

SENSORY FOCUS

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO IMPROVING SENSORY ISSUES

SUMMER 2013



Benefits of Yoga for Children with Sensory Challenges

by **Britt Collins, MS, OTR**

... and articles by

Paula Aquilla, DO, BSc, OT

Robert M. Hensel

R. Wayne Gilpin

**ALSO IN
THIS ISSUE:**

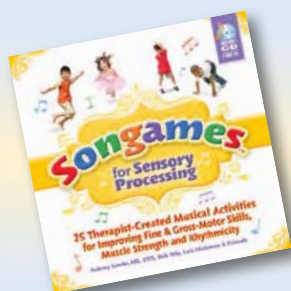
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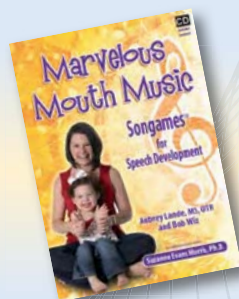
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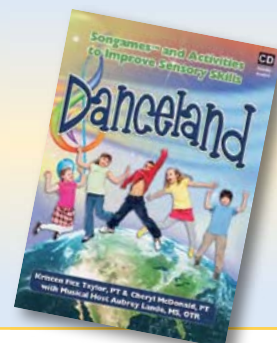
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Summer is here in full force! Here in the United States, most of us now have strong heat outside, and the kids are home from school. I hope you are all enjoying both, as much as you can. No worries! Your seasonal *Sensory Focus* issue is here to give you some great ideas—and a bit of inspiration.

First and foremost, we have to announce a columnist change. In this issue, we bid a very fond and loving farewell to our columnist Bobbi Sheahan, who has been writing the “Focus on Autism” column. Bobbi is busy with her wonderful family and is not able to stay on as a regular columnist. Frankly, I think she may have been somewhat superhuman, as she has been home-schooling five kids (one with autism) and keeping up with writing two columns! She may be popping back here and there with an article, so I’m sure we have not heard the last from her.

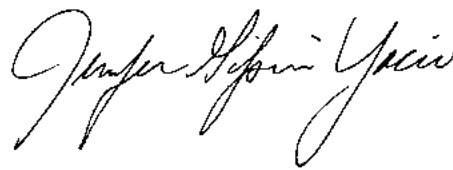
This goodbye is bittersweet, though, because at the same time, we are so happy to introduce Jennifer McIlwee Myers as our new “Focus on Autism” columnist. Jennifer has Asperger’s syndrome and is the author of the book *How to Teach Life Skills to Kids with Autism*. She has a lot of insight into how to help our kids with sensory issues, and I look forward to reading her ideas in every issue. Her first column features information about dealing with the mall, which I think we will all be able to relate to!

Yoga is so helpful for all of us, but especially for kids with sensory issues. It can help with regulation, motor control, and even self-esteem. Thanks to Britt Collins for expounding on that information in her article this month.

Next, we have an inspirational contribution from a man with spina bifida, who has been in *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*. Also, you’ll find a helpful article from our technical editor, Paula Aquilla! Paula usually helps us out behind the scenes, and we are so happy to have her send in an article. In the always-fun “PlaySense” column, Barbara Sher gives ideas that may turn a cranky moment around in just a few steps—and just in time for those hot summer days, when kids wear down more easily. Thanks, Barbara!

Rounding out this issue is a wonderful article by the founder of our company about a school dance he attended for kids with disabilities. We were all inspired by his experience, and we hope you will be, as well. Who knows? Maybe we have readers with the gumption to start a few more special dances out there.

Ready? Grab your favorite cool beverage and dive in to the *Sensory Focus* experience we have prepared for you this fine summer day. Enjoy.



Jennifer Gilpin Yacio

*Vice President of Future Horizons, Inc./
Editor in Chief of Sensory Focus*

Benefits of Yoga

Do you love yoga, or have dreams of loving yoga, but your schedule never allows you to actually go? There are many people who love exercise, and especially yoga and Pilates, because they are gentle on your body and have the additional benefits of providing meditation and a sense of serenity. Have you ever thought about having your child or children participate in kids' yoga? There are many studios out there that offer yoga classes for kids.

Yoga has great benefits for all children, and it can really be helpful for children with sensory challenges. If your child has sensory challenges, such as difficulty with regulation, motor coordination, imitating postures, social skills, following directions, and more, then yoga could help with all of these skills.

for Children with Sensory Challenges



Britt Collins, MS, OTR

There are also ways to incorporate yoga moves into your child's sensory lifestyle to help him with regulation.

Briefly, let's look at the meaning of some of these terms:

✦ Regulation refers to your child being in that “just-right state” for learning. He is happy, follows directions, has impulse control, and engages appropriately with others. We strive to regulate our kids who struggle with sensory issues, so they can be happy and function in their environment.

✦ Motor coordination refers to gross- and fine-motor skills, as well as bilateral coordination (coordinating both sides of the body). These skills can be hard for

some children, and yoga can strengthen these them.

✦ Imitating postures refers to children being able to watch someone else and then make their body move like the person they are watching. Can they imitate you if you stand on one leg or stretch your arms out wide?

Yoga can be fun and silly or serious, depending on how your child tolerates a group setting or class. There are also ways to incorporate yoga moves into your child's sensory lifestyle to help him with regulation. We try to not use the term

sensory diet anymore, if that is something you are familiar with, because creating a sensory lifestyle for you and your family is a more realistic way to function.

A sensory lifestyle is knowing what makes your child tick—what gets him revved up and what calms him down. What types of activities are good for him to do before you make a transition? Does he need movement activities paired with heavy work, to help him stay regulated or to be able to tolerate the next activity (such as sitting through math class or going to the dentist)?

Yoga for children can present itself in many forms. Your child could take a class with an instructor, who may guide the children through a series of moves and poses. Or, you, as the parent, can learn various yoga poses that would be beneficial for your child. Here are some poses you might try:



The **CHILD'S POSE** is where you lie down with your knees tucked under you, leaning forward, with your forehead resting on the floor and your arms stretched out above you or tucked down by your side. This is a great relaxation pose that stretches the upper back and arms.

tree



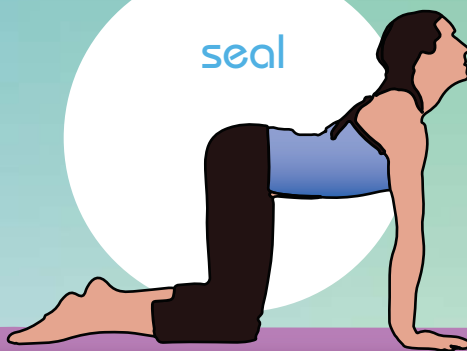
The **TREE POSE** is done by standing on one foot, with the other one supported on the inside leg. Your arms are pressed together at the chest or above your head. This pose is great practice for balancing. Help your child if he cannot balance independently.

cat



The **CAT POSE** is where you get down on all fours on the floor, and round your back upward. Then, you can switch to the **SEAL POSE**, where you arch your back downward and look up. The seal pose can help to develop core strength and movement.

seal



cobra



The **COBRA POSE** is done by lying flat on your stomach, then pushing up on your hands as far as your body will allow while you look upward. This pose is good for stretching the back and opening up the chest. It also helps provide deep pressure input to the arms, shoulders, and wrists.

butterfly



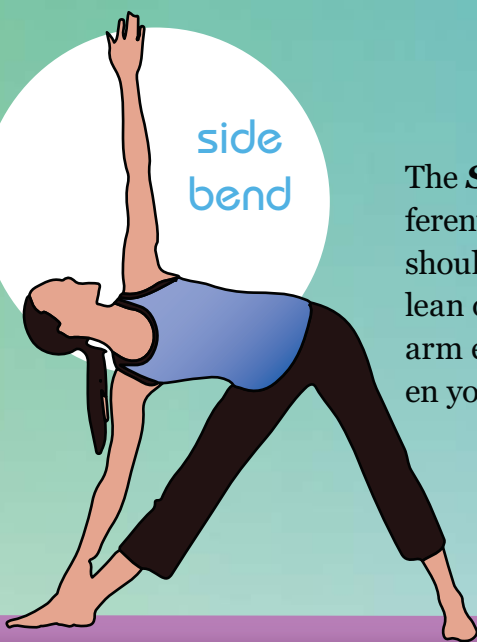
The **BUTTERFLY POSE** is where you sit with your legs in “butterfly” position out to the sides, with your back straight. This pose helps you work on developing core strength, posture, and flexibility.

The **ROCKING BOAT** is done by lying back and tucking your knees up, then rocking gently back and forth. This pose can target the flexor muscles of the abdomen and stretches out the back muscles.

rocking
boat



side
bend



The **SIDE BEND** or **TRIANGLE** pose can be done in different variations. The legs are spread slightly wider than shoulder width apart, with the arms out to the sides. Then, lean over and touch the floor with one hand, while the other arm extends straight above you. This pose can help strengthen your sense of balance, coordination, and core strength.

frog #2



frog #1



The **FROG POSE** is where you squat like a frog, then jump up. This move helps with coordination, leg strength, and deep pressure into the legs.

There are thousands of yoga poses, and there are so many fun poses that children make up themselves ...

There are thousands of yoga poses, and there are so many fun poses that children make up themselves—but any of them can really help with overall sensory regulation, body coordination, and strength. Children seem to enjoy working in a group together or doing “yoga time” with mommy at home. I use yoga poses throughout therapy sessions to keep kids engaged and to challenge them and their bodies. Sometimes, when your child is starting to look anxious or become frustrated while you are out and about, you can have him take a deep breath, press his hands together at his chest, and even give him a little deep pressure on his shoulders to help regulate him.

Yoga also helps children improve their self-esteem. Many children with sensory-processing challenges struggle with team sports because it is hard to coordinate their bodies efficiently, or they cannot run as fast as their peers. Children who have weak core strength or poor coordination tend to shy away from sports or athletic activities for that

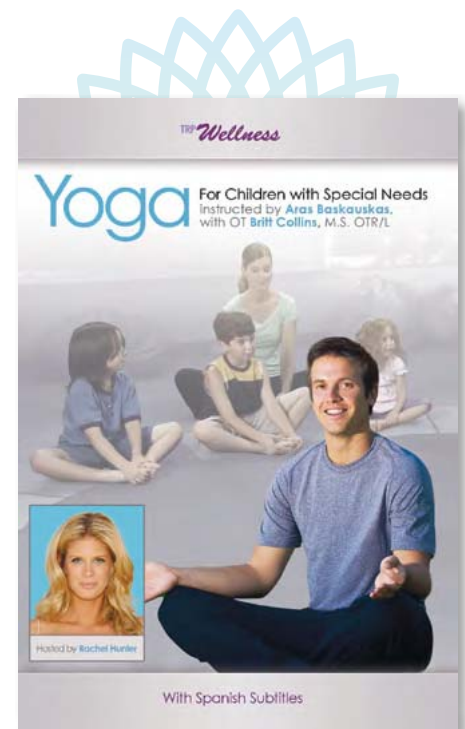
reason. Yoga can be done at your own pace and gives your child an opportunity to learn the movement or pose and perfect it.

Yoga also increases the sense of body awareness. When you are moving your body through space and challenging your sense of balance and strength, you are giving your muscles feedback (information) that helps your brain process where you are in space. This can be challenging for kids with sensory issues, and yoga is one way to help them with this.

You do not have to be a trained yoga instructor to practice yoga with your child, but you should make sure that you are using safe body movements and making sure that your child is not pushing himself too hard, to the point of injury. It should be a fun and relaxing experience for you and your child.

Resources I can recommend are the *Yoga for Children with Special Needs* DVD, with Aras Baskaukas, as well as card decks that kids can use to learn yoga poses. ♦

Britt Collins is a pediatric occupational therapist in Denver, Colorado. She works at the Sensory Therapies And Research (STAR) Center and tours the country, speaking about the benefits of occupational therapy for children. Britt co-authored the Sensory Parenting book series, as well as the OT (Occupational Therapy) DVD series. Her web sites are www.sensoryparenting.com and www.sensorypathways4kids.com.



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PlaySense

Fun Ways to Walk

Turning
a Cranky
Moment
into a
Wonderous
One



*by Barbara Sher, MA, OTR,
The Gameslady*

Every kid gets cranky. You don't have to be a parent of a child with special needs to know that on some days or in some moments, your child can become difficult. It may happen when you've stayed too long at a store—you still have to walk to the car or walk home, and your child either refuses or is getting ready to have a meltdown.

When you sense that your child is about to lose it (or already has and is over the worst of it), change the mood and play a game. Distraction—the tried-and-true method that worked with your fussy baby—still has value. Pulling out a jangly set of keys to distract and calm your child will no longer work, but initiating an activity in which you are the playmate can have a wondrous effect. I have done these games with preschoolers and teenagers, so I know for certain that adding an element of play never gets old.

Oh—and by the way, between you and I, these games are also teachable moments that benefit a child's social,

cognitive, and motor skills. But, children don't need to know that—all they care about is that it's fun. And the best part is, you get to where you need to go with your good humor still intact!

Giant Steps, Baby Steps

When you're walking with your child, alternate between a big stride (giant steps) and a little shuffle (baby steps). You can decide ahead of time how many steps to take, such as 10 giant steps and then 10 baby steps, and then keep repeating the pattern.

Stop and Go

As you're walking, suddenly say, "Stop!" and stop instantly, as if you're frozen. Then say, "Go!" and begin to walk. Your child or children won't know when you will suddenly say "Stop" again, since you will do it irregularly. Sometimes there will be a long walk between "Stops," and sometimes it will happen almost immediately (which produces giggles). The

fun for the child is not knowing when it will come. The fun for you is knowing that you are painlessly getting to where you want to go.

You can change this game to "Red Light, Green Light," if you want to develop an awareness of the meaning of traffic lights.

Who Else Can You Be?

Rather than walking like a regular person, move like someone or something else, such as a mouse, kangaroo, elephant, hawk, or whatever creature inspires you.

You can be spontaneous and make up movements, such as walking like a stiff robot, and your child can imitate you. Or, your child can turn into a jumping kangaroo, and you follow her lead.

You could even turn it into a guessing game. What animal or creature am I walking like?

Choreograph Movements

You could choreograph a repeated movement, such as doing three jumps, followed by

10 gallops. Then repeat, repeat, all the way home. Or, try moving in different ways, such as doing a sideways slide, turning around and walking backwards, hopping on one foot, or leaping.

Or, just hold hands and skip together! To me, there is nothing more fun than that, especially if you sing, “We’re off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz...”

Glued Together

Pretend to put imaginary glue on your child’s back and on your front, and you become stuck together. Place your hands on your child’s shoulders to give you control as you walk. Then, walk forward—and he walks with you. You can go quite a ways with this one.

For older kids, you can just be “glued” by your hips, so you walk more like conjoined twins!

One of the benefits of this game is the sweet physical closeness, as well as moving forward in a silly way.

Guess the Number of Steps

A walking game doesn’t have to be physical—it can also be mental. Guess the number of steps it will take to get to the next corner, signpost, traffic

light, or tree. (How far ahead you go depends on the age of the child.) Or, guess how many seconds or minutes it will take to get to the next landmark. See how close you both were to the correct number on your last try, and then make a new guess as you head for the next spot.

Dance Away

This idea works well with teenagers—especially when you do it as you walk down a country lane. These days, there is so much more variation in dance movements than ever before. If you are familiar with a popular “dance” called “the Harlem Shake,” you know that any movement can be acceptable and “cool.”

Take turns imitating each other’s moves for a delightful and joyous way to be together and shorten the trek home.

A Final Thought

If you’re worried about other people looking at you and thinking you’re nuts as you shimmy down the street, just think of how you would feel if you watched a parent with his or her kid(s), clearly having some silly fun together. If it makes you smile just to think of it, then these games are for you! ♦

Barbara Sher is an occupational therapist and the author of 10 books on children’s games—because she knows that play matters. The ideas in this article are excerpted from her upcoming book, The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor, and Sensory Games: Using Children’s Natural Love of Play to Enhance Key Skills and Promote Inclusion. Check out Barbara’s books in any online bookstore or on her Web site, www.gameslady.com. On her site, you can even ask Barbara to design a game specifically to fit your child’s needs and interests.

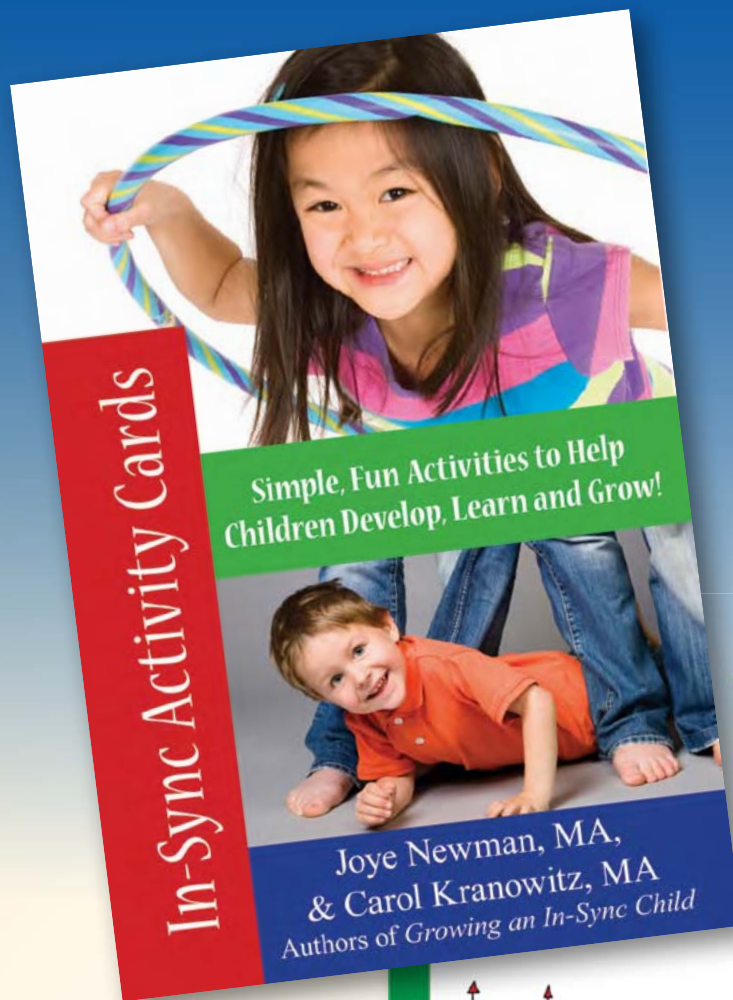


Tami’s daughter, Heather, was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome just before her 13th birthday. Heather spiraled out of control medically and educationally until an occupational therapist helped lead her to a functioning recovery. Tami shares her recommendations for other parents as she tells Heather’s story of coming through the fog.

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POWER to the PARENT!

Paula Aquilla,
DO, BSc, OT

THE

keystone in the center of an archway holds the arch in place.

This stone is the most important

stone in the archway; it is strong, and it supports all the other stones. If the keystone moves or falls, the whole arch falls! Parents are keystones. Their health and well-being are essential to the functioning of the whole family. The American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force on the Family states that, “Families are the most central and enduring influence in children’s lives. Parents are also central in pediatric care. The health and well-being of children are inextricably linked to their parents’ physical, emotional, and social health, social circumstances, and child-rearing practices”.¹

In our occupational therapy practice, we meet many parents who have children with sensory challenges. They range from parents who are informed, supported, and capable of caring for their children, to parents who seem to be shell-shocked. They appear overwhelmed and have difficulty absorbing new information about their child. Some seem to have surrendered their power and decision-making to professionals because they may think professionals have more knowledge than they do. However, most of us agree that no one has more knowledge about a child than the child’s parent. Professionals may have knowledge about their field or area of practice, but it is the parent who knows the child best. Together, parents and professionals can create programs and strategies that are customized to meet the needs of an individual child within an individual family. The parent is an essential part of the whole team and must be the center of the team, as the parent is the keystone of the family.



Occupational therapists (OTs) are health professionals who assess the ability of a person to participate in the activities he or she does every day, including self-care tasks, (tooth-brushing, eating, and dressing), leisure activities, and school- and work-related tasks. The treatment goal of an OT is to support the individual to maximize his or her participation in daily tasks. A child is supported within the context of a family, and, therefore, the parents are an integral part of the process.

The goals an OT may have for parents include developing a better understanding of their child and their child's behaviors, learning keen observation skills to be able to "read" their child with confidence, generating the ability to create strategies to support their child (often on a moment's notice), and building advocacy skills to secure the best programs, placements, and opportunities for their child.

The most important goal of all, however, is to empower parents with the education and skills they need to enjoy, love, and share with their child how special they are. A child's self-esteem develops through love, care, and the feeling of being a valued part of a social

unit—a family that communicates, has common values, and provides the opportunity for companionship.¹

Empowering parents happens from the beginning of the OT-parent relationship. Parents can be very anxious about yet another assessment and might worry that their child may not perform well. It is important to ease these worries. Educate parents about the assessment and treatment process.

The goal of the assessment is to learn about the child's strengths and areas of challenge and to learn how the chal-

lenges they cited their child as experiencing at home or at school. Parents who understand the underlying reasons that motivate their child's behaviors can deal with them more efficiently, because they understand. Parents can learn strategies to help their child cope with sensory and motor challenges; to process sensory information with more accuracy and efficiency; to regulate arousal, emotion, and attention; to engage in and form relationships; and to develop a sense of self.

Empowering parents happens from the beginning of the OT-parent relationship.

lenges affect function. These findings are explored through the lens of the family. What is important to this family? Are there other children? What does this family like to do as a family? Listen to the answers carefully, so the whole process can be customized to meet the needs of the family. When we take the time to understand the hopes a parent has for his or her child, we are practicing family-centered care.²

Educate parents about the findings of the assessment and support them in tying the as-

The goals parents listed for their child for occupational therapy intervention likely included social participation, self-regulation, and perceived competence. The goals parents should have for themselves include learning strategies to support their children, as well as developing personal validation.² Feelings of competence and confidence as a parent grow out of having successful interactions with their child. Parents learn that understanding their child may take some time and coaching, but, once

they “get it,” the strategies can be easier to come up with. After all, many of the amazing strategies that are used by OTs were created by parents!

Fear can block a parent’s relationship with their child, as they may feel they don’t know what to do. Parents can participate in occupational therapy sessions and receive coaching from the OT to develop confidence in their observation

Parents can also be advocates for their children within their families, schools, and community organizations and can feel confident in their ability to enable their children to access experiences that make life fun and rich. When parents are successful and know how to deal with their child’s behavioral difficulties, they can feel competent in their skills as a parent.³ Sometimes, the needs

learn. Every child deserves to feel special and to feel like an important part of the family. OTs can support parents through education, coaching, problem solving, and support. Let the adventure begin! ♦

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Paula Aquilla is a pediatric occupational therapist in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She co-authored Building Bridges through Sensory Integration, now in a new edition.

... parents are the hidden heroes and heroines of this journey.

skills, so they understand their child’s needs, problem-solve solutions, and advocate for their child. A parent can also develop their play skills (which may be rusty), so the important work of building a trusting, loving relationship with the child can continue at home. Once the fear and worry lessen, parents have more energy to put into their relationship and into having more fun with their child.

When the parent is supported, educated, and empowered, the benefits to the child are enormous. Educated parents can be empowered with understanding. They can be taught strategies to support their children. Supported parents have the energy to meet the demands of their children.

of the parents exceed the abilities of the OT. Referral to other professionals can also support the needs of the parents, so they can support their child.

Dr Lucy Jane Miller is the director of the Sensory Therapies And Research (STAR) Center, which uses a parent-centered philosophy and teaches OTs that parent coaching, education, and participation are essential. She recognizes the value of involving the family in the treatment process, so the child and parents establish the relationships needed to help the child blossom.⁴

As Dr Miller describes, parents are the hidden heroes and heroines of this journey.⁴ Parents provide the love, the fun, the attention, and the opportunities to plan and to

SPRING 2013 CONFERENCES

Come Meet Our Amazing Speakers!



Date	Location	Speakers
Oct. 4	Cincinnati, WI	Carol Kranowitz, MA & Paula Aquilla, DO, BSc, OT
Oct. 11	Baltimore, MD	Carol Kranowitz, MA & TBA
Oct. 18	Kansas City, MO	Temple Grandin, PhD, Carol Kranowitz, MA & Maria Wheeler, MEd
Oct. 25-26	Charlotte, NC	16th Annual SPDF Symposium with Lucy Jane Miller, PhD, OTR & others
Nov. 22	Seattle, WA	Lucy Jane Miller, PhD, OTR & Carol Kranowitz, MA
Dec. 6	Dallas, TX	Carol Kranowitz, MA & Jim Ball, PhD

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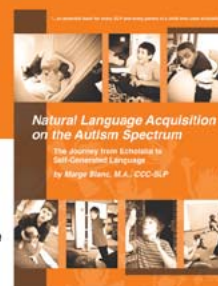
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Me at

Growing Up with Sensory Issues

the

MALL

Jennifer McIlwee Myers, Aspie At Large

Allow me to introduce myself: My name is Jennifer, and I found out that I have Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) after I received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome when I was 38. Information about SPD is some of the most helpful knowledge I've ever gotten hold of, and I'd like to share some of the best bits with you.

When I first received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, the psychologist mentioned "SPD," so I went out and got a book about it right away. Reading it provided me with an evening full of "Aha!" moments that changed my world.

As I read, the human race seemed much saner than I'd ever guessed before. Human behaviors that had always seemed mean-spirited or carelessly cruel were revealed to be simply the result of others not being able to hear or smell the way I did. And, I wasn't such a big "wimp" as I'd always thought: I really did feel things more than others.

This all came together for me to explain that most puzzling and frustrating of human constructs in existence: *The Mall*.

People with Asperger's syndrome frequently develop strict rules of behavior to help them navigate the social world. I had read that *The Mall* was a vital part of suburban life—the equivalent of the old general store or town square—so I went to *The Mall* almost every Saturday. If I needed a birthday card or new socks or was just looking to decorate the refrigerator with some wacky magnets, I'd get those at *The Mall*.

However, *The Mall* is a nightmare if you have the right (or rather, wrong) kind of SPD. The movement, the noise, the thousand things competing for your attention—it's horrible. People actually come up to you and offer to spray perfumes on you! For super-sniffers like me, this makes as much sense as folks walking up and offering me a refreshing right hook to the face.

At *The Mall*, conflicting styles of music come at you from every direction—each store adds its own sound to the mix. The food court is a riotous nightmare of scents and flavors that spread far and wide. Cinnamon not only bakes sugar-soaked cakes as big as your head, they also pump so much cinnamon into the air you can smell it from one end of the mall to the other.

Reading about SPD made it clear that *The Mall* was such a painful place simply because I was in no way able to process the intense level of sensory input involved.

So, I stopped going to *The Mall*, and my weekends became much, much more pleasant. I was calmer, happier, and got more done without that weekly chunk of brain drain.

And, after a few months, my husband Gary mentioned something I hadn't even

thought about. He said, "Have you noticed that we haven't had a single big fight since you stopped shopping at the mall? We used to fight on weekends a lot."

He was right. I thought it over—the one factor that could account for such a change was the difference in my sensory stress levels. Gary certainly hadn't changed; he still moved my stuff that I had put there for a reason and did the dishes in a completely different way than I did. (In other words, he still did the same annoying things he did before!)

But, when I stopped immersing myself in sensory hell on a weekly basis, I removed so much stress and mental overload that Gary and I didn't have big fights anymore, even when he put "top rack dishwasher safe" items on the bottom rack.

When I stopped going to the mall on a regular basis (I don't need to capitalize it anymore, as it is a place I seldom go to now), I found I could handle life's little irritations and misunderstandings without "going off." It didn't just change my behavior—it changed my self-image. I went from being "Jennifer, who has a terrible temper that she should learn to control," to being "Jennifer, who gets very upset when she is under intense physical

stress." Instead of struggling in vain to hold my anger in, I worked on improving my sensory-processing abilities and working around the areas I couldn't change.

It is just as important to note that the rest of the human race seems so much less malicious and difficult, now that I know the average person simply doesn't realize when they are being too loud for me or using too many words at once.

The more I learn, the better my life has gotten. Getting a handle on SPD has been a springboard to being able to do other things to improve my life, like working out and studying cognitive therapies.

That's why I want to share my stories with you. Because the more you know, the more you and your child can see each other as just human beings—not as "bad" or "good" ones, but as individuals who are doing their best with what they have. Because that is what you (and they) are. ♦

A woman with Asperger's Syndrome, Jennifer provides countless tips to improve the lives of those with sensory difficulties. She is the author of How to Teach Life Skills to Kids with Autism or Asperger's (Future Horizons, 2010).

I Don't Have a **Dis-**Ability,

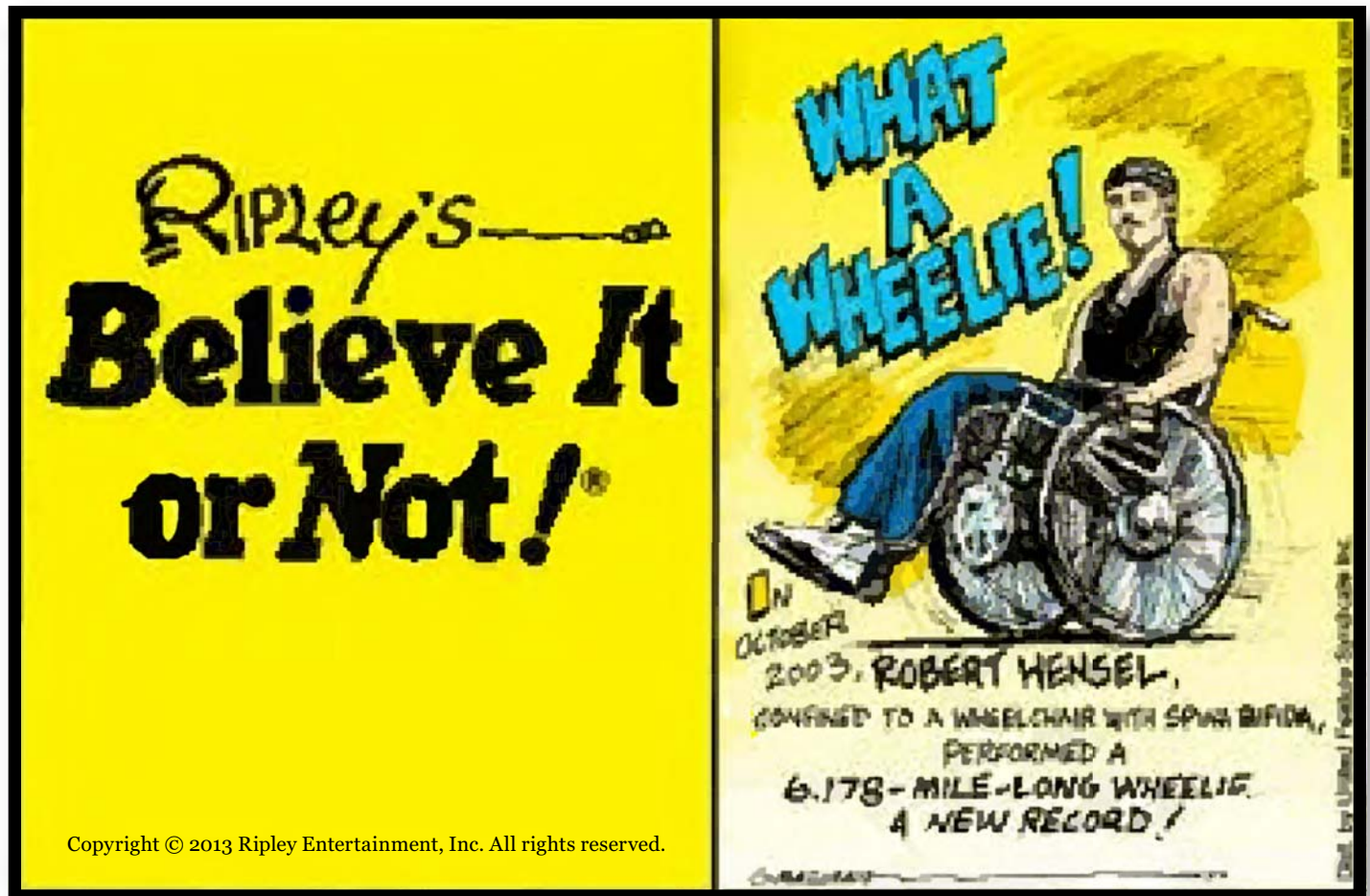
The following was submitted by contributor Robert Hansel, a man with spina bifida who advocates for the treatment and rights of all individuals with disabilities. Hansel currently holds a world record with Guinness World Records and Ripley's Believe It or Not for the longest nonstop wheelie in a wheelchair—covering a total distance of 6.178 miles! Hansel went for this record to help raise money for wheelchair ramps throughout his community.

Top Ten

Life Lessons for Living with a Disability

1. I choose not to place “DIS” in my ability.
2. We, the ones who are challenged, need to be heard—to be seen, not as a disability, but as a person who has and will continue to bloom. We have a right to be seen, not only as a handicapped person, but as a whole, unique human being.
3. As a disabled person, let my life be a reflection of the endless amount of ability that exists in me—and in each and every one of us.
4. Know me for my abilities, not my disability.
5. Placing one foot in front of the other, I've climbed to higher heights with each step. I reach beyond my own limitations, to show my inner strength. There is no obstacle too hard for this warrior to overcome. I'm a person on a mission, to prove my disability hasn't won.
6. I have a disability—yes, that's true—but all that really means is I may have to take a slightly different path than you.
7. I don't have a dis-ability—I have a different ability.
8. Being born with a disability can sometimes be a struggle, but it is the ability to overcome such a challenge that makes it so worth the fight. Never give up!
9. No disability or dictionary out there is capable of clearly defining who we are as individuals. It's only when we step out of that labeled box that our abilities begin to be fully recognized, allowing us to better define who we truly are.
10. I may have spina bifida, but I've still got a lot of backbone!

I Have a *Different* Ability



Robert M. Hensel was born with the birth defect spina bifida, a disability that has not stopped him from achieving success in life.

He spearheaded the movement for Oswego County, New York, to pass a motion recognizing October 1-7 as “Beyond Limitations week.”

In October 2006, Robert was honored to carry the torch

for the 2006 Asian Games, the second largest multi-sport event after the Olympics.

He also writes poetry, with more than 900 publications to his credit worldwide. Most recently, he was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, an award presented to outstanding poets and writers.

Many of Robert’s accomplishments have recently

found a permanent home within the walls of The Museum of Disability History in Buffalo, New York. This museum is unique, commemorating some of history’s most notable disabled figures—such as Helen Keller.

You can read even more about Robert’s inspiring achievements at his web site, www.roberthensel.webs.com.

A Visit Down Memory Lane ... Only 20 Times Better!



R. Wayne Gilpin

I recently had the privilege of attending the best prom I have ever seen, heard about, imagined, or thought possible. I have been lucky to attend about 20 proms in my lifetime ... as a guest, with a guest, and—with a few friends of mine—as a prom “crasher.”

However, not one could compare to this one, in terms of the joy, excitement, fun, and kindness of this event.

Allow me to go back a few steps ... (dance steps, of course). A young lady I had met invited me to attend a function that is offered every year, for 12 years running. As the president of a publishing company that is focused on autism, I meet many folks on the spectrum and have attended numerous special-needs functions. However, my friend thought this event was special and encouraged me to attend. I was not prepared for what was in store.

This was a special-needs prom. Kids who are about to graduate and have a special need—including all kinds of challenges—are invited from all over the country. The soon-to-be grads who attend this event face everything you can imagine—Parkinson’s disease, epilepsy, autism, Asperger’s syndrome, muscular dystrophy, vision concerns, and so on. The attendees arrive in

everything from casual clothes to tuxedos and ball gowns. But, they all wear one special thing to this event, during it, and as they are leaving: A huge smile.

Bren Thompson and her co-chair Fran Williams (there is definitely a place in heaven waiting for these ladies) started this event in 2004. At that time, they had less than 20 attendees. They host it in cooperation with the Mansfield Bible Church in Mansfield, Texas. This year, they welcomed more than 300 guests. As it stands, Bren has had to cap the number of invitations that go out, because of space and funding constraints.

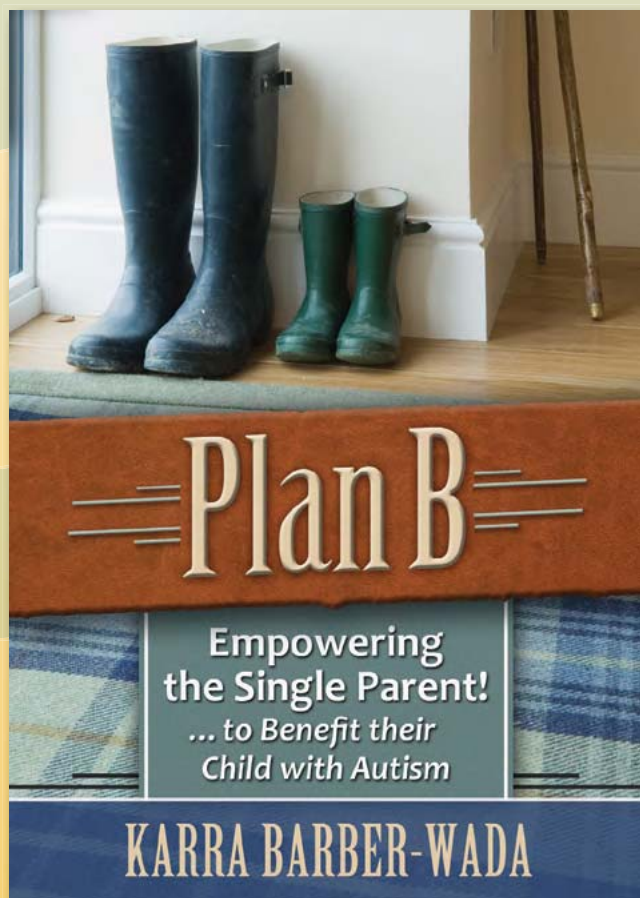
Every year, the special-needs prom has a theme. This year it was Candy Land. Others have been an Egyptian Night on the Nile, Jungle Fever, Kings’ Treasure, Rock of the Ages, and Out of This World. The decorations are all donated, the food is sponsored, and the hall is

(continued on page 26)

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(continued from page 24)

donated, but still—funds are needed. Bren finds them wherever she can.

The popularity of this event has spiked because of the interest and love of many kids in the Mansfield Bible Church youth group, who attend as “dates” and dance, cheer, and have fun with the guests. The best part is that this was their idea—no one is forced to participate. These kids come to give something back, and they end the evening feeling that they were the ones who gained. And, many come back in the following years to laugh, dance, and enjoy.

Some “challenged” guests danced virtually every dance in wheelchairs, and several had crutches. Some had a little trouble following the beat, but it was always done with more pure enjoyment than I have ever seen at any dance in my life. The line dance was a joy to watch—they began in nice, straight lines—and wound up disintegrating in a whirlwind of laughter, pride, and sense of accomplishment. No one cared that the lines were disorganized by the time the dance ended. It was easily the best line dance ever!

This was a special night. I admit to enjoying my past proms, but those all were like wakes compared to this one. I think the knowledge that

everyone there had some sort of challenge—meaning no one would tease, laugh, or think less of their dancing, walking, speech, or actions—relaxed everyone.

Bren does not try to say that this event is easy to put together, but she has a partner in her (usually) willing husband Mark, as well as her family and many helpers that join her in the many hours of preparation required. Every year as it gets closer to the big day, they question if they can do it again next year, but as the excitement and appreciation of these young people overwhelms them, they know they are already on the hook for next year (but they all seem to love the “hook”).

I do not portend that those with special needs should not go to their own school’s dances. Quite the contrary—they should be a part of their school’s activities as much as possible. However, there was something special—a shared camaraderie—that made this

dance something magical. If you want to enjoy a night you will never forget, I encourage you to sponsor a dance like this one in your neighborhood, county, or state. You will be the winner.

I (and next year, a few of our staff members) will be at the 2014 event, and hopefully many more after that ... Good Lord willing. ♦

Wayne Gilpin is the president of the Future Horizons publishing company in Arlington, Texas. He is also the author of several books about autism, including his most recent title, A Lifetime of Laughing and Loving with Autism. The web site for Future Horizons is www.fhautism.com.





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