

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a person's face, focusing on the eye. The iris is a vibrant, multi-colored rainbow. The skin is pale and the lighting is soft, creating a serene yet intense expression.

S.I. FOCUS

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO IMPROVING SENSORY INTEGRATION

WINTER 2013

The Effect of Sensory and Perceptual Difficulties on Learning Styles

Temple Grandin, PhD

Living a Sensory-Rich Life: Educate, Embrace & Engage

Angie Voss, OTR

The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up

Carol Kranowitz, MA

**ALSO IN
THIS ISSUE:**

To Speak Up or Not To Speak Up?

Bobbi Sheahan

The Attention Cure

Barbara Sher, MA, OTR

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Greetings and welcome to the first *S.I. Focus* created under the Sensory World banner. When we inherited the magazine from Kathleen Morris, we were honored to be considered capable and also excited about the possibilities. Thank you, Kathleen, for creating and running such a helpful resource for so many years. The world is better for it.

A quick introduction is in order! My name is Jennifer Gilpin Yacio and I have been involved with our company, Sensory World, since its inception as a division of Future Horizons. I have always held an interest in sensory issues as I have a few of these myself. My little brother, who was born with autism, certainly had many. As you can imagine, I grew up in a more sensory aware environment than most.

As we were in production with the magazine, I became even more sensitive to the topic. I was pregnant with our daughter, and things went very wrong. Three weeks before she was due, our baby was diagnosed with Intrauterine Growth Restriction and I was rushed into emergency C-section. Madelyn Rose Yacio was born at 4 lbs, 1 oz and we were concerned for her future.

Luckily, our baby has thrived, and over two months later, is a healthy 9 lbs, 3 oz. Due to her circumstances at birth and like many pre-term infants, she is more likely to have some sensory issues.

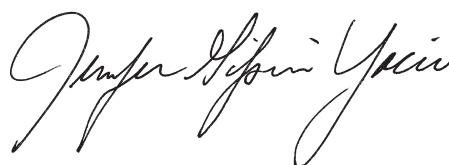
I have kept an eye on her development over the past two and a half months, and

have been sensitive to times when she seems overstimulated. When she starts showing small signs of overstimulation, usually consistently looking away from what is vying for her attention, I quickly try to make the room quieter and darker, well before the crying starts.

Would I have known these tips, or been as sensitive to them before my “sensory education”? Probably not! I am blessed and grateful to have the wonderful resources afforded to me from my years at Sensory World, and from this magazine.

In this helpful fact packed issue, we have an article from Dr. Temple Grandin about learning styles and one from Carol Kranowitz on growing up “in-sync”. Rounding out this informative issue are the Bobbi Sheahan, Barbara Sher, and Angie Voss. All have wonderful tips and ideas to share with us.

With all of these great resources, let’s move forward into the great world of sensory knowledge. We can make our lives better with what we learn today.



Jennifer Gilpin Yacio

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

THE EFFECT OF SENSORY AND PERCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES ON LEARNING STYLES

Temple Grandin, PhD

Individuals on the autism spectrum have remarkably varied problems with sensory overresponsivity and information processing. While these problems originate in the brain and are biological in nature, they manifest in behaviors that compromise the ability of individuals to learn and function in the world around them. In my analysis of reports from many people with autism, it appears that the manner in which their brains process incoming information can be grouped into three basic categories: (1) sensory overresponsivity, (2) perceptual problems, and (3) difficulties in organizing information.

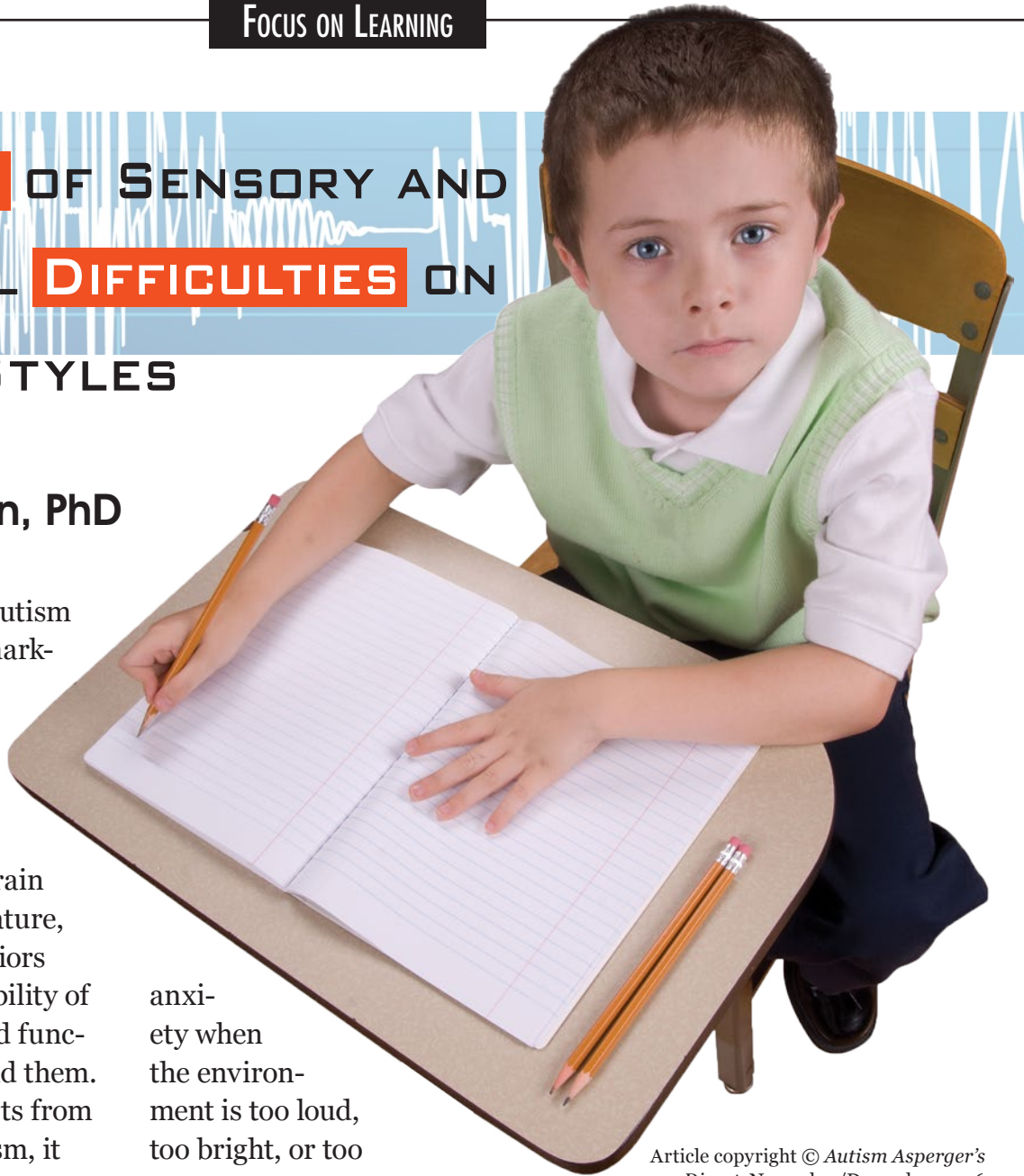
Sensory Overresponsivity

From child to child, sensory overresponsivity is variable. It can range from mild (slight

anxiety when the environment is too loud, too bright, or too chaotic) to severe, with an individual going into a screaming tantrum every time he is in a large supermarket. One child may not tolerate fluorescent lights; another, like me, fears sudden loud noise because it hurts her ears. Children may gag when they encounter certain smells, such as perfumes. The taste and/or texture of foods can be repulsive to them. A light touch can be merely

annoying or actually painful. One child may enjoy water play and splashing, and another may run screaming from it. Some individuals on the spectrum are attracted to objects that move rapidly, and others avoid them. When the senses are disordered, the attention and concentration that learning requires become difficult and, in some cases, impossible.

Article copyright © Autism Asperger's Digest, November/December 2006



Children who spend their days in fear of people and places who, through past experience, have been overwhelming to their senses have little chance to relax enough to take notice of the learning opportunities presented to them.

Perceptual Problems

Problems in this category often determine the style of learning that will be most effective. A child with poor auditory perception may hear sounds that resemble a bad mobile phone connection, where a voice fades in and out or entire parts of a communication may be missing. The child is more likely to learn best with information presented visually. A child with visual perception problems may learn best through the auditory channel.

Children who look out of the corner of their eye while reading often have visual processing problems. Suspect a visual processing problem in children who flick their fingers in front of their eyes or those who dislike fluorescent lights and/or escalators. To some of these individuals, the world looks like it is being viewed

through a kaleidoscope—flat, without depth perception, and broken into pieces. For others, it is like looking through a small tube, where you can see only the small circle of vision directly in front of you, with no peripheral vision. Some nonverbal individuals

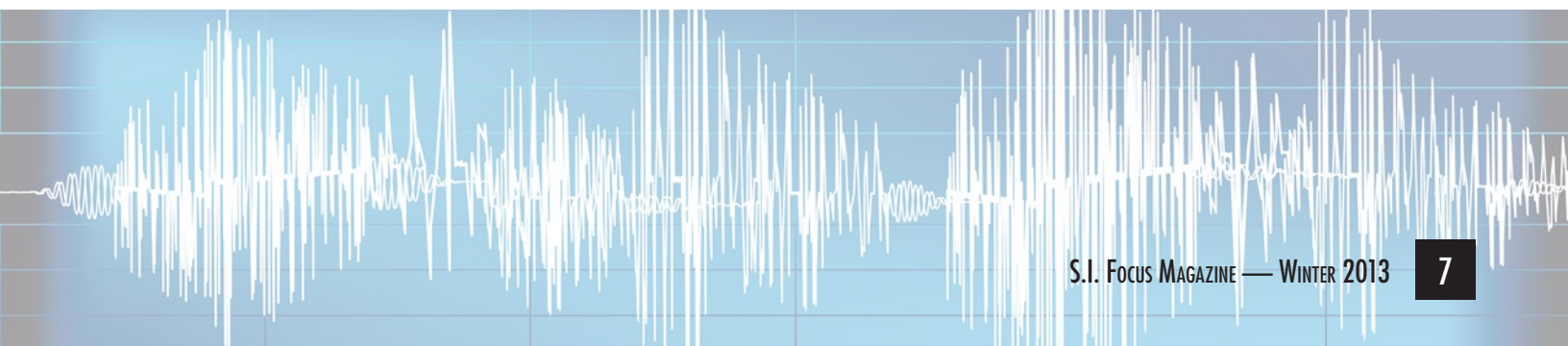
“Children who spend their days in fear of people and places ... have little chance to relax enough to take notice of the learning opportunities presented to them.”

have both visual and auditory processing problems. They may learn best through their senses of touch and smell. For instance, to learn to dress, they may need to be “walked through” putting on socks or pouring cereal by using a hand-over-hand approach. They may learn letters and

numbers best when they can touch them and trace the shapes with their hands or fingers. Representative objects rather than visual charts can be useful in helping these individuals know when it is time to transition to a new activity.

Organizing Information

Because of atypical connections in the brain, an individual may receive information but be unable to organize it or make sense of it. Donna Williams, a well-known Australian woman with autism, says that speech sounds like “blah-blah-blah” to her, and the meaning disappears. She hears the words clearly but does not understand them. Problems with organizing information can affect children’s ability to form categories that are the foundation for later concept formation. Difficulties people on the spectrum have with multitasking would also fall into this category. Again, these difficulties are highly variable and range from mild to severe, depending on which brain circuits connect and which ones do not. One classic test of



flexible thinking is the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test. In this test, a person has to sort cards with different patterns, one at a time, into categories such as “yellow” or “circles.” A person on the spectrum can be slower to figure out new categories as they are introduced.

Sensory overload can cause either vision or hearing to shut down completely. During these times, no information will get through to the brain, and learning will not occur. Also, sensory and information processing problems are worse when a child is tired. It is therefore best to teach difficult material when a child is alert and wide awake. Since my overresponsivity to noise was fairly mild as a child, I responded well to a gently intrusive teaching method, where the teacher held my chin to make me pay attention. Donna Williams told me this method absolutely would not have worked with her. The tactile input, coupled with the teacher speaking, would have overloaded her, and she would not have been able to process both types of input simultaneously. Donna is a monochan-

nel learner. She has to either look at something or listen to something, but she cannot look and listen at the same time. For her, information processing on more than one sensory channel is not possible.

An effective teacher for children and adults on the spectrum is one that is a good detective, who looks for the source of learning difficulties. Often, the source can be found in one of these categories mentioned previously—or a combination of them. A sensory-based challenge, even one that is considered mild, will dramatically compromise a child’s ability to learn with “traditional” teaching methods. Teachers who truly want to help students with sensory and perception difficulties will figure out the child’s unique learning style



“Sensory overload can cause either vision or hearing to shut down completely.”

and adapt his or her teaching methods accordingly. Some children do best with written instructions and assignments; others will do best through oral methods or oral testing. The best teachers have a flexible approach and teach with a style through which these children can learn. ♦

Temple Grandin, PhD, is an internationally respected specialist in the design of livestock handling systems. She is also the most famous person with autism in the world today. She was recently named one of Time magazine’s 100 most influential people and is the subject of the award-winning 2010 HBO biopic. Temple has authored several books on autism and is a worldwide speaker on autism topics. Her website is www.templegrandin.com.

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This is a must-read for any single parent who has a child on the autism spectrum!


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To Speak Up or Not To Speak Up?

Bobbi Sheahan



“Come back anytime—just don’t bring those kids,” the waitress said, trying to smile. She repeated it for emphasis, and then, without smiling, tacked on, “Just kidding.”

She was talking about my kids. Well, she was talking about one of my kids. The one who had spilled her water while trying to put ice cubes into her pocket. Also the one who had brought a pocketful of thumbtacks to the restaurant. The level of mayhem that my dear daughter was able to create made it seem as if a dozen kids were marauding through the building. Again.

I felt a sickening anger. At the waitress. At myself for having attempted this outing. And—let’s be honest—at my child for instigating the chaos. She was at the end of the list of people I was mad at, but she was on that list too.

It’s nobody’s fault, really. Is it?

Was the waitress really a jerk for what she said? Was I?

Let’s face it—when our kids Do What They Do in public, we feel we’re in a no-win situation. But in the restaurant, admitting this would have sounded like an excuse—at best.

The parents’ dilemma: how much information is too much?

What about when we speak up right from the start? If we disclose our children’s challenges—sensory issues, autism, you name it—in advance, we feel we’ve set our kids up for failure in the eyes of people who will now see them through the lens of their challenges, no matter what happens next. Maybe we’ve even violated their privacy by being open

How much do you say (or keep to yourself) when you observe sensory challenges or other evidence of possible special needs in someone else?

about it. Then again, if we say nothing and hope for the best, aren’t we dumping ice cubes and thumbtacks into people’s laps—sometimes literally—without any prelude or explanation? So, what do you say—or not say?

Autism and sensory issues always present a dilemma. We may look like everyone else on the outside, but we don’t really have the option of Just This Once being a family that

blends in. There are many situations that we just choose to avoid, but we do have to leave the house sometimes, and then the question of disclosure rears its head. I asked my readers how they handle the dilemma of disclosure, from both sides of the coin: How much do you tell about your child’s challenges—or your own—when you are entering an unfamiliar situation? Parents aren’t the only ones with a dilemma. What if the child isn’t yours, and you find yourself feeling like our exasperated waitress? I do remember life before kids, and I recognize that our waitress did have a mess to clean up after we left—so where’s the balance? How much do you say (or keep to yourself) when you observe sensory challenges or other evidence of possible special needs in someone else? Do you speak up? How do you respond when someone else speaks up?

On the other hand, what if you’re the waitress?

There are, of course, many variations on the scenario I’ve described. Sometimes, the shoe is on the other foot. Many times, I’ve wondered what to say about my own family, but, even more often, I’ve been in the awkward position of observing apparent special needs and wondering what I ought to

say. Do you ask a question or make an observation that may be helpful or insightful—but is just as likely to offend? When the shoe is on the other foot, it's hard to know what to say. Since there are so many shoes involved here, I asked readers for their input. What if you're the waitress observing the spillage and the ice cubes going into the pockets? Or what if you're another diner in the restaurant?

I'm so glad I asked. The answers I got were all over the map, but some common themes emerged when making observations about someone else—whether that “someone else” is an adult or a child:

1. Be compassionate.
2. Keep it simple.
3. Err on the side of not being a big blabbermouth.

Let's look at some of the responses I received. A parent of a child with autism offered a tactful way to speak up:

It's a hard call, because I'd like to be supportive, but I also don't want to offend. I'll often say (with a smile), “He reminds me of my son at that age. Of course, my son has autism and that doesn't apply to your child, but he sure is cute.” Then, if their child has a diagnosis and they want to talk about

it, they will. Otherwise, they focus on the “He/she sure is cute” part.

A preschool teacher ventured:

I will say, “Johnny walks on his toes and tries to take off his clothes a lot,” but I won't use The Big, Scary Words and try to hint at diagnoses. It's not my place to make a diagnosis, and I might be wrong. Better to stick with the facts.

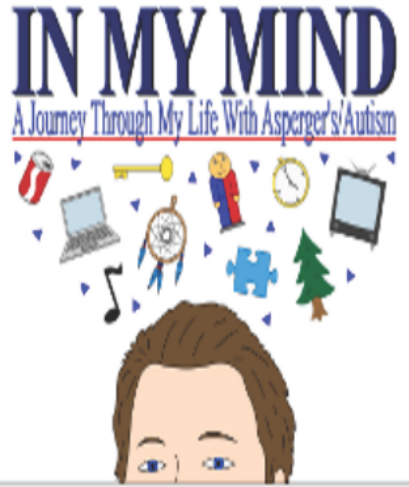
Those concerns are well founded. People generally don't appreciate being on the receiving end of such observations, however well intentioned. I can personally recall having strangers “diagnose” my daughter at the park, and, if memory serves, those folks didn't have the best timing or delivery. Other readers told similar stories, such as this one:

My child was melting down in the grocery store, and this woman came up and asked, “How long has he had ADHD?” I was already irritated, and now I was offended at this stranger to boot. I guess it's a good thing I couldn't look her up a year later to tell her she'd been right.

So, how do you know when to speak up and how? I broached this question to a group of parents, and I found an interesting split of opinions.

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The parents of younger children seemed to err on the side of minding their own business, lest we intrude on someone's dawning awareness by being a buttinsky or know-it-all, while some of the parents of young adults challenged us by asking, “How are people going to begin to understand and face reality if we don't speak up? How are we going to help the world understand our kids if we don't advocate for more understanding, awareness, and acceptance?” I see both points. Still, that's quite a load of bricks to pile onto a casual acquaintance at the park. It really depends on whether

you're talking to a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger.

One parent summed up the approach that most of us seem to take: "I don't speak up to people whom I do not know well. Chances are, they already know. If they don't, they do not want to hear that from a stranger."

I think that's a safe assumption. People are at different points on their journeys, and I have no idea what they know or if it's even my business. Also, different things may be appropriate in different situations. A stranger in the library isn't going to warrant the same level of discussion as a friend in my home. Also—here's a crazy thought—even though I may think I have insights to share about what's going on with someone else's child, I might be wrong.

Conclusion: It's Good to Say Just the Right Thing, Which Is Sometimes Nothing at All

Of course, there are gracious ways to approach sensitive topics. One example of graciousness comes from a woman I know named Kate. I met her at the birthday party of a mutual friend. The setting was intimate, but Kate and I were meeting for the first time. As my daughter happily spun and cavorted away from the other kids, Kate gently said to me, "What a lovely girl!

Is there a name for what she struggles with?" On the page, it looks awkward, but it's all about the delivery. For Kate and me, it was the opening for a friendship, delivered with kindness and sincerity.

Kindness and sincerity are always a good starting point, and sometimes discretion is the better part of valor. When in doubt—which is often—I button my lip. When I do speak, about my child or about someone else, I try to keep it simple and short and as non-intrusive as possible. I don't assume that people want to tell me all of their business or that they want to hear mine. I appreciated the comments of this adult with Asperger's:

Loud noises drive me nuts, and background noise is distressing to me. I often tell people on the phone, "I find background noise overwhelming. I'd love to talk when you can get a quiet moment, so please call me back," and then I just hang up. I've tried it other ways, and the other ways didn't work.

I love it when people can advocate for themselves like that, and I hope I'm teaching my kids to do the same. When I see behavior that tips me off to special needs, I generally as-

sume that the parents do know. I also don't assume that I'll come across as beautifully as my friend Kate did. So, I often keep quiet unless I'm asked a direct question. I've been on the receiving end of too many clumsy approaches, and I have also put my foot in my mouth before—probably more than I've even realized.

I have a friend who found the perfect balance—at least for me. Years ago, before I had much of a clue, she pointed out my daughter's "sensory stuff" that reminded her of her son, and she waited for me to inquire further. When I did, she offered some details about the various therapies that had helped her son, and she shared a book with me. I eventually put "the sensory stuff" together with my daughter's other challenges and learned that she has autism, but I will forever appreciate my friend's courage—and her restraint.

I'll also make a mental note of which restaurants to avoid in the future, even if I've left my kids at home. ♦

Bobbi Sheahan is the co-author of What I Wish I'd Known about Raising a Child with Autism (Future Horizons, 2011).

PlaySense

(A regular column with a playful sensory game embedded in the story)

Sophia could be a mother's nightmare. She had an unrelenting need for attention from her mom. She was always tugging at her, pulling at her, and insisting that she be noticed. Her mother couldn't even go to the bathroom without Sophia there, in her face, wanting something. Being a gentle and agreeable person by nature, Sophia's mom heeded Sophia's desires. She listened to her, watched her, came to her, got things for her, and did whatever she could to meet Sophia's needs. She learned she'd better do it, actually, because if she didn't, Sophia threw fits you wouldn't believe—full-blown tantrums.

The tantrums might have started off as a way to let her mom know that she meant business, but her emotions soon overtook her, and Sophia dissolved into tears that were very real and lasted a very long time. Her mother's heart opened to her daughter's distress. She deeply loved her and wished she knew what to do.

THE ATTENTION CURE

Sophia's mom sought help. She asked friends, relatives, and professionals what she could do to control her daughter's behavior. She tried out the advice she was given: ignoring Sophia, rewarding her, punishing her, and praying for her. Whatever she tried worked—for a while—and then the same old patterns would return.

Finally, Sophia's mom did find a method that worked, worked well, and kept working. She calls it "The Silent Treatment," but I call it "The Attention Cure." I know it, because I saw it in action. Here is how it began.

Sophia was enrolled in an early-intervention program, designed to help parents who have concerns about their child's development. Children with established conditions,

such as Down syndrome and autism, are in this program, as are children whose conditions have no diagnosis. But, diagnosis or no, they have a parent who believed that something wasn't quite right and that the child might be eligible to receive services from a teacher, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, and/or a speech pathologist.

If you are familiar with the therapy world, you'll know that when a child in an early-intervention program turns 3 years old, he or she gets transferred into an early-childhood program and has a whole new set of therapists and teachers. This transfer from one team to the next is conducted at a large "transition meeting," attended by both teams and the child's parents, where, traditionally, much jargon is spoken back and forth by the team members.

For Sophia, the "transition meeting" was held in a large room that had a lot of toys and play equipment and a big

by Barbara Sher, MA, OTR,
The Gameslady

conference table. Sophia and her mom played on the toy slide as the team members gathered in the room. Ten strangers. One mom. One child. That's enough to get any child nervous! Sophia began her litany of "Mom, come here," "Mom, get me that," and "Mom, watch this," accompanied by tugging, pulling, and even hitting. Her mother tried to join the table to meet the team and discuss Sophia's case, but it seemed futile. As soon as her mother sat down, Sophia wanted something. It wasn't long before it became clear that Sophia was going to crank up her demands. It was then that her mom applied "The Silent Treatment," also known as "The Attention Cure."

Her mother placed Sophia directly in front of her and looked at her quietly. Her face was placid, and her eyes simply said, "I am here for you." No words were spoken. The attention was so full and so present and loving that everybody in the room could feel it—especially Sophia. One minute

passed, then two. Sophia sat and soaked up her mom's attention, which is all she really wanted. Then, feeling satisfied,



Sophia got up, made her way over to the toys, and began to play quietly—by herself.

Both teams were impressed. They talked over each other as they complimented Sophia's mother on this strategy and commented on its effectiveness.

"It works every time," Sophia's mom said, smiling.

Three months later, according to the rules of the early-

childhood program, Sophia was scheduled to undergo a complete evaluation to check her motor, social, self-help, communication, and cognitive skills and find out if she was eligible to receive special education.

Sophia did all the tasks presented and aced everything. Her behavior was exemplary, even when it was time to go home and leave all the toys behind. Sophia's mom credits her "Silent Treatment" strategy for the ease she's developed in getting along with Sophia, and she wishes other parents knew about it.

Now, they do. ♦

Barbara Sher, MA, OTR, is an author of 10 books and believes in using children's natural love of play to enhance key skills and promote inclusion. Her books include early-intervention games, self-esteem games, attention games, and spirit games. To receive a free game designed for your child's needs, visit Barbara's Web site at www.gameslady.com.

LIVING a SENSORY-RICH LIFE:

Educate, Embrace & Engage

Angie Voss, OTR

As an occupational therapist (OT), author, and mother of a child with sensory differences, my sensory journey has come full circle. I knew from the time I entered college at the University of Florida that I wanted to become involved with sensory integration as an OT, but I had no idea where this would take me or what I would learn along the way. As a new graduate, I wanted to provide the most skilled and technically oriented OT session possible. I was ready to apply my newly learned skills and dive right in with sensory strategies and techniques to help these sweet kiddos. So that is exactly what I did—although I soon realized that parents needed more. The time I spent with parents at the end of sessions, briefing them and giving them ideas and instructions for sensory activities to do at home, was critical. I could have easily spent an extra hour each week educating parents. I had so much to tell them and so much to teach. Parents were longing for more information and understanding as to why their child did what he or she did. I cannot count how many times I saw parents shed tears—happy tears—when they realized that someone finally “got it.” Someone finally understood their child and was able to help.

Year after year, I continued to emphasize the importance of developing a home program and living a sensory-rich life on a daily basis. I was simply the leader and developer of the home program and the sensory plan, but the true effects occurred at home and during the rest of the week, outside of the clinic—not in the hour spent with me. Many parents jumped right onboard, embraced the challenges ahead, and developed a newfound respect for their child. They acquired the tools they needed to have at home and ran with it! The kiddos in these scenarios were the ones that made incredible progress ... and quickly. On the other hand, some parents seemed to be under the impression that the once- or twice-weekly OT session was going to “fix” their child. I knew this was not the case. I had witnessed over and over again the dramatic difference it made to a child’s progress when his or her parents truly carried over what I was teaching by applying sen-



sory techniques at home and at school, as opposed to those who relied on the weekly OT visits as the only sensory intervention all week.

So a few more years passed, and then I had my own precious baby boy. Because I lived and breathed sensory strategies, I naturally began applying sensory techniques and incorporating sensory-enriching activities throughout the day, every day. I responded to my son's sensory cues and signals as he grew and developed. And wouldn't you know it ... I discovered I had a kiddo with sensory challenges on my hands! An oral seeker like no other, my son was unable to focus or attend or sleep without an oral sensory tool. He was also a sensory seeker who craved movement and proprioceptive input on a constant basis at home and at school. He was a picky eater and the child in the classroom who disrupted others by talking a mile a minute. But that was okay, because we were prepared—and you'd better believe that every teacher my son had knew the sensory tools and strategies he needed to have a successful day and school year.

Our own home became a sensory dreamland. It started with

just a “hippity-hop” ball and some other basic sensory tools, such as fidget toys, oral sensory tools, and a therapy ball. Then we added a hammock swing, a cuddle swing, a trapeze, a pillow cave, a huge beanbag, a BOSU balance trainer, weighted balls, a body sock, and other sensory tools in every room of the house! Most of these items were obtained at Christmas

“The daily application of sensory techniques and a consistent home program was the ticket, as well as respecting my son for exactly who he was ...”

and on birthdays, as presents from myself and my son's grandparents, since sensory equipment can be expensive. Whenever I was asked, “What does Dillon want for Christmas?” I always made sure it was sensory related. A pogo stick, a Rip-Stik, rollerblades, hockey nets for street hockey—you name it. There was never a doubt he was getting a sensory tool. The daily application of sensory techniques and a con-

sistent home program was the ticket, as well as respecting my son for exactly who he was—a perfect little gem.

I then began to realize something else ... I was different, too! My level of patience and understanding for my own son's sensory challenges developed naturally, and I embraced him and adored him for exactly who he was. He is a young man with sensory challenges and differences, yet he has strengths and positive traits that are unique to him. I would not change a thing about him! His sensory differences helped make him the perfect person that he is today.

You may notice that when I speak about him, I do not use the term “disorder.” This is my personal preference across the board. I feel that it sets a negative tone and also implies that something is wrong, and I do not see kids with sensory differences in that light at ALL. Yes, there are challenges, and they are real, but if and when one begins to take on a mindset of embracing and respecting the child exactly the way he or she is, you will see a very positive outcome. If parents, teachers, and caregivers respect children for who they are, HELP them understand their own nervous systems, learn how to assist them to im-

prove self-regulation and manage sensory input, and practice the sensory strategies to which the brain responds best, then children will experience a shift from frustration and expectations to respect and love. This, in turn, will help each child embrace his or her own unique traits and strengths.

More wonderfully successful years passed in my private practice. I learned through experience and parent conversations that my approach, passion, and level of understanding and respect for the kids I worked with in my clinic was unique. I had a true love and passion for each and every child who walked through that door. I was determined to help them, as well as help their parents understand and respect them for who they are and what they have to offer this world. I soon learned that my

approach was different than that of other OTs. Parents who came to my clinic after years of working with other OTs expressed that they learned more in two sessions with me than they had in 2 years with other therapists. They also indicated that their child responded to me more quickly in one session than they had in years of working with a previous therapist. I knew I was onto something! I assure you, I am not saying all of this to toot my own horn. That is not my style. It is my firm belief that I have stumbled onto the key to achieving success with sensory issues: It's living a sensory-enriching life, every single day.

Here is how things have come full circle. After more than 20 years working as a sensory OT and having a very successful pediatric private practice, with the most amaz-

“Their child responded to me more quickly in one session than they had in years of working with a previous therapist.”

ing son, who is now 14 years old and doing incredibly well, I realized I could reach so many more children if I put my strategies in writing. My first book, *Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals*, provides more than 110 sensory signals, behaviors, and cues, with a brief sensory explanation of each signal and ideas about how to address it. This book was so well received that I wanted to write more. In



my upcoming book, the second edition of *Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals*, you will find more than 300 "sensory signals." This practical handbook is intended to be used in conjunction with information found on my new Web site, ASensoryLife.com, which provides a wealth of free information and resources, including printable handouts, sensory how-to videos, sensory equipment ideas, and much, much more. The Web site is designed to help a parent, teacher, or caregiver follow three steps to live a sensory-rich life: Educate, embrace, and engage.

Educate

Step one is to educate and empower yourself. The world of sensory integration is full of big words. The brain is a complex organ, and most people do not understand sensory differences and challenges! It is our job as parents to inform those in our child's life about his or her sensory needs. As a parent, you are your child's most powerful advocate. To advocate, you must be informed, and when you are informed, you are empowered. But it doesn't have to be so difficult and complicated. I have dedicated the first section of ASensoryLife.com to helping parents truly

understand sensory integration from a practical standpoint.

For example, it is important to understand sensory modulation in a practical way that applies to daily life. When a child seeks input one minute, then avoids and shuts down toward the same type of input, this child is likely dealing with sensory modulation difficulties. Learning to recognize the signs and respond appropriately can dramatically improve the quality of life for this child. The "fight or flight" response and sensory meltdowns are two concepts that are often misunderstood as behavioral issues or as demonstrations of defiance, opposition, or attention seeking. Most of the time, it is quite the opposite. The child is giving you sensory cues and signals that his or her nervous system is no longer in "ready state" and is in a state of dysregulation.

Embrace

Step two is to embrace the child for exactly who she is as a person! This step involves truly respecting a child's sensory differences and embracing her unique sensory needs. It is also necessary to learn and understand a child's sensory signals, why she does what she does, and what makes her brain tick



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or shut down. Almost every little signal and behavior can link back to self-regulation and sensory causes. Our children are giving us hints and cues on a constant basis. Lack of eye contact, for example, does not necessarily indicate that a child is being disrespectful. It can be a signal that the child is not ready or able to engage in eye contact according to his visual input level and/or state of regulation. Misinterpreting a lack of eye contact is just one example of how someone can misconstrue a sensory signal as an intentional behavior. The way to change this is to simply

(a) look for these cues from a sensory perspective and then (b) act on what you see.

Did you know that hiccups can be a sign of sensory overload? How about the way tickling a child can be very dysregulating and disorganizing to the nervous system? Are you aware that too much spinning is not therapeutic or beneficial for the brain, even when the child craves it? Or that when a child is chewing on clothing, he is likely trying to organize his brain and self-regulate?

In *Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals*, I will address and “translate” sensory cues like these. I also talk about what I call “side effects,” which include anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. For example, anxiety can be a direct result of the nervous system perceiving the environment to be a threat, due to the fact that the brain is overresponding to the sensory input or misinterpreting the input. I go on to discuss “sensory anchors,” which are often referred to as “stimming.” I prefer to call these behaviors anchors, since stimming has a negative tone and suggests that a child is doing something “bad” or “wrong.” A sensory anchor is something a child does to help his brain feel good and

to help himself feel grounded and regulated. Examples of sensory anchors include lining toys up, watching spinning objects, flapping the hands, smelling nonfood objects, and walking on the toes.

Engage

This brings me to the third step, which is to engage in living a sensory-rich life! It is important to engage in purposeful and meaningful sensory-based activities throughout the day. Step away from the busy, hectic world of technology and the many screens that captivate our attention throughout the day. Get back to the basics of play, going outdoors, engaging with your children, and being truly present with them by infusing your interactions with meaning, purpose, and love. Just “getting through the day” is not enough. Be aware of everything your child eats, as food directly affects the brain and nervous system. Be aware of the dangers of medications and toxic air fresheners in your home. Learn how to help improve your child's sleep patterns, as the sleep/wake cycle directly affects sensory processing. Learn how certain types of sensory input, such as having visual clutter in the

home or classroom, can be enough to hinder learning and disrupt self-regulation. All of these topics are discussed on ASensoryLife.com, along with learning ideas for developing a sensory home program and how to engage in and live a sensory-rich life each and every day—at home, at school, and in the community.

If you want to improve the quality of life for your child with sensory challenges, I truly believe that following these three steps—educate, embrace, and engage—will get you there! ♦

Angie Voss, OTR/L is a registered and licensed occupational therapist with over 20 years of experience working with children with sensory differences. She is the owner of Sensory Solutions, PLLC located in Boise, Idaho. Angie's scope of practice also includes extensive experience as a presenter of sensory workshops for parents as well as sensory training for various organizations and businesses including educators, therapists, physicians, and other medical professionals. She is the owner of Understanding-SPD.com, a membership and resource based website with a focus on sensory processing disorder (SPD).

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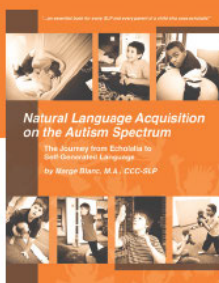
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the Out-of-Sync Child

Carol Kranowitz, MA

If you are seeking information about the effects of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) in children, you are in luck. An abundance of books is now available to help parents, teachers, and other non-occupational therapists learn to recognize SPD characteristics and support “out-of-sync” kids at home and at school.

Alas, should you want information about the effects of SPD as children mature, you will find fewer choices. Reader-friendly resources that describe “what happens next” are hard to write—and hard to find.

Whether they are wondering or worrying, parents and teachers have many questions about their kids’ futures. As children grow up:

- Do they grow out of SPD?
- Are they able to use their beautiful minds to flourish at school?
- Can they develop close friendships?

- Are they invited to birthday parties and social gatherings?
- Can they learn to enjoy games and sports?
- Can they manage noisy, odorous, madding places, such as the subway, the highway, the cafeteria, and the dormitory?
- Will they ever eat like other people?
- Do they learn to date, procreate, and parent?
- Do they find meaningful work?
- Does it ever become okay to hug them?
- Will it be possible to take them to new places? Go to the beach, across a bridge, to the amusement park, up an escalator, on an airplane ... to the dentist?
- Does everything turn out all right in the end?

Parents and teachers have asked me these questions since the publication of *The Out-of-*

Sync Child in 1998. They yearn for reassurance that the children they care for will develop the sensory skills necessary to function in daily life.

I have yearned, in turn, to give an answer more satisfying than, “It all depends ... I really don’t know.” I don’t know because, as an early-childhood educator, my expertise is with young children. Also, I do not know because I do not have SPD. Well, maybe just a little, when my hands come into contact with finger paints or bread dough. (Shudder.)

Because I don’t know firsthand how SPD affects maturing people, I have sent information seekers to experts who do. Sharon Heller, a psychologist, has sensory overresponsivity and has written books about it for teens and adults. Hartley Steiner, mother of three teenage sons with SPD, has assembled a compilation of memoirs from 48 adults.

Scholarly articles and research papers about SPD in adults are also available in journals, in OT Practice, in the American Occupational Therapy Association’s Sensory Integration Special Interest Section newsletters, and on the Internet. Moya Kinnealey

is well known for her research in adults with SPD, and Teresa May-Benson and Jane Koomar have more recently reported on research studies in this area. Tina Champagne has researched and published strategies on the integration of sensory approaches into mental healthcare practices with adults. Paula Aquilla wrote an excellent article for *S.I. Focus* about SPD in people of different ages.

These books and articles are helpful, and still we need more. Teenagers and adults must know that they are not alone, that they can learn new strategies, that others like them have learned to cope and improve their lives with direct one-to-one occupational therapy, and that the future is full of hope.

Thus, I decided to gather and interweave stories written by individuals who have lived with SPD all their lives and who are glad to tell us about the process. *Seeking Sync: Stories by Teens and Adults about Adapting to SPD* is the working book title. Sensory World will publish it in the fall of 2013.

To whet your appetite, here are some excerpts from the manuscript and thoughts from the contributors:

'I Was Finally Out of Jail'

"When I learned about SPD around my 40th birthday, I was shocked—so many years, so much suffering for me and others! I felt like a person who had been confined in jail for all those years, without being at fault, and suddenly I was exonerated because they discovered I was innocent."

—Gina Betch

'I Enjoy Helping Younger Kids'

"I have been pleasantly surprised to discover that although I am still a teenager, I am having a real positive effect on kids even younger than I am. One of the things I have learned is that although children can learn from the guidance of adults, they will progress even more if someone around their own age assists them. Through my speeches, I have been able to directly speak to children and convince them about the merits of hard work so they can find their own voices. This is a reward unto itself."

—Alexander Fields-Lefkovic, author of books that promote exercise for kids with special needs

'I Learned to Attend to Personal Hygiene'

Dan Travis avoided tasks that involved the tactile sensations of soap and water until an occupational therapist helped him: "Even after my nervous system became more relaxed when I experienced these sensations, my mind was still psychologically hardwired to avoid them. I had to spend time working on removing my beliefs that these forms of stimuli would still be painful to me. Once I did, however, I was finally able to do the things I could never bear before!"

"After undergoing more than 3 years of occupational therapy as an adult, I have finally gotten to a place where I am able to appreciate a daily shower, and brushing my teeth doesn't send me over the edge. I am now able to begin reversing an awful trend of declining dental hygiene. Even if I never truly enjoy these things, being able to do them without them wreaking havoc on me and sending me into a state of overload has been amazing.

"Occupational therapy honestly does have the potential to make dreams come true, and my story has been a living testament to that over the past few years."



'I Help Others Understand'

After receiving a diagnosis of SPD, Rachel Schneider decided to inform her relatives about her condition prior to a cousin's wedding: "I cried when I wrote the e-mail, unsure of how I would come across, how they would react, and how it might change our relationships. Their reactions were heartwarming. When I showed up at my cousin's celebration

"Most people don't know how much you go through until you give them permission to understand."

(disorders and diagnoses be damned), my uncle enveloped me in his arms. He didn't need to speak a word—I knew he understood. My aunt and cousins followed suit.

"Two hours later, when I started feeling sensorially taxed by the day's events, no one asked, 'Why are you going? Why can't you stay?' Instead, we all teared up and hugged each other good-bye. They thanked me for the enormous efforts I put forth to be able to participate in the celebrations that night. And that's the thing. Most people don't know how much you go

through until you give them permission to understand."

The stories I have collected so far cover many topics, from feelings to friendships, from strategies for avoiding certain sensations to strategies for adapting to other sensations, from childhood memories to future plans. Several topics re-occur, especially the misery of having an "invisible" and often undiagnosed or misdiagnosed disorder—and the jubilation when an occupational therapist assigns a correct diagnosis of SPD. The stories are vibrant, poignant, funny, determined, angry, resigned, tender, and grateful—the full gamut. Indeed, the contributors concur that their lifelong work to manage sensations has made their lives and relationships more precious than anyone would have predicted when they were out-of-sync children.

Want to add your voice? Please do—and soon. Seeking Sync is still in progress. Send your contact information to SeekingSync@SensoryWorld.com—and let's get in sync! ♦

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Additional Resources

You can check out Moya Kinnealey's research studies on SPD in adolescents and adults at www.SPDFoundation.net. I also recommend Teresa May-Benson and Jane Koomar's research studies on sensory processing in typically developed adults and those with SPD, available at www.thespiralfoundation.org/researchproj.html.

In 1995, Carol created a course of study about her interest in SPD and turned her master's thesis into a book, The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder, which was published in 1998. Carol is a board member of the SPD Foundation. Her website is www.out-of-sync-child.com



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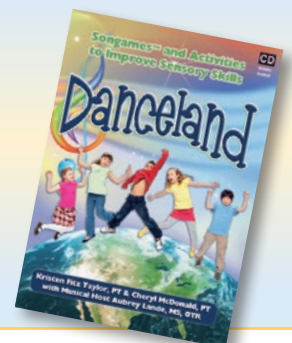
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