Class 10

Guidance

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GUIDANCE & DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:

TIME OUT IS OUT

BY KATHY PREUESSE

In a typical early childhood classroom, children engage in a variety of behaviors—some appropriate and some inappropriate. Early childhood teachers need to deal with all behaviors, but of course it is the inappropriate ones that are the subject of so much study! And even more than the inappropriate behaviors themselves, our response to the behaviors is weighed, measured, and quantified by a wide range of early childhood experts. The question remains: how do teachers react to children's behavior, and how does that reaction impact the child in later incidents? Through the years, styles of discipline have changed. "Spare the rod and spoil the child"—the in vogue punishment over perhaps a hundred years—gave way to time out sometime in the late 1970s. And now time out, the "strategy of choice" for 20 years or so, seems to be falling out of favor. What is time out, why has it been so popular, and what strategy will replace it if indeed it is on the way out?

What Is Time Out?

Sheppard and Willoughby (1975) define time out as the "removal of an individual from a situation which contains minimal opportunity for positive reinforcement." According to Schreiber (1999) the intent of time out is to "control and extinguish undesirable behaviors." When you say time out to a classroom teacher, many times the image evoked is that of a chair in the corner of the classroom where a child is put when she has "misbehaved." The length of time that child needs to "think about what she has done wrong" is many times determined by the child's age. The rule of thumb generally has been one minute per year.

The Use of Time Out as a Discipline Strategy

Time out was originally used in institutional settings with people who had a variety of mental or emotional disorders (Marion, 2001). In that setting, time out might have been used to ensure the safety of other residents by removing a dangerous or disruptive resident from a setting. It might also have been used as a consequence, when a resident refused to comply with requests of the staff. In such a setting, time out was considered a legitimate guidance strategy.

At some point during the 1970s, time out made its way into schools as a discipline technique. As corporal punishment declined, time out arose to fill the void with what seemed as a more caring, humane, and non-violent method. In an early childhood classroom, time out has seemingly been used as a discipline strategy to control and extinguish undesirable behaviors. Well-meaning teachers might use it to cope with non-compliance in young children, or to give a consequence for unsafe behavior. In some situations time out may be viewed as a logical consequence to inappropriate behavior or the loss of self-control (Gartrell, 2001).

How effective is time out in the typical early childhood environment? *Two-and-half-year-old Ben runs over to giggling two-year-old Jack and pushes him. The teacher says, "Ben! I told you not to push Jack! Use your words!" Ben tries again to push Jack. The teacher shouts, "Ben! That is not okay! You need to sit in the time-out chair!" She leads Ben to the chair and sits him down. In the time-out chair, Ben might be thinking, "I'm sitting in the chair... What is that noise?... I'm sitting in the chair... I want my mommy... I'm sitting in the chair." Ben is probably not thinking, "Wow! I guess I'll never push Jack again! I'm really sorry I did that!" Jack might be thinking: "What happened? I was giggling and then I was pushed down!"* (Schreiber, 1999, p. 22).

Should the Use of Time Out be Questioned?

Although many teachers view this technique as discipline, the lost opportunities and deprivation of positive interactions move this technique into the punishment category. The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, P-1.1, states, "Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not

participate in practices that are disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, intimidating, psychologically damaging, or physically harmful to children. This principle has precedence over all other in this code." Marion and Swim (2001) point out that "punishment has great potential for doing harm to children because it often serves as a model of negative, hurtful and aggressive measures."

Teachers may view time out as discipline rather than punishment, but children view these strategies as painful. When two-, three- and four-year-old children were asked in a study about time out, they expressed sadness and fear, as well as feeling alone, feeling disliked by the teacher and feeling ignored by peers (Readdick and Chapman, 2000).

Many early childhood experts agree with Readdick and Chapman. For example, Montessori (1964) sees these external controls that reward and punish as an opportunity lost to teach children how to self-regulate (Gartrell, 2001). The removal period can be confusing to the child because he lacks the cognitive ability to understand the process (Katz, 1984; Gartrell, 2001). Schreiber (1999) calls the practice of using time outs "undesirable" for five reasons: 1) external controls overshadow the need to develop internal controls; 2) adult needs are met at the expense of the child's needs; 3) a negative effect can be seen in the child's self-worth and self-confidence; 4) confusion arises over the connection between the action and the consequence; and 5) the lost opportunity for learning. These "undesirable" aspects of time out, along with the others mentioned above, make this strategy developmentally inappropriate. The needs of the child are not met, thus, causing harm to the child.

Guiding Children's Behavior

Time out needs to be revisited under the broader umbrella of guidance. Guidance can be defined as "Everything adults deliberately do and say, either directly or indirectly, to influence children's behavior, with the goal of helping them become well-adjusted, self-directed, productive adults" (Hildebrand and Hearron, p. 4, 1999). Using this definition, it is obvious that teachers have a responsibility to guide interactions towards a meaningful end. It is through positive actions or techniques that learning takes place. Today many positive techniques are available to early childhood teachers. Let's look at three areas: 1) managing the environment, 2) demonstrating developmentally appropriate practices, and 3) fostering the development of self-regulation in children.

Managing the Environment

Managing the environment must start with safety as the first priority. Consider the child who seems to be always running in the classroom. The teacher says, *"John, stop running before you hurt yourself. I've told you many times that if you run you will have to sit on a chair and slow down."* A positive alternative to this would be to take a look at the environment. Is there sufficient space for large muscle or active play? Instead of changing the child's behavior with negative consequences, add a tunnel for crawling through, steps for walking up and down or change your schedule to provide outdoor play earlier in your morning routine. Schreiber (1999) lists several ways to minimize conflicts such as keeping group sizes small so each child gets more attention and minimize crowding of play spaces to minimize disruptions. Classrooms need personal spaces and social spaces. Personal space refers to an area where children put belongings or spend time when privacy is needed. Social space refers to an area around the child that the child feels is his such as a seat at the art table, or a section of the sand box (Hildebrand & Hearron, 1999). Teachers need to provide enough social spaces in their classrooms so children feel comfortable while playing. Take a look around your room. Is there adequate play space? Consider having 50 percent more play spaces than the number of children present.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Developmentally appropriate practices and positive guidance strategies go hand in hand. As teachers, we must make sure our expectations are in line with the developmental levels of the children.

Giving children choices is one of Eaton's (1997) suggestions for positive guidance techniques. For example, *if a two-year-old is having difficulty coming to the snack table, the teacher can say, "It is time to sit down for snack now Jody. You may sit on the red chair or this blue chair."* Choices allow the child to have control over her environment within the boundaries set by the teacher.

Teaching expected behavior is another positive guidance strategy (Marion & Muza, 1998). As teachers we model behavior continuously. As a toddler teacher, I find myself modeling appropriate behaviors in the house area in my room especially at the beginning of the year. The children love to set the table and serve food. They also love to put everything in their mouths as they play and pretend to eat. In order to keep the toys clean (and out of the sanitizing container), I need to model how to hold the food inches from my mouth and move my lips as if I was eating. I tell them what I am doing and why. I label it by saying, "I'm pretending to eat the spaghetti." They love to watch and then repeat the modeled behavior.

Redirecting behavior takes on many forms—diverting, distracting, substituting (Marion, 1999). Consider having two of some items in your room so that substituting can easily happen such as in this example: *Sydney is playing with a doll when Michael tries to take it away. The teacher redirects by substitution when he hands Michael the second doll and replies, "Michael you may use this doll. Sydney is feeding that doll now."*

Setting limits in a preschool classroom provides boundaries for the children and teacher. Limits are set to assure the safety of children, adults, and materials. They also provide a framework in which trust, respect, equality, and accepting responsibility can flourish. Routines and transition times are ideal opportunities to apply positive guidance strategies. Use phrases such as, "It's time to (wash hands, go outside, rest quietly,)" "It's important to (use soap to remove germs, stay where a teacher can see you)," and "I need you to (wait for

me before you go outside, pick up those two blocks)." (Reynolds, 2001).

Using action statements to guide behavior in young children. Telling children what to do, such as "we walk inside," takes the guesswork out of the situation. The child knows exactly what is expected of him. Hildebrand and Hearron (1999) point out that putting the action part of the statement at the beginning of the sentence is an effective method. For example, saying, "Hold on to the railing" is better than, "You might fall off the slide, so be sure to hold on." This allows the important part to be stated before it's too late or the child loses interest in your comments.

Demeo (2001) suggests when using positive guidance strategies a teacher must also take into account the variables that affect compliance. When advocating for behavior change in young children we should:

- Use statements
- Give the child time to respond
- Use a quiet voice, don't give multiple requests
- Describe the behavior we want to see
- Demonstrate and model
- Make more start requests than stop requests (do vs. don't)
- Be at the child's eye level and optimal listening distance of three feet.

Fostering the Development of Self-Regulation in Children

Self-regulation allows children to control their actions. They must develop the ability to know when to act, when to control their impulses and when to search for alternative solutions. This is a learned, ongoing process that can be fostered by teachers who use an integrated approach that considers the whole child and the developmental level of that child. "To support developing impulse control [in toddlers], caregivers can use responsive guidance techniques that emphasize individual control over behavior, provide simple cause-and-effect reasons for desired behaviors, use suggestions rather than commands, and use language to assist self-control" Bronson (2000, p. 35). When we teach problem-solving skills, we help children take responsibility for their actions, see a situation from another point of view, and develop decision-making skills (Miller, 1984). These internal processes help children think of alternative solutions and possible outcomes. As teachers we can start the thought process by asking children, "How can you...?" or "What could we do to...?" As children develop these skills they will soon generate their own solutions and gain control of their actions.

Conclusion

Time out is out! As early childhood professionals, we must abide by the code of Ethical Conduct laid out by NAEYC, which states that "Above all we shall not harm children." The use of time out as a discipline strategy can harm children and must not be used in our classrooms. It is our responsibility to help "children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust, respect, and positive regard" (NAEYC, 1990). As teachers we influence children daily. We can choose to affect children in positive ways by managing the environment, using developmentally appropriate practices, and fostering self-regulation. An effective teacher uses a mix of several techniques. One strategy may work one day while another may be best another day. It takes forethought and reflection. Positive guidance strategies help children develop into caring, respectful human beings.

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Through the Lens of Sensory Integration: A Different Way of Analyzing Challenging Behavior

Sue Bakley

As usual, during morning circle, Ethan struggles to stay seated on his carpet square. The four-year-old inches over, pokes his neighbor a few times, then lies down on the floor and starts singing to himself. When the teacher reminds him to sit up straight, Ethan has difficulty getting his legs to crisscross like the teacher has shown him countless times. Before long, he uncrosses his legs and leans against his neighbor, putting his arm across her shoulder. When she shrugs him off and moves away, he reseats himself, positioning his legs outward from the hips and turned backward at the knee (sometimes called a W-sit). He intermittently hums and clicks his tongue.

When the teacher finishes reading "The Three Little Pigs," she asks Ethan a question about the story. His answer only remotely connects to the question. "My daddy saw a house on fire one time."

Running off after circle (he *never* walks!), Ethan crashes into the carefully constructed display of rocks the children collected on a nature walk. The teacher sighs deeply. She later admits to a colleague that she just can't seem to make any headway with Ethan, and she wonders what she's doing wrong.

This daily situation frustrates not only the teacher but Ethan and his family as well. The exasperated, discouraged teacher feels inadequate and blames herself for being unable to effect any changes in his behavior. Ethan's mother and father, after enduring numerous hints that they lack parenting skills, feel like failures. Ethan is seen as a behavior problem, a hopelessly "bad" or spoiled child. "I can't help it," Ethan says with a shrug.

This scenario takes on a whole new dimension with the possibility that Ethan's behavioral difficulties may be deeply rooted in neurological underpinnings that affect the way he processes and reacts to everyday sensations. Perhaps looking through the lens of sensory integration will help clarify the origins of Ethan's behavior and lead toward obtaining appropriate and effective help.

Sensory integration

Here's how theorists think sensory integration works. The body's central nervous system is responsible for processing and organizing information taken in by the senses. Once the brain interprets the information, responses are triggered in the form of physical actions, thoughts, or feelings. This interchange of action and reaction, which develops in the early years from birth through around age eight, forms the foundation of self-image and personality. It prepares the child for the more complex learning that occurs later on.

When this process of sensory integration works efficiently, attention can be directed to the task at hand and movements coordinated in a useful and efficient way. But in some children, the brain cannot organize sensory input and ordinary sensations may interfere with learning and behavior. This can cause a child to be confused, distracted, and disorganized. Coping with the ordinary demands of everyday life becomes difficult and frustrating. The process has been likened to indigestion of the brain (Kranowitz 1998).

Seven senses are involved in learning. The most familiar are those related to vision, hearing, taste, and smell. The more complex

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Kathleen Pechan, occupational therapist, gave valuable input on both terminology and content of this article.

senses related to touch (tactile), balance (vestibular), and body awareness (proprioception) often escape our notice because they operate on a subconscious level.

The *tactile* sense provides an array of subtle information about temperature, pain, and pressure as well as textural qualities of objects. Our reaction to the textures of foods is regulated by our sense of touch. It also helps us make human and emotional connections and find comfort in a hug. Together with vestibular and proprioception senses, the tactile sense is critical to how we function in our daily lives.

The *vestibular* sense gives us the feeling of movement as well as an understanding of where our body is in relationship to its surroundings. Located within the inner ear, it gives the balance needed to keep our bodies upright through changes in direction and speed. It helps the two sides of the body work together in a coordinated fashion and guides our eyes smoothly across a page of words.

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Perhaps the least known sense is *proprioception*. Proprioceptive sensors, located in tendons and joints, are activated when muscles contract and joints move. For example, when we engage in a physical activity like jumping, the proprioceptive sense tells us where each part of the body is, and how it is moving and allows the jump to be completed without mishap. In addition, the sense registers the weight of objects and calculates how much pressure to apply when we hold an object.

The tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive senses interrelate to form the foundation for higher level learning. The efficiency of sight, smell, vision, and hearing depend on and integrate with this foundation. When the central nervous system is not operating smoothly, and a child must cognitively work to integrate these senses that should be working automatically, attention and energy may be diverted from the task at hand. Learning might become difficult, laborious, and stressful.

Ordinary experiences can cause extraordinary reactions leading to behavioral and emotional problems. Instead of reacting calmly to interruptions or transitions, children without efficient sensory processing are more likely to overreact, lose control, and have difficulty calming down again. They may exhibit poor coordination and be hyperactive, distractible, inattentive, and impulsive. Paradoxically, some children who have problems with sensory processing react to the same environmental influences in an under-responsive way. They may

Signs a Child Might *Have Sensory Integration Disorder*

- Shies away from touch or wants affection only on his or her own terms
- Dislikes getting hands dirty and avoids messy materials, *or* seeks out messy experiences
- Hits and pokes others; bumps into objects and people
- Is easily distracted by visual or auditory stimuli—covers ears and complains about loud noises or makes excessive noises
- Avoids eye contact, especially when being reprimanded
- Has language processing problems (gives answers unrelated to questions; has difficulty following directions)
- Has poor balance (sits in "W" position, leans against others); avoids gross-motor activities requiring balance
- Runs, swings, spins, paces excessively, or flaps hands when excited
- Has difficulties interacting and playing with peers (play is often immature) so may prefer to play alone
- Is restless, inattentive, and disruptive; may not participate at group times
- Has immature grasp; switches hands during a task; avoids visual motor tasks
- Is hyperactive *or* underactive; exhibits anger; falls apart or loses control easily
- Has difficulty maintaining attention and completing tasks
- Has difficulty with transitions
- Objects to changes in routine; falls apart during transitions

Sources: A. Ayres, *Sensory Integration and the Child* (Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services, 1979); C. Kranowitz, *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1998).

at others or purposely bumping into them. Some are oblivious to pain. Still others fluctuate between over- and under-responsive behaviors.

When the central nervous system is not operating smoothly, and a child must cognitively work to integrate these senses that should be working automatically, attention and energy may be diverted from the task at hand.

Taking another look at Ethan's behaviors

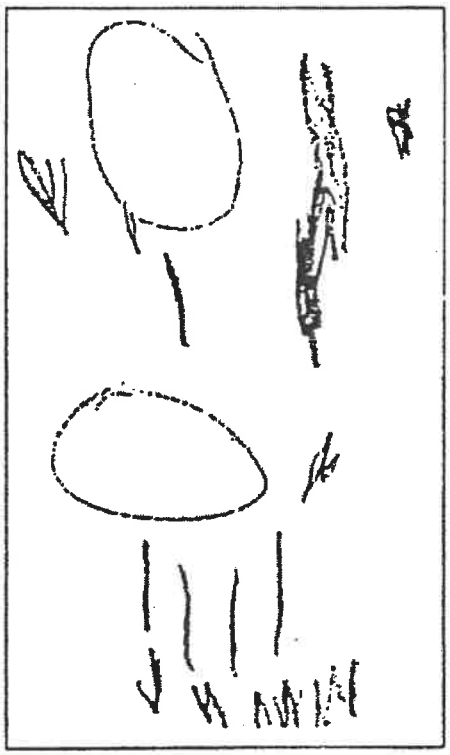
When examining Ethan's behavior through the lens of sensory integration, we see a four-year-old who is so preoccupied with operating the underlying factors of balance, body, and spatial awareness, that he has little energy left over to pay attention to the story. Ethan can't balance well enough to sit with his legs forward so he settles into the "W" position, which provides a wider base of support. When the teacher urges him to sit properly, he seeks much-needed doses of postural support by leaning against his neighbor. Because he's not sure where his own body is, it's hard for Ethan to tell where others are in relationship to himself—so, he reaches out and pokes the boy next to him. While his teacher and classmates seem annoyed by this, he somehow feels reassured.

Ethan's self-portrait is telling (see drawing at right). The head lacks facial features and hair and, although he included many different parts of the body, he clearly doesn't know how they connect. Without this understanding, how could he possibly know where his extremities are in relation to his body or where his body is in relationship to objects and people in his environment?

Some children may go unnoticed

While children like Ethan demand constant attention from teachers, other children with sensory integration disorders may go unnoticed because they are not disruptive. Derrick is a timid five-year-old who avoids activities and social interaction. The noise and activity of the typical preschool classroom seem to encase Derrick in a perpetual state of fear and anxiety. Ill at ease with any social interaction, Derrick would rather play by himself than with his classmates even if it means he has to give up his toys altogether. Even the smallest change in routine presents a challenge to his precariously balanced nervous system, causing him to dissolve in a puddle of tears. Although Derrick is clearly a bright child, his slow verbal processing makes it difficult for him to express himself or respond to questions. Routine questions leave him at a loss for words, reacting like a deer caught in headlights.

Motor planning is another compromised aspect of Derrick's learning. Motor planning involves being able to approach an unfamiliar task, plan how to do it, and follow through without a lot of wasted effort and motion. For example, a toddler approaching a tricycle for the first time is likely to climb aboard readily and soon pedal smoothly. However, when Derrick attempts the same thing, it is a frustrating experience. First, he has great difficulty figuring out how to sit on the seat, then he struggles to keep his feet on the pedals. He finally turns the pedals awkwardly, but then gets all tangled up in the process of getting off the bike.



Ethan's self-portrait

Even though the teacher has led Derrick through these same steps countless times, he doesn't seem to get it. Eventually, he gives up and watches from the sidelines. Any confidence Derrick might have is constantly undermined by feelings of inadequacy from attempting tasks again and again without success. The result is that he often shies away from new experiences. Instead of a joyous experience, learning becomes an overwhelming chore.

Cracks in the sensory foundation, as seen in the profiles of Ethan and Derrick, often cause difficulties in higher level skills such as learning to read and write as well as understanding and using language.

Possible causes of sensory integration disorder

Teachers may know children whose behaviors (see "Signs a Child *Might* Have Sensory Integration Disorder") are similar to those of Derrick and Ethan. Some of those children may have sensory integration disorder (also known as sensory integrative dysfunction). The exact causes of the disorder are still un-

known, but there appears to be a strong genetic connection. Other possible causes include prematurity, prenatal and postnatal environmental influence, birth trauma, and lack of sensory experiences after birth. Research shows that anywhere from 12% to 30% of children have problems of sensory integration. Boys are three times more likely to have problems than girls; however, boys may be diagnosed more frequently because their behavior tends to be seen as more disruptive (Ayres 1979; Kranowitz 1998).

Teachers should keep the following in mind when considering whether a child's behavior might be caused by sensory processing difficulties.

1. Some symptoms are similar to those caused by allergies, illness, certain medications, or problems in the home. For example, children who are victims of abuse or neglect can exhibit some of the same behaviors. It is important to examine these and other possible causes of a child's unusual behavior.

2. Children who are young or immature show many of these same signs but typically outgrow them. For the child with true sensory disorders, these difficulties do not go away. The defining difference resides in the severity of the symptoms (so pronounced that they can't be ignored) and duration and persistence (usually present but not necessarily apparent at birth) of the behavior despite everyone's efforts to help.

3. Typically, children with sensory integration disorder exhibit two or more symptoms that usually reflect two or more senses. For example, a child may be consistently disruptive, avoid physical contact, and sit in the "W" position.

4. Children with sensory integration problems often have "bad" days and "good" days and fluctuate between craving sensory input and overreacting to it. Day-to-day inconsistencies are typical.

Techniques to Use When a Child Loses Control

Children with problems of sensory integration are apt to melt down easily. Anger and tears hover close to the surface, ready to erupt at the least little thing. Once control is lost, it's extra hard to regain composure. The following techniques work well for most young children and can be easily applied in a typical classroom. They are particularly effective for children with sensory integration problems.

- **Resist telling an upset child to calm down.** Because the lack of control occurs below the level of consciousness, the child with sensory integration problems cannot willingly calm himself down.
- **Redirect an escalating child to a sensory activity** such as playdough, water play, or bins of sensory materials. More vigorous physical activities such as digging, jumping, and running can also help. Some children will naturally gravitate to the calming motion of a swing. Others may want to retreat to a safe, quiet place away from busy activities.
- **Offer a firm hug or a lap to curl up in.** When a child is agitated, the external control provided by your enveloping physical presence can help restore inner control. Some experts believe a firm hug reaches deeply into the subcortical level of the brain, overriding reactions of rage and aggression.
- **Wait for the child to calm down before talking about what happened.** When a child is agitated, your physical approach may trigger a fight-or-flight reaction (striking out or running away). Wait for her to regain composure. The calmer the child is, the more likely she will learn from the experience.
- **Maintain a calm, cool demeanor when discussing misbehaviors.** Avoid no-win confrontations. Your composure sets the tone for the child's success in learning from his mistakes. Remember, although this is a child who will surely test your patience, he desperately needs your help to learn acceptable behaviors.
- **Allow children to avert their gaze when you talk about their behavior.** Because so much effort is required to make and sustain eye contact there is little energy left for listening. Children with sensory integration problems are likely to listen better if allowed to avert their gaze.
- **Use simple, direct language.** Give brief, specific directions. Say "Put your hands in your lap" instead of "Keep your hands to yourself." Help the child remember what you've said by asking her to repeat it.

Familiarity with the symptoms and causes of sensory integration disorder makes it easier to understand how children once thought to be willful, lazy, or stubborn may actually be none of these. Because understanding and support are crucial to how the child views himself, the teacher's attitude becomes central to the child's self-esteem.

Ways teachers can help

There are many other ways teachers can help. The following suggestions reflect current best practice in early childhood education for all children. Don't hesitate to try them even though the Derricks and the Ethans in your class have not yet been formally diagnosed. They

supporting children's learning.

• **Remember that behavior *is* communication. Ask yourself, "What is the child trying to say?"** Perhaps, the child's answer would be, "I'm overwhelmed." "It's so noisy in here—I can't stand it anymore." "Don't get too close to me!" Once the message of the behavior is clear, it's easier to respond appropriately. That doesn't mean children with problems of sensory integration should have a different set of rules, however. These are children who often lack the inner controls to brake their impulses and therefore need the security of clear limits even *more* than other children. They need to be *taught* the rules and *consistently* held to them even if they fail frequently. The key is your compassionate understanding and helpful guidance.

• **Validate children's feelings by translating them into words.** This not only helps children learn the words for emotions and feelings, it also lets them know that strong feelings are part of being human. Attaching words to feelings helps children shift from the physical to verbal expression of strong emotions.

• **Transform your classroom into an environmental protection package.** The pervasive hype of today's cha-

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children with more stimulation than they can handle. Examine your classroom through the over-stimulated eyes and ears of a child. Define the learning areas, organize materials, and keep the room as orderly as possible. Keep displays and decorations low-key. Bright colors such as red and orange tend to excite

children, while pale blues and greens create a more serene atmosphere. The imperceptible strobe effect of fluorescent lights may agitate some children and interfere with learning (Schreiber 1996). Make use of natural light from skylights and large windows whenever possible.

Choose background music that soothes rather than excites, or have no music at all. Teach children to modulate their voices by modulating *your* voice. By making some simple environmental changes, you can begin to create an oasis of order and serenity that can dramatically affect children's behavior.

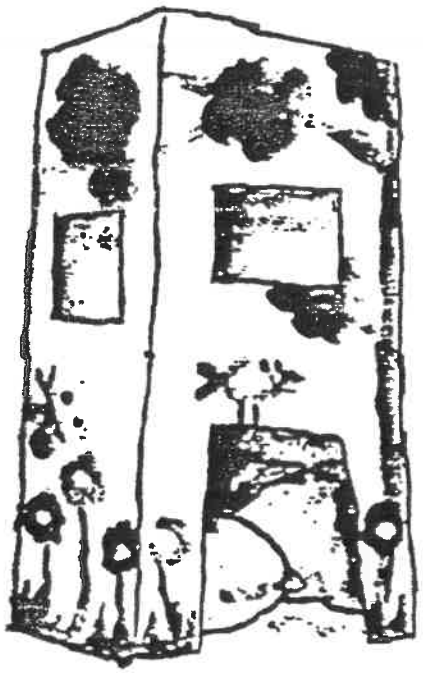
• **Provide a secluded area away from the mainstream.** Let children know this is a place where they can go when they feel the need to retreat. A tent or large refrigerator cozy getaway. Crawling into a sleeping bag can help a child calm down or settle in for a nap.

• **Help children get off on the right foot each day.** Plan a morning routine of physical activities that have a direct calming and organizing effect on behavior. This could include a quick back rub, a bear hug, and a few sets of jumping jacks. Stretching and bending exercises can relieve tension. Try a few simple yoga poses, some deep breathing, a minute or two of meditation. Starting the day with these activities could make the difference between a good or a bad day for children with sensory integration problems.

• **Avoid programming every minute of the day.** Children need time to think about, absorb, and react to their experiences. Time is a precious gift that helps them make sense of their world.

• **Allow children to find the most comfortable positions in which to do their work.** Children will usually choose the position that is least tiring, thereby freeing up energy for the task at hand. Let them choose to stand, kneel, or lie on their tummies—whatever works best.

• **Provide the security of routine, ritual, and predictability.** For children with sensory disorders, these factors can mean the difference between success and failure. Knowing what comes next helps them feel more secure and in better control. If possible, inform children of any schedule changes in advance. A picture schedule takes advantage of the strong visual orientation of most children by allowing them to *see* what comes next. This not only increases their independence but also makes them feel more secure in the process. Be sure to rearrange the pictures to reflect any schedule changes.



• **Structure transitions.** Some children fall apart during transitions. You can help them maintain their composure by giving plenty of warnings before transitions. Sing the same transition song each time. Putting away toys can often be an overwhelming task, but many children with sensory integration problems will find it easier to cooperate if the task is broken down into smaller chunks. For instance, one child can sort all the red blocks while another puts away the blue ones. Stand by in case help is needed, and liberally sprinkle positive acknowledgment as the job progresses.

• **Offer choices.** Children with sensory disorders often feel they have little control over their own bodies because their reactions to daily activities and interactions are unpredictable. Given a seemingly trivial matter, the child may exert *more* control than normal by ignoring or defying your attempts to resolve the situation. Offering options can difuse a difficult situation and restore self-esteem to both teacher and child.

• **Pay attention to appropriate behaviors.** Sometimes we get so involved with a child's inappropriate behaviors, we forget to notice and comment on to those that are appropriate. One clever teacher reports a dramatic increase in appropriate behavior when she wears an inexpensive pair of binoculars around her neck, glancing through them periodically to zero in on or bring attention to the children's positive behaviors.

• **Provide physical support during group times.** A wall to lean against can provide good postural support. A squish ball can occupy fidgety little hands during storytime. Help a child stay grounded by placing a large, weighty bean bag in his lap. Make a "sitting snake" by filling a long fabric tube with stuffing. Encircle the children with the snake and encourage them to lean into it as they seat themselves. Position a restless child next to you to provide physical support that can help him stay centered and focused. For example, place your arm across his shoulder or put a hand on his knee.

If you think a child in your class is showing signs of sensory integration disorder, you may find that trying different techniques (see "Techniques to Use") could benefit the child and make the day go more smoothly for everyone else. However, if the behaviors are so severe that they affect the child's ability to learn or the child continues to disrupt the classroom, work with the family to seek professional assessment and assistance.

Conclusion

While no one knows for sure just what causes sensory integration disorder, one of the most effective treatments is based on the work of the late A. Jean Ayres. As an occupational therapist at UCLA Medical Center, Dr. Ayres examined how difficulties in sensory integration affect learning, school performance, and behavior (*A Parent's Guide* 1986).

While not yet universally recognized, sensory integration treatment is widely and successfully used throughout this country. It may be available through your community's hospital or private therapists. Children who experience developmental delays may also be eligible for sensory integration therapy through the public school system's special education services.

Therapy is based on a thorough assessment by a qualified occupational therapist. An individual treatment program is developed to help the central nervous system filter and organize sensory information more efficiently. Most treatments last from six months to two years. The results typically show improvements in motor skills, increased emotional stability and control, more organized and efficient learning, and, ultimately, a more confident, happier child.

For maximum benefit from the therapy, teachers and families must follow through with the child's specific program. The therapist can provide suggestions for meeting the child's needs within the everyday activities of the classroom.

Because the neurological system is especially malleable during the preschool years, early childhood is the ideal time for treatment. In many cases, behaviors can be dramatically improved and the child will face a greatly improved outlook for the future.

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Why some people have trouble with learning and coordination

by Kathleen Anderson Brands, OTR

Three ways to look at Sensory Processing

Sensory Integration
Does the information coming in from our senses get processed accurately by our brain and then get acted upon correctly?
Sensory Defensiveness
Are non-harmful stimuli consistently being perceived as threatening or painful?
Sensory Registration and Alertness
Is our brain registering only new and important sensations?
Are we getting too much, too little, or just the right amount of stimulation?

Sensory Integration

We take in information from all our senses. Our brain organizes (integrates) this information so that we can make the proper motor response. Our bodies give us feedback to let us know if we acted appropriately.

In addition to the five senses that we usually think about (sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch) there are other very important senses. Our sense of balance comes from the *vestibular* system. The receptors for the vestibular system are located in the inner ear. Our muscles give us two types of feedback, proprioception and kinesthesia. *Proprioception* tells us where our joints are and how much pressure we are applying at the joints. Are our arms over our head or down by our sides? Are we writing too hard or too light on the paper? *Kinesthesia* lets us know which of our body parts are moving. With this information from our muscles we can tell what our bodies are doing even if we can't see them. We can walk in the dark. We can button the top button on our shirts.

Sometimes our brains don't process the sensory information properly. If this happens consistently it can cause problems with learning or coordination. People with sensory integrative problems might:

- be poorly coordinated. They might have trouble using their large muscles for gross motor activities such as jumping or skipping. They might have trouble using their small muscles for fine motor skills necessary to use tools such as pencils or scissors or to eat easily or to talk clearly.
- use hands interchangeably
- have trouble forming letters or copying simple designs.
- reverse letters when they write them or read them. The letters "b" and "d" are frequently confused. "Saw" might be read as "was".

Sensory Defensiveness

When information comes in from our senses, it can take one of two paths. One alerts us to danger, the other gives us detailed information. When the signals from our senses are sent to the more discriminatory parts of the brain, we can distinguish between keys and coins when we reach in our pockets. We can tell if we are being touched in one or more places, which allows us to hold pencils and spoons correctly. Information sent to the more protective part of the brain evokes an emotional response. It lets us know whether or not we are safe.

Sometimes too much information goes into this protective part of the brain. When this happens, non-harmful information is perceived as painful or threatening. This is called *sensory defensiveness*. People with sensory defensiveness are less likely to explore the world and learn from it.

They may:

- be picky about the clothes they wear
- be picky eaters
- be frightened of loud noises
- write lightly with a pencil
- walk on their toes
- be afraid of motion in different directions (e.g., roller coasters, walking on uneven surfaces, or just "horsing around")

They may dislike:

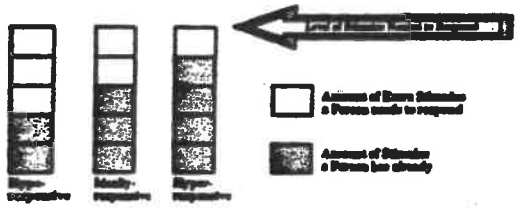
- being touched
- getting their hands dirty
- touching textures such as sand
- bath time or having their hair washed
- certain textures of food
- particular flavors
- certain smells

Why some people have trouble (continued)

Additionally, people with sensory defensiveness are often overly emotional. They may whine or cry over the slightest thing and give up easily. They might have trouble with bowel and bladder control.

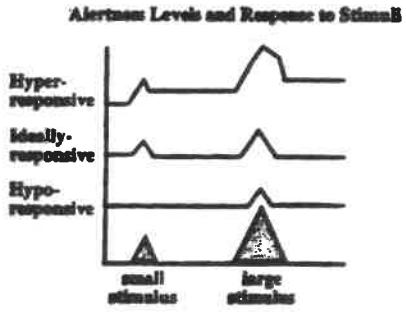
Sensory Registration and Alertness

There are two considerations of sensory registration. First, is the stimulus strong enough to get past the threshold our nervous system has established? Secondly, how close is our nervous system to reaching an over-loaded level? We need enough information from our senses to stay awake and be alert, but not too much to be overwhelming. We learn best at an optimal level of alertness.



Ideally, our nervous system is somewhere between the understimulated (*hypo*responsive) and over stimulated (*hyper*responsive) states.

If people are receiving too much stimulation, everything will bother or distract them. They may try to reduce the amount of stimulation by turning off the radio or television, or moving to a quieter place. Another strategy they might use is to create some stimulation (e.g., hum to "drown out" the distracting stimuli). If people are not getting enough stimulation, they may seek more. They may turn on the television, hum, get up and stretch, or go for a walk. Some researchers believe that hyperactive people fall into this *hypo*responsive—sensory seeking category. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between hypo- and hyper- responsive behavior.



Throughout the day and from day to day we all vary in our alertness level. Many people with learning disabilities or sensory processing challenges have a narrower range of alertness in which they function well. Also after they have been distracted once, they are more easily distracted the next time.

An important aspect of alertness is to have only important and new pieces of information reach our brains. It is not very efficient to respond to every stimulus we see, hear, or feel. When we first get up in the morning we notice how our clothes feel. After a while, our bodies get used to the sensations and we no longer "feel" our clothing.

To respond best to our environment, we need to

- accurately assess the level of threat that the stimulation provides
- get accurate information from our senses as to the location and type of stimulation
- be able to block out extraneous information
- make appropriate motor responses
- accurately get feedback from our bodies and make any necessary adjustments based on that feedback

Treatment for people who have trouble with sensory processing problems is individually planned and implemented by specially trained occupational and physical therapists. Therapy can include systematic sensory input to

- reduce sensory defensiveness
- get the right level of alertness
- encourage body positions (not all straight and not all bent) that make responding to motor tasks easier

Our alertness level is affected by the strength, frequency, and the rhythm of the sensory input we receive.

- Soft music, rhythmic motions, repetitive actions, and firm touch from a visible source *tend* to be calming and soothing.
- Loud sounds, motions that change constantly, and light touch from an unseen source *tend* to be stimulating and potentially threatening.

Developmentally Appropriate Child Guidance: Helping Children Gain Self-Control

WILL MOSIER, EDD

Dealing with disruptive behavior in the classroom is one of the most difficult issues an early childhood educator faces. In trying to redirect or extinguish disruptive behavior, teachers need to use developmentally appropriate practices as laid out by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

According to these practices, the purpose of child guidance, or discipline, is not to control young children but to help them learn to be cooperative. The most effective techniques help children learn how to accept responsibility for their actions and empower them to exercise self-control.

Discipline should not be punishing. Instead, it should provide children with learning experiences that nurture an understanding of social consciousness. Those learning experiences include participating in generating class rules, receiving positive reinforcement for pro-social behavior, experiencing the natural and logical consequences of their behavior, and observing adults in pro-social, person-to-person interactions. Ultimately, any child guidance technique must nurture each child's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Discipline should not be punishing.

Involve Children in Creating Classroom Rules

An important initial step in ensuring a developmentally appropriate pro-social environment is to create a set of classroom rules in cooperation with all the children in your room on the first day of the school year. A cooperative approach is the key.

With 3-year-olds, you may need to propose two or three simple rules, explain the reasons behind them, and invite their cooperation. By the time they turn 4, most children will be able to propose rules and discuss them. Ideally, classroom rules are not teacher-dictated. They must evolve from ideas discussed with and agreed upon by the children.

By encouraging children to participate in setting rules, you are laying the foundation for a community of learners who follow rules, not because they will be punished by the teacher if they don't, but because they feel a part of that which they help to create. Using a democratic group process helps children to develop moral reasoning.

Creating rules helps clarify behavior expectations. If children are to know what behavior is expected, the guidelines must be stated as positive actions. Help children with wording that says what they are expected to do, not what they can't do.

For example, instead of a rule that says "No running," the rule would read "Running is an outside activity. I walk inside." Other examples:

"I touch people gently."

"I talk in a quiet tone of voice."

"When I finish with an activity, I put it back where I found it."

"I place trash in the wastebasket."

Once the rules have been established, create opportunities to practice them. During the first few weeks of the year, reinforce the class rules through role playing, singing songs, and reading children's books about the rules.

In addition, you must model the rules and socially competent behavior in general. Children best learn rules by seeing them practiced by the adults in their lives. Modeling pro-social behavior demonstrates how human beings should interact with one another. It reinforces behaviors that are respectful of others.

Use Positive Reinforcement

Make a commitment to verbally reinforcing the socially competent behavior you expect in young children. Use positive feedback to reinforce prosocial, productive behavior, and to minimize disruptive behavior.

To reinforce pro-social behavior, simply look for it. When it happens, use a three-part "I" message, as explained below, to reinforce it. When disruptive behavior occurs, use positive feedback to draw attention to classroom behavior that you would like to see. Avoid focusing on the disruptive behavior.

Reinforcing pro-social behavior should not be confused with praise. Praise can damage a child's self-esteem by making a child feel pressured into attaining arbitrary standards. Praise implies an objective value judgment. For example: "Josh, your painting is beautiful." If praise does not continue, Josh may perceive that his value, as a person, is diminishing. A young child may start to assume that a person's value is directly tied to an ability to produce a specific product.

A better alternative is recognition and encouragement. Encouragement is specific and focuses on the process the child used to produce the artwork or how the child is feeling at the moment. For example: "I like the effort you put into your picture" or "I see that you're happy with the red lines and green circles." In these examples, neither the child nor the product is labeled good or bad. The focus is on the process or behavior. When stated as positive affirmations, words of encouragement can help nurture self-esteem.

An encouragement system can also use tokens as positive feedback. For example, children could be offered tokens when displaying behavior you want to reinforce. The tokens are not used as rewards, and they are not redeemed for some tangible prize. Additionally, the tokens would never be taken away once given to a child.

This system encourages a child to repeat desired behavior and will tend to stimulate intrinsic motivation. When a child sees or hears a classmate being reinforced for a particular behavior, the attention given to the targeted behavior increases the odds that the disruptive child will be motivated to try the same behavior.

Examples of developmentally appropriate tokens are construction paper leaves that can be placed on a personalized paper tree, and paper ice cream scoops that can be stacked on a paper ice cream cone. Every child would have a tree trunk or ice cream cone on a designated bulletin board. Early in the year the children would cut out leaves or ice cream scoops and place them in a large container near the board. When a teacher observes a desired behavior, she states the behavior, how she feels about it, and invites the child to get a token. "Tyron, when I see you picking up those blocks, I feel so excited, I invite you to put a leaf on your tree!" Phrasing a message in this manner tends to encourage intrinsic motivation.

Use Natural and Logical Consequences, Not Punishment

Natural and logical consequences can effectively motivate self-control without inflicting the cognitive, social, and emotional damage caused by punishment. When appropriate, allow natural and logical consequences to redirect inappropriate or disruptive behavior. This will encourage self-direction and intrinsic motivation.

Assume, for example, that Melissa leaves her painting on the floor instead of putting it on the drying rack, and a minute later another child accidentally steps on the artwork and ruins it. Melissa ends up with a torn painting as a natural consequence.

Use logical consequences when natural consequences are not practical. If a child is throwing blocks, for example, a logical consequence would be to lose the privilege of playing in the block area for a set time. Children need the opportunity to connect their behavior and its consequences. Using logical consequences allows children to learn from their experience.

By contrast, punishment relies on arbitrary consequences. It imposes a penalty for wrongdoing. For example, "Steven, because you hit Johnny, you don't get to sit in my lap for story time." Loss of lap time here is an arbitrary consequence, unrelated to the hitting behavior.

Being punished for unacceptable behavior conditions young children to limit behavior out of fear and leads to lowered self-esteem. Experiencing logical consequences, on the other hand, allows children to see how to achieve desired goals and avoid undesired consequences.

Wanting attention is not a bad thing.

Inappropriate, disruptive behavior is typically motivated by the need to gain attention. Wanting attention is not a bad thing. The issue is how to gain it. Children need to learn that they can choose to satisfy needs in socially acceptable ways. Logical consequences help young children become self-correcting and self-directed.

Model Clear, Supportive Communication

Supporting a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development requires well-honed communication skills. When talking to young children about behavior, differentiate between the child and the behavior. It's the behavior that's "good" or "bad," not the child.

"I" Messages

Speaking in three-part "I" messages is an effective tool for keeping your focus on the child's behavior. This is a three-part, non-blaming statement that helps a young child hear which behaviors are not acceptable without damaging the child's social, emotional, or cognitive development. "I" messages can be used to address inappropriate or disruptive behavior as well as to reinforce socially competent and positive behavior.

Use this template for constructing "I" messages that encourage pro-social behavior: "When I see you ——(identify acceptable behavior), it makes me feel —— (identify your feelings about the behavior) that I want to —— (identify what you want to do). For example: "Wow, Tara, when I see you turning the pages carefully as you read your book, I feel so happy I want to give you a high five."

To extinguish disruptive behavior, adapt the template as follows: "Tara, when I see you hit Mary, I get so sad that I am going

to keep you with me until I think you understand about touching people gently."

Empathic Understanding

Empathy is the ability to identify with someone else's feelings. As early childhood educators, we are responsible for nurturing the development of emotional intelligence in young children. We need to reinforce behavior that is sensitive to the emotional needs of others.

An example of when to use this skill is when children are tattling. Children tattle as a passive-aggressive way to solicit adult attention. Assume, for example, that Takesha complains, "Johnny hit me." A developmentally appropriate response would be "You didn't like that, did you?"

This type of response does three things: 1) The focus remains on the child's feelings, rather than on the actions of another child. 2) It models words that help a child express what she is feeling. 3) It encourages the child to talk about how she feels, which helps her develop enhanced awareness of her feelings and pro-social ways to express them.

Attentive Listening

Children need to feel they are being listened to. To communicate that you are paying attention to a child, maintain eye contact, smile attentively, and use appropriate, gentle touch to convey that you have unconditional positive regard for the child. Use the same communication skills with children that you want others to use with you.

Common listening errors that adults make when interacting with young children are analyzing the child's words rather than focusing on the child's feelings, rushing the child through the expression of feelings, and interrupting the child's expressing of feelings. A teacher displaying impatience, for example, can stifle language development and discourage a child from sharing feelings. But a teacher who listens attentively helps children develop emotional intelligence.

Be Consistent

A critical factor for successfully implementing developmentally appropriate child guidance is consistency. You need to enforce rules consistently, even when it may be easier to look the other way.

Children need to know what is expected of them. They have difficulty adjusting to unexpected change. When they display disruptive behavior, keep in mind that it may have been conditioned into them since toddlerhood. It's unrealistic to assume that it will be extinguished in just one day. Behavior reinforced prior to the child's being exposed to your classroom will take time to reshape. Don't expect an overnight change.

You can change disruptive behavior by using a consistent, systematic process, such as the 12 levels of intervention.

Developing self-control is a process. Throughout the process early childhood educators must demonstrate considerable patience and be consistent in reinforcing productive, socially competent behavior.

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