

PARENTING MATTERS

Volume 30

Newsletter

April 2011

Happy Spring everyone! With Spring break behind me, and with report cards home and showing “good effort,” I can focus now on gardening and spring cleaning! I only wish the weather would cooperate.

The first Monday in May, I will present at Cove Cliff Elementary PAC on **Helping Your Child Manage Their Anxiety**.

I recently attended a short presentation given by an Occupational Therapist who works with children in a unique way, to address “inattentive behaviours” in the classroom. Here is some food for thought in looking at “misbehaviours” in a different light.

Sensory Processing and Self-Regulation

Marc Landry is an Occupational Therapist (OT) with a speciality in assessing and treating sensory processing difficulties in school age children. People can be sensitive to elements in their surroundings such as fluorescent lighting, noise, smell, loud sounds or by being touched or startled. They may not be aware of their sensory needs and become agitated in different environments. Marc’s presentation was based on his long history in working in the field, his research and understanding of brain development, and his own personal journey in life being a “sensitive/sensory” male.

Self-regulation can be difficult for children and adults with attentional problems, learning disabilities and those individuals within the Autism Spectrum. Some of their reactions to their environment are behaviors that exhibit “disregard or exaggerated responses to sensory stimulation, inconsistent ability to attend to tasks, distractibility, poor impulse control, limited frustration tolerance and fluctuating emotional reactions.” (Marc Landry’s website). As a mental health therapist, Marc was describing many children I have worked with who have the profiles of ADD, ADHD, learning disabilities, anxiety, oppositional defiance and autism. Marc described attending to the “misbehaviour” and studying the child’s reaction to his/her environment, to determine what tools and techniques would improve the quality of the child’s work life in school. This approach and treatment would also challenge traditional psychiatry in how ADHD and oppositional behaviours are understood and treated. The physiological and neurological differences between girls and boys, along with our traditional way of

learning in school, accounts for more boys being identified as a behaviour concern to the teacher.

A Unique Approach

(Lists shown are taken directly from Marc's website: www.marc.landry.ca)

Children who are sensitive to their environment can be either hypo-responsive (a slow response to sensory stimuli, appearing lethargic or not easily responding to requests) or hyper-responsive (intense response to stimuli, adrenaline and stress hormones activated, agitated).

Children who are hypo-responsive can seem lethargic, uninterested or to be daydreaming. These children often have low muscle tone, decrease endurance and delayed motor skills. They need *more* sensory input to help them stay alert to learn.

Examples of sensory activities that help children to be more alert include:

- Bright lighting and fresh, cool air
- Fast swinging, especially with rotation, and bounce
- Quick unpredictable movement (bouncing on a ball, lap or mini trampoline)
- Drink ice-water or carbonated drink, suck through a straw
- Cold water play, playing with goop, slime, mars mud, etc. novel things to feel like squishy balls, stretchy lizard etc.
- Running - tag games, hide 'n' seek, errands
- Sitting on a ball chair, water mat or air pillow,
- Mist or cool water from spray bottle on face, cool cloth
- Loud, fast music and sudden noises, upbeat and lively auditory environment
- Cause and effect toys with sounds and lights
- Strong odours (perfume, peppermint, etc.)
- Visually stimulating rooms, lots of colours and lights (if you want the child to only attend to some things, make other aspects of the environment bland in contrast.)

Children who are hyper-responsive tend to have a quick reaction to any stimulus. This is largely based on their sympathetic nervous system over-

functioning. These children often seem to be more jumpy as their reaction to the stimulus releases adrenaline and therefore stress hormones. For parents, it can often feel like you are walking on eggshells.

Some ways to protect the hyper-responsive child from excessive input are:

- Wearing long or snug clothing to limit sensitivity to touch and temperature
- Wear a visor or cap or sunglasses in class to reduce both visual stimuli and light sensitivity
- Facing away from a window or sitting in a study carrel
- Wearing a weighted vest (has a calming effect and anchors the child)
- Getting up and walking around the classroom, instead of sitting 40 minutes at a time.
- Background music can block out other distractions

The school environment can be challenging for sensory sensitive children. For example; assemblies in large indoor spaces, in class free time, fire alarms, flickering lights, indoor recess, sitting next to a noise source or even the sun shining in one's eyes.

Sensory calming activities may help a sensitive child to manage a challenging environment, or to recover from sensory overload. Examples of sensory calming strategies are:

- Sensory reduction products
- Deep pressure
- Calm relaxing music
- Fish tanks
- Calming visual motion
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Slow rocking
- Swinging, bouncing
- Walking
- Headphones/white noise
- Dim incandescent lights
- Fidget items to keep hands busy

- Breathing exercises

I learned that an OT assessment can be helpful for the sensitive child to address specific concerns of inattentiveness, distractibility and poor transitions to new activities when their sensory needs are over-looked or not met adequately. The sensory information and practice adds a new dimension to looking at child behaviours in the classroom that could benefit teachers and students in the classroom.

Marc is presenting a workshop on May 11th on this topic. Please visit his website for further details at www.marclandry.ca

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