

Sensory Confusion

by David Brown, Educational Specialist

“Next to Jonathan’s cardiac status, his sensory losses and resulting processing dysfunction - with all its ripple effects - is our deepest concern. Sensory Processing Dysfunction factors into so many challenges for Jonathan - his communication skills, social skills, availability for learning, eating and drinking skills, being rested and stress-free, ability to comfortably handle information coming to him from the world around him, how he feels inside at any given moment.... It’s hard to put into words how HUGE I think this is for him. And it is the one area where I feel I don’t have a thorough handle on everything yet because it is so all-encompassing and so variable. And that’s very frustrating because I want to know it all right now so I can say the right things and do the right things to help him at all times. Not unreasonable, right?

He is a loving, funny, curious, persistent, brave little boy and when he ‘acts out’ in some way, it is always because he is trying to tell us something, even if it’s not obvious to us what that is at first. That is one of my and my husband’s biggest challenges - figuring out what he is saying to us through his behavior, unique signs, and speech that is mostly a couple of vowel sounds. That and helping other people understand what he is saying when they want to look at it another way.

I have mentioned Jonathan’s sensory diet in other threads, and that is one thing that we do that I know does help him, A LOT! It seems to help him feel more ‘balanced’ (that’s not the right word but the best I can think of right now) to begin with, and helps him manage the different situations and experiences that come his way that would otherwise overwhelm him. Because of that, we see less ‘undesirable behaviors’ that he would have resorted to before out of frustration, fear, pain, stress, excitement, etc.

Our OT has been absolutely key in helping us get to where we are in our understandings, and has been crucial in helping to create the best possible school environment for him.

One year Jonathan had a teacher who did not understand him at all. She kept telling us about all these behaviors that she was seeing at school that were not typical for him and that we didn’t see at home. We began asking lots of

questions - such as what was happening right before the behavior started - and the information we gathered quickly spotlighted several problems. His sensory needs were not being met and both the materials being used and the manner in which they were being presented were not appropriate for him. We called a team meeting and together the team developed a plan to help him with moving forward. Once these adjustments in program were made, Jonathan quickly responded. Not only that, but we began to see other positive changes as well - such as a reduction in his reflux, better sleeping, better eating. The poor fellow was more stressed than even we knew because he was working so hard to deal with everything. At this year's IEP (in a week and a half) we will be asking for some additional things to be added to the IEP. Again, this is where having a strong OT, and a strong team at school, is so helpful - they treat us as 'Jonathan experts' and seek our input. Then together we can brainstorm." Julie Kulp Ferguson

These recent comments from Facebook were written by a mother about her young son with deaf-blindness. They show a highly developed understanding of these issues, and the way that they can be identified, understood, and dealt with effectively. For many people in the world of education, however, anything involving the word "sensory" seems to cause a lot of confusion. We hear people talk about specifically "sensory" toys, even though all toys are sensory, and rooms filled with special lights and music are traditionally referred to as "sensory rooms." We also hear about "sensory" sessions in a student's daily program, even though all school sessions involve the senses. There are people who regard "sensory work" as an acceptable alternative to any kind of regular "school work," and other people who consider any kind of "sensory work" to be purely and inevitably recreational with nothing to contribute to development and learning. This brief article will try to clarify some of these misconceptions.

Teachers of a certain age can still remember the days when students with significant multiple disabilities, including deaf-blindness, were first considered to be educable and so entitled to go to school. Quite early in this process there developed a widespread assumption that providing "sensory stimulation" for these students was a good idea; consequently the students were often placed in a chair or on a bean-bag and exposed to a variety of lights (such as strobes, fibre optics, spotlights, ultra-violet) and recorded music, and sometimes tactile stimulation was applied at the same time using things like feathers and soft cloth and strings of beads. The students were only rarely able to interact with these stimuli in any way, and little regard was paid to whether or not they enjoyed what was happening or showed any benefit from it afterwards. The present writer can recall many occasions in many schools when lights and music were turned on, and then the staff chatted with each other about their personal lives while the students were left to make what they could of what was happening around them. Somehow this was felt to be interesting and helpful for the students, and a legitimate way to fill up their day in school.

A significant step forwards came in the early 1980s when the idea of "the sensory curriculum" was launched by pioneer authors such as Flo Longhorn, Richard Hirstwood, and Mike Ayres, many of whom have continued to develop and promote the philosophy to the present day. Longhorn stated the basic premise in her first book:

“In order to benefit from the school curriculum students with sensory impairments must learn to develop their senses, individually and in combination - a process the non-handicapped student goes through unconsciously and spontaneously. This book outlines a curriculum for each sense in turn, using stimuli that can be adapted for the age of the student. These can be amalgamated to create a multisensory experience, and this newly developed awareness can be integrated into the rest of the school curriculum” (Longhorn, 1988, introduction).

In part this development was a reaction to the then-prevalent idea that it was a good thing to impose sensory stimulation on students with multiple disabilities regardless of their needs and preferences and regardless of the outcomes of such stimulation. There were also still, at this time, many people who believed that students with significant multiple impairments were not really educable in spite of the recent changes in the law, and so these pioneers set about demonstrating ways in which the curriculum could be made available to all students, and all students could be helped to become more receptive and available to access the curriculum.

Unfortunately, the name “sensory curriculum” is itself misleading since it suggests an alternative curriculum rather than an approach which aims to help students access the school curriculum. Partly as a result of this there now seems to be a tendency to offer a ‘sensory curriculum’ to students who are considered not yet ready to access the regular curriculum, in the clear belief that this is an either/or situation, and that these two curricula are mutually exclusive. Experience has shown that when the staff involved in these situations are questioned they sometimes have a very limited and stereotyped understanding of what a regular curriculum could look like, what it would and should contain, and they also appear to have very little understanding of how a “sensory curriculum” could be made educational in even the broadest sense of the word. The old bad attitudes are still surprisingly prevalent. Quite apart from the worrying fact that any student should be considered not ready for, and so completely excluded from, the school curriculum, all too often the “sensory curriculum” that people are putting into practice appears to have significant limitations, namely:

- A reliance on the old-fashioned and discredited idea of a mix of various types of sensory stimulation being administered to the student with little expectation that they will actually learn anything.
- Often most activities are a passive exercise for the student, with no expectation that they will be actively involved in the session, and with little or no attention paid to individual needs and preferences.
- The curriculum reflects no understanding of the ways that sensory systems develop, or how different sensory systems interact with, and support or override, each other.
- There is often no expectation that the student may change as a result of each particular “sensory” session through the day, so no awareness of the things that could be achieved by carefully planned, timed, and observed “sensory” sessions.

The idea of separate “sensory” and “academic” curricula is itself meaningless of course, since any academic curriculum must have significant sensory components otherwise it could not be perceived and would be totally ineffectual, and a sensory curriculum devoid of any academic content would not be a curriculum. Every student would benefit from a curriculum that takes account of their sensory needs and strengths and preferences, but for students with deaf-blindness such considerations are likely to be of paramount importance. Indeed, as Julie Kulp Ferguson states in her Facebook post, the sensory component of the curriculum might be the key factor in allowing the student to access the academic content, and may also have a significant positive impact on the student’s general health and functioning. But the sensory component is there to assist the student in accessing as much of the school curriculum as is possible and appropriate, not to give them and their teachers something to do through the day while their fellow students follow the academic curriculum. The CDBS website has other articles that consider this topic in the context of assessment, and motivators, and a sensory perspective on behavior and learning (see bibliography below). There are several points to bear in mind:

- » Strategies to help develop a student’s sensory perception skills (for example, visual, auditory, tactile, vestibular, or proprioceptive perception) can be devised by the relevant specialist after proper evaluation of each student. Experience shows that these strategies are most effective if they are understood by all involved staff and are applied throughout all relevant activities during the school day. So modifications and adaptations recommended by the Itinerant Teacher of the Visually Impaired, or the Occupational Therapist, and so on, should be understood and remembered and applied throughout the day rather than just being used during specific ‘vision’ or ‘therapy’ sessions.
- » Sensory inputs that are meaningful and motivating for a student can be used to teach a whole range of skills as specified in the IEP. With creativity and genuine efforts to individualize the approach being used, any part of the curriculum can be made accessible to every student (Belote, 2009, Brown, 2009).
- » Different sensory inputs are likely to have a direct influence on the student’s levels of arousal, so that each student can be helped to be more alert, or to calm down, as necessary if the right kinds of sensory experiences are made available to them. This is probably the most important single aspect of the sensory perspective in that it deals with attention, and with availability for learning and for social interaction (Brown, 2005, 2007, 2008).
- » The concept of the ‘sensory diet’ has led to the idea of the “sensory break,” so that students who cannot attend in one physical position (like sitting on a chair or standing unsupported) for an entire lesson, or who tire very easily or become very anxious or over-aroused after a relatively short period of instruction, can be given access to specific sensory inputs so that they can return to the lesson with their sensory systems better adjusted for attention and learning. Such a “sensory break” might, for example, involve things like getting into the horizontal position, or standing up and walking, something more strenuous like jumping, or looking at some lights (Brown, 2009, 2008; Majors & Stelzer, 2008).

- » There is also a totally legitimate place for providing sensory experiences for a student as a purely recreational activity, provided that it is understood that this is recreation not instruction. Even then, the types and range of sensory inputs made available to each student may need to be chosen with care in order to respect individual preferences and needs, and to minimize the risks of boredom or over-stimulation.

All staff need to be aware that every interaction they have with a student is sensory, all material things in the school setting are sensory, and every person in the school is sensory, and so concepts like “sensory stimulation” or “sensory time” or “sensory materials” are misleading. “Sensory needs and preferences,” and how to satisfy and respect them, would actually be a far more helpful way of considering a student. Sensory issues are in operation throughout the school day, not only when we think we are working on the students’ sensory perceptions, and they exercise a profound influence on what happens or doesn’t happen. It is a terrible waste if the pitfalls they pose and the opportunities they offer are minimized and ignored.

If anyone in California would like further information on these ideas, or help with implementing them, they may contact California Deaf-blind Services to request assistance.

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