

# Pediatric Development Center



~ Newsletter ~  
November  
2011

We provide occupational therapy evaluation, treatment and consultation for children with developmental delays, autism/Asperger, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, sensory processing disorders, attention, behavioral concerns, handwriting, and other areas of weakness. Contact us for further information:

125 Presumpscot St. Portland,  
ME.  
(207) 699-5531

## Good Resources:

Take Five! Staying Alert at Home and School by Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger

Arnie and His School Toys: Simple Sensory Solutions That Build Success by Jennifer Veenendall (read this one with your child! ☺)

## School Organization Techniques

(The following information was compiled from "Activities for Home Use" by Kimberlee K. Wing and Take Five! Staying Alert at Home and School)

To maintain appropriate attention to tasks it is necessary to be able to self-regulate. This allows us to adapt to the changing demands of the environment. We are the most productive in the calm-alert state, but have moments when we are tired, distracted, anxious or excited and have difficulty staying focused. As adults we have the freedom to seek out whatever will help us to self-regulate, but children do not always have this freedom and therefore we need to provide them the opportunities as well as the activities to help them maintain an optimal arousal state.

It is important to have a good understanding of the child's processing strengths and weaknesses, what types of input they seek and what they avoid. Being proactive in providing organizing input and strategies will help your child get through the school day.

## Strategies for Oral Organization

The mouth is usually the first place most of us seek out sensory organization, and therefore helps to pay attention. Food choices have different effects on us. Foods that are alerting to us tend to be cold, sour, tart, spicy, minty, or crunchy (pretzels, tear jerkers, popsicles). Foods that are calming are usually warm, sweet, and smooth (oatmeal, hot cocoa). Some foods can alert or calm and tend to provide a "heavy work pattern" to the

mouth. These foods involve chewing, blowing, sucking and crunching (bubblegum, lollipops).

It is important to determine if there is good oral motor control or it may be necessary to build up muscle tone in the mouth. You can experiment at home to determine which foods, at what time of day and with what intensity are necessary to support your child with their attention and organization.



## Strategies for Movement Organization

Movement breaks may be one of the most common ways to achieve self-regulation, as it comes naturally to us. When seated for long periods of time you may roll your neck, stretch your arms or legs, take a walk to just sharpen your pencil or stand briefly, and return to your desk re-energized. In order to remain alert our bodies crave different types of movement, with varying degrees of intensity, for differing amounts of time, and at different times of the day.

In general, slow rhythmical movement can be calming, and fast, arrhythmic movement can be alerting. When in doubt, do heavy work because it is effective when we are in high or low states of alertness. In classrooms many teachers are incorporating movement into their daily routines in a variety of ways. Supporting a child's self-regulation can be done individually or with a group.

Examples of heavy work activities for home: climbing a

tree, moving furniture, shoveling, carrying groceries, vacuuming or sweeping.

Examples of heavy work activities for school: chair or table push-ups, washing cafeteria tables, erasing chalkboards, putting chairs on the desks at the end of the day, sitting on a therapy ball.

### **Strategies for Touch Organization**

When we are feeling tired or stressed, we often reach for something to fidget with or at times, destroy. Many of us rely on fidgeting and touching things to stay alert, and often children use the same tactile self-regulation strategies, but get into trouble. There are a variety of things we can do regarding touch, employing holding things, light touch, deep touch, pressure and temperature variables. Remember that it may take at least a month to change or develop a habit, so don't give up after trying something once.

**Fidgets:** These tend to be more acceptable at home and school if they are quiet, small and not projectiles. Over time students usually choose specific fidget toys to help maintain their focus. If you sense a child would play with a toy and be distracted by it, offer another type of self-regulation strategy. Examples: koosh ball, colorful paperclips, bendable animals or figures, slinky or plastic coils.

**Temperature:** Generally, neutral warmth or heat tends to be calming and relaxing, where cool or cold temps tend to be more alerting. Teachers are limited to how much they can control the temp in the classroom. Options are to open a window, use a fan, or splash cool water on the face.

**Light and Deep touch:** The clothes we wear can give us light or deep touch input, and this can be the reason we prefer certain types of clothing styles, textures, or fabrics. Parents may want to experiment with a variety of clothing textures and styles. Light touch helps us to stay alert, but while some enjoy a light tickle backrub to wake up in the morning, others prefer it for relaxing before bed. Tickling and other light touches can be too much for some children's nervous systems and they may perceive it as painful even though they demonstrate the reflex to laugh. Deep touch can be used to calm or alert the body. Some deep touch suggestions: bear hugs, deep massage, playing with resistive putty.



### **Strategies for Visual Organization**

In thinking about ways to support a child's learning, the environment is an important consideration. The visual input in the environment significantly affects our ability to attain, maintain and change our levels of alertness. It is necessary to understand the various sensorimotor preferences that help us to concentrate and what may interfere with attention. In general, dim lighting, muted colors and plain walls can be calming. On the other hand, bright lighting, lots of colors and variety tends to be alerting. It is important to realize that within a classroom setting, there are likely to be several children who will be visually distracted and therefore it will be necessary to provide an

area where they can go for reduced visual stimulation, such as under a table or out in the hall. Placing borders or frames around visual information helps to contain it and it is easier for the eye to move from one thing to another. Fish aquariums, lava lamps and nature scenes are also organizing visual input.

### **Strategies for Auditory Organization**

Some people learn best in a quiet setting where others function better in an auditorily stimulating environment. It is necessary to find out how each student works best. Some children's brains are not able to adequately block out irrelevant sounds in the environment and they are not able to concentrate. The sounds may cause some to become irritable as well. Other people may need auditory input to concentrate, such as music or just background noise. In general, sounds that are most alerting are ones that are arrhythmic, of short duration, loud, or novel. Sounds that are calming and easiest for the nervous system to ignore are ones that are rhythmical (in predictable patterns), of long duration, quiet and familiar. Music is often used to support self-regulation. Try a wide range of music types and observe how your child responds.

White noise such as nature sounds will provide a filter for the listener. Children may create their own white noise with humming, etc. Headphones may also be used in a classroom to help block out distracting noise.

