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Article By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

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TOMMY'S EXTRASENSORY GRACE

by Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

The real “Tommy,” who was the model for Tactile Tommy in *The Out-of-Sync Child*, resisted coming to preschool.

Wearing a perpetual frown, he clung to his mother and wanted nothing to do with an unpredictable troupe of three-year-olds.

Tommy’s teachers gently pried him out of his car seat every morning and encouraged him to participate just a little bit in the playground activities, art projects, and sing-alongs. Hyper-vigilant and with his back to the wall, during the first week of school he sobbed for three hours. The second week, two hours. The third week, sporadically. Now he began to show some interest in his school surroundings.

Although his feet never left the ground, and he avoided the sandbox and finger paints, he had other talents. He loved puzzles and story time. And, we noticed, he was extraordinarily attuned to other children’s emotions. When one whimpered after stumbling on the playground, Tommy whimpered.

When another yelled because someone knocked over his block tower, Tommy yelled. When another child laughed, Tommy gravely paid attention. We hoped one day to see him smile.

Although Tommy had not yet been identified with Sensory Processing Disorder, it was evident that he was highly over-responsive to tactile, auditory, and vestibular sensations. He seemed bewildered, as if he didn’t know how to play or what to do. He had come to the right place, because all teachers at St. Columba’s Nursery School in Washington, DC, are dedicated to supporting kids with SPD.

With an OT consultant, I screened Tommy (and all the other preschoolers) for SPD. We determined that he would

benefit from occupational therapy using sensory integration techniques (OT-SI). His parents were willing to try anything to help their little boy, so Tommy began therapy and, inch by inch, he began to enjoy school.

As he grew more comfortable, Tommy found two friends, both with identified special needs who were more verbal and less active than their classmates. One was Gabe, who had spina bifida. Gabe wore leg braces to stabilize him when he stood and sat upright on the floor. His forte was building forts with wooden unit blocks. Tommy began to like this construction work. When Gabe needed a particular block that was out of reach, Tommy obligingly got it for his friend. Tommy



told his mother, “Gabe can’t get up to reach things. He needs me.”

Another friend was Barbara, a blind girl who introduced Tommy to the joys of stroking the bunny, Poppy. The teacher would lift Poppy from his cage and place him in a rubber bin. Tommy (formerly, the boy who could not tolerate being close to another child) and Barbara sat snugly side-by-side, the bin straddling their legs, petting Poppy.

One day, Poppy pooped in the bin. Dismayed by the sight and scent, Tommy pinched his nose and hollered, “Oh, no!” Barbara said, “Ooooh, I know what happened. Poppy pooped!” Tommy told the teacher, “Barbara’s eyes don’t work, but her nose sure does!”

The school year ended, and the teachers and Tommy’s parents agreed that Tommy had made great strides, especially with social and sensory-motor skills. And there was something else — something ineffable. This little boy, so over-sensitive to the world around him, was developing an exquisite sensitivity to others’ emotions and differing abilities.

September came. Now Tommy, Gabe and Barbara were “big kids” in the four-year-olds’ wing of the building. Tommy greeted his friends with a hug — a tactile move that would have been unlikely a year ago.

At the end of the first morning, everyone was outside on the playground. Three-year-olds played on one side, and four-year-olds played on the other, separated by a chain link fence. Tommy and his friends sat on a gym mat, chatting and stroking Poppy, whom they had renamed “Poopy.”

Just then, on the three-year-olds’ side of the fence, a child began to cry. Tommy alerted to the sound, stood up and approached her. He said something. She nodded. He pressed his forehead against the chain links and stuck his fingers through.

The girl’s sobs subsided. Through the chain links, her little hands and forehead met Tommy’s. They stood there, connected, for a magical moment. The world stood still.

The girl’s teacher came along and coaxed her to join the other children awaiting their carpools. Tommy turned. His face was aglow.

When his mother pulled up in the carpool line, I took him to his car. I was moved by what I had witnessed and wanted to tell her about Tommy’s being in sync with someone who was suffering, and about his incredible, perfect, generous skill in giving “just-right” comfort. Many people with SPD have this ability — what I describe as “extrasensory grace” in *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*— but I had seldom seen it in someone so young.

However, I didn’t need to say a word. Tommy, smiling, clambered into his car seat. He said, “Mommy, school was good! A little girl was sad, and I knew what to do.” ■



Adapted from *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up: Coping with SPD in the Adolescent and Young Adult Years*, which includes personal

stories and unique strategies by and for teens with SPD. (TarcherPerigee, 2016) Learn more about these activities and many more in three of Carol’s books, *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*, and *The Goodenoughs Get In Sync*, and in two books she co-authored with Joye Newman, *Growing an In-Sync Child* and *The In-Sync Activity Cards Book*. Carol is available for workshops on how Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) affects children and on fun and functional sensory-motor activities to get kids in sync. www.CarolStockKranowitz.com.

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