

Behavior Means Something

by Carol Stock Kranowitz, M.A.



Considering that we were cooped up indoors on a cold, rainy day, our morning was going sensationally well. My granddaughter, then 6, and grandson, 4, had come to play in my basement, which was set up like a sensory gym. The children waddled around in Bodysox, stretchy sensory sacks, and pretended to be scary monsters. They took turns jumping on the mini-trampoline. They dove into the crash pad — a duvet cover stuffed with pillows and upholsterer’s foam blocks. With a stick, they played the pipes — sections of metal pipe cut into different lengths (like xylophone pieces) that dangled from a dowel — and picked out tunes such as, “Twinkle, Twinkle” and “Joy to the World.”

Harmony all around.

The kids’ proprioceptive, vestibular, tactile, visual and auditory systems were getting a workout. I felt fortunate not just to have such engaged, well-behaved grandchildren, but also to be well-informed in general about children’s sensory needs.

Then Granddaughter picked up a doll. Grandson, who until that moment had never shown any interest in dolls, suddenly needed that very one. He grabbed it. She tugged it back. They fought. They cried. They shouted, “It’s mine!” and, “I need it!”

Oh, no! Discord in Granny Kranny’s basement!

I thought fast. What did their neurological systems need?

Tactile input! That was just the ticket to distract and calm them. I opened the dress-ups trunk and pulled out velvet capes, silk tunics, feathery boas. “Look! How about some fun dress-ups?”

“Noooooo!”

Hmm. Maybe they needed some soothing linear vestibular activity. Quickly, I suspended a platform swing from a chinning bar. “Come and swing for a bit. There’s room for both of you on the board. You always love this.”

“Noooooo!”

Maybe proprioceptive input would be just right. Whatever ails a person, proprioception always helps, right? I dragged the inflatable bop-bag into the center of the room. “Grandson, come

punch the bop-bag instead of your sister. She can hold the doll. Then you can switch.”

“Noooooo!” they wailed.

Just then, my son, back from errands, ran down the stairs. “What’s going on?”

“I’m mystified!” I said. “I don’t know what the problem is! They’ve been playing so sweetly for two hours! I’ve tried tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive ...”

He looked at his watch. He rolled his eyes. “Mom, the problem is — they’re hungry!”

Children’s behavior often seems bewildering, especially when the grown-up in charge expects a particular response and gets something different. Something different, i.e., the children’s disintegration, was not what I expected for two reasons. One was that I had neglected to notice how much time had passed. The other reason was that I forgot about interoception, the sensory system that tells us what is going on inside our bodies —for instance, when we’re hungry and full, hot and thirsty.

When your child's behavior mystifies you, put on your imaginary sensory spectacles and ask ourselves three questions:

1. What sensation does the child avoid?

This may be unexpected touch or movement, T-shirt tags, lumpy mashed potatoes, sirens, sonar or buzzing lights. Remember that the environmental sensation that irritates your child may not bother you or anyone else. Reduce the sensory overload if possible.

2. What sensation does the child continuously seek while never getting enough of it?

Perhaps fidgeting or chewing is her "thing." Provide fidget toys or chewies so she can get the constant sensory input she needs for her neurological well-being.

3. What sensation calms and organizes the child?

Maybe rocking, swinging, knocking things over, listening to loud music, or spending long moments in a "Time Inn," such as a bathtub, beanbag chair or tepee, which helps the child get in sync. Offer equipment, space and time so the child's can do his self-therapy in a socially appropriate way.

A. Jean Ayres, PhD, OTR (who formulated the theory of sensory integration and processing) taught that every behavior is an adaptive response to the environment. The environment in the children's tummies had changed, and thus their behavior changed.

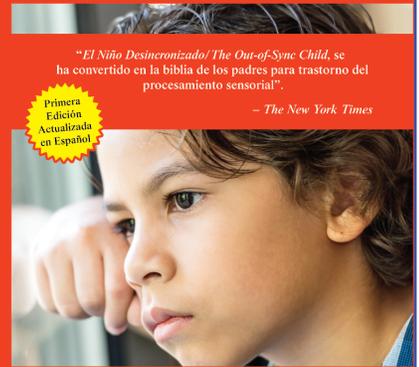
"Behavior means something," says Patricia S. Lemer, author of *Outsmarting Autism: Build Healthy Foundations for Communication, Socialization, and Behavior at All Ages* (North Atlantic Books, 2019). Sometimes the underlying reason for behavior is obvious. For example, a child with sensory challenges refuses to touch the cookie dough and angrily stomps out of the kitchen. His over-reactivity to messy touch sensations is apparent.

Sometimes the reason is obscure, such as when a child disregards his sticky, dough-covered hands and turns to pet the dog. His under-reactivity to messy touch sensations may be harder to read, and the grown-up may not understand that this child's lack of efficient sensory processing is the underlying reason for his out-of-sync behavior. As Ms. Lemer notes, "It's really hard to see what isn't there."

A cooped-up environment will certainly cause children to behave in unexpected ways. These COVID-19 days, while we are vigilantly reminding our children to keep apart from other people, to wear masks and wash hands, let's also be vigilant about giving them what they need for their sensory systems. Sometimes, it's as simple as lunch. ■

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Carol Stock Kranowitz is the author of the "Sync" series, including *The Out-of-Sync Child*, *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*, and *The Goodenoughs Get In Sync*. With Joye Newman, she wrote, *Growing an In-Sync Child* and *The In-Sync Activity Cards Book*. Carol is available for workshops on how sensory processing challenges affect children and teenagers, and on fun and functional sensory-motor activities to get kids in sync.

