

Spencer Hamblin and Carol Kranowitz, 2005



Silver Spring Maker-Faire, Sep 2014



One of Spencer's "Multicopters"

# Spencer Figures It Out

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

Spencer has always loved figuring things out. But at nine, he couldn't figure out how to "do school."

His teacher couldn't, or wouldn't, understand his out-of-sync behavior. She insisted, "He is smart—he should know how to sit still, listen, and do his work." She regarded Spencer as an unmotivated student and clumsy attention-getter — rather than a child who could shine, if she would take the time to observe how his brain and body worked.

Spencer wanted to understand his sensory processing challenges. He told my friend Nika, "Mom, you have a book to read about SPD. Is there a kid's book to help me figure out why I'm out of sync?"

Nika reported this to me, and I agreed that a children's book was a great idea. "So," she said, "will you write it?"

"A parent who lives 24/7 with a child with SPD should write it. No, not me."

"Yes, you," Nika said. "You must."

So I wrote *The Goodenoughs Get in Sync* (Sensory World, 2004), in which each Goodenough family member has a different type of SPD. They experience a rough morning, help one another use their "sensory tools," and get in sync by evening.

## Spencer and Nika Come for Tea

On a wintry afternoon, Nika and Spencer came over to receive several inscribed books. Spencer sidled into the house. He didn't look at me. He inched into the living room, where I had set out gingerbread cookies and lemonade, two foods I knew this picky eater liked. He reached for a gingerbread man and slumped into a corner of the couch, watching warily as I sat down at the far end.

Nika and I sipped tea and chatted for a few minutes, and then I turned to regard Spencer, curled over his cookie. His body language said, "Don't touch me. Don't

talk to me. Just let me be."

## Children Deserve Our Regard

His behavior was OK with me; I got it. Kids with sensory issues are often ill at ease in social situations. They may come across as oafs because of their clumsiness, mumbled words, limited eye contact, and other observable issues. Meanwhile, their finely-tuned feelings and deep interests go unobserved. Ignored or rebuffed by adults and other kids, these children find social contact to be daunting. So, they withdraw.

Each of us needs what the psychologist Carl Rogers terms "unconditional positive regard." While everyone yearns to connect and be known, children like Spencer struggle to make those connections, especially with strangers.

I hoped to connect by showing my interest. I took a cookie, and we nibbled side-by-side for a moment. Then I asked, "Spencer, what do you like to think about?"

## Spencer Plans to Clean Up the Planet

Mid-nibble, Spencer froze. Slowly, he lowered his cookie, looked up, and studied me. I must have passed the OK-vs.-Not-OK test, because he nodded and answered, "Batteries."

"Why batteries?"

"Because they can run the world efficiently and help save the environment."

A few more questions, and he was off and running. As if some magic hand had zipped up his spine, his posture changed, and he sat tall. Eyes aglow, he talked, smiled and gestured for ten sparkling minutes about how batteries work. He described how, in his plan, big batteries would not only energize cars, home appliances, cities, and space travel, but also clean up the planet. He explained how these big batteries would be replenished by gigantic batteries.

I asked, "How will the gigantic batteries get their energy?"

"Solar power, I think." He sipped his lemonade. "I'm figuring it out." Then: "I wish you were my teacher." We smiled at each other, while Nika wiped away a tear.

After more conversation, it was time for my guests to leave. Unprompted, Spencer gave me a bear hug and said, "Thank you. This was nice."

Wow!

## Advocacy Goes a Long Way

Spencer's sensory processing challenges were caused by Lyme

disease. (In addition to having sensory issues, children with tick borne diseases also may be nonverbal and are sometimes diagnosed with autism.) At 18, his parents switched him to an adult medical doctor -- "much better than the pediatrician" who had missed Spencer's symptoms. When the correct diagnosis was made and treatment began, the sensory problems diminished. At school, "finding my footing took a while," Spencer says. Elementary school was rocky until his parents and a few teachers advocated for a meaningful IEP and other accommodations. In middle school, he enrolled in a gifted/talented program where he had wonderful teachers. That change, he says, "went a long way." He developed into an electronics expert. In high school, he built drones, led a 4H Inventors' Group, and competed in national robotics competitions.

His medical problems finally under control, he went to Frostburg State University in Maryland, where he worked on autonomous car research involving long-range sensors. With a major in electrical engineering and a minor in computer science, he earned his B.S. with honors.

## "I've Gotten Lucky"

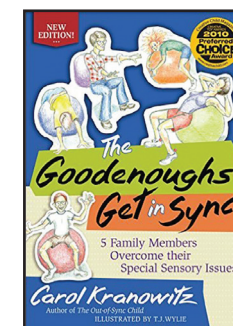
Spencer has grown to be an engaged, productive, and healthy adult. His tactile and other sensory challenges are minor. "I've gotten lucky," he says. "I can ignore them, or they just don't bother me." He has solved the problem of irritating food

textures -- by becoming the family cook!

Still "obsessed with technology, and anything mechanical or electronic," he intends to find the job of his dreams as an embedded hardware engineer. Spencer anticipates helping the world become more energy efficient, and we can be sure that he will figure it out. ■



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 co-authored *Growing an In-Sync Child*, *In-Sync Activity Cards*, and *A*



*Year of Mini-Moves for the In-Sync Child*. Carol presents workshops on how sensory processing differences (SPD) affect children and teenagers, and on fun sensory-motor activities to get kids in sync.

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Spencer at a New York MakerFaire, 2014. He had a booth with his creations.



Spencer Hamblin at a STEM event at Northrop Grumman in Germantown, Maryland, 2014. He built the "Multicopter" from scratch before drone-building kits were available.