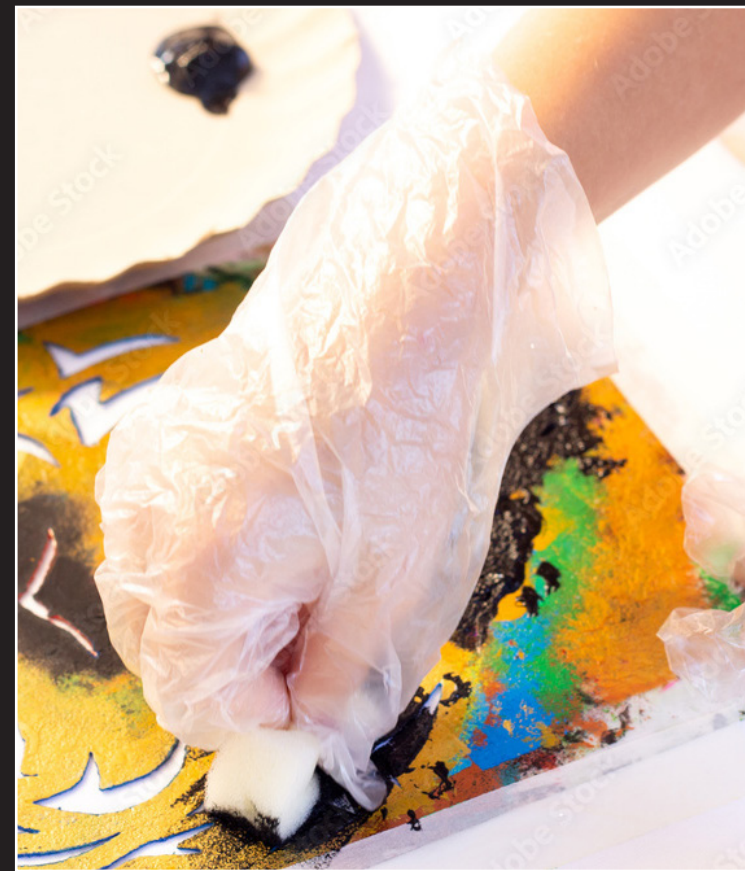




"I'M ALLERGIC TO APPLES" AND OTHER EXCUSES: NONSENSICAL OR INTELLIGENT?

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA



Margaret is an exceptionally tidy child. On the preschool playground, she stands aside and mopes while her classmates make mudpies and dig ditches in the sandbox. When her teacher invites her to participate, Margaret cries, "I can't get my Sunday shoes dirty!"

Margaret has tactile over-responsivity. For her, messy play has no allure. She happily complies when her parents remind her on Sundays to keep her dressy shoes clean. Margaret figures it out: If she wears them on school days too, her grownups will be pleased that she doesn't get them muddy, right? Margaret is brilliant!

Kindly, her teacher mentions to Margaret's mother that sneakers or boots would help Margaret participate in outdoor activities.

Mother sighs, "She won't wear sneakers. She insists on wearing Mary Janes and frilly socks every day. It makes no sense to us, but what can we do about it?"

Her teacher and mother discuss the problem and evolve a plan. Her mother begins offering stickers to bribe Margaret to wear sneakers or boots on Mondays ... and then Wednesdays ... and then every school day. Her teacher introduces classroom art activities using sparkly colored sand, hoping Margaret is enticed to touch it. Step by step, she gets into messy play and has fun with new friends, together digging a muddy hole "almost all the way to China!"

Every Sunday, Wednesday, Friday ... children like Margaret with Sensory Processing Differences (SPD) must use their energy

and wits to get their sensory needs met, to get along at home, to socialize at school, and to get through the day without upsetting everyone. Their behavior may seem to indicate immaturity, poor manners, inattention, or lagging developmental skills; however, if we can understand what they are communicating through their behavior, we can recognize and marvel at their intelligence and ingenuity.

First-grader Chip, another child with tactile over-responsivity, wears his tee shirts inside out, risking his father's wrath but "saving his skin." Is Chip a defiant, uncooperative slob who hasn't the sense to put his clothes on right -- or is he a thoughtful boy



who has come up with an intelligent plan to avoid the tee-shirt's irritating seams and tag?

When Chip's parents understand the underlying reason for his unusual way of dressing, they find seamless clothes on-line. Chip's wardrobe and family life become much more comfortable.

No tee shirt for Liam! Another lad with tactile issues, Liam wears a button-down shirt to school. His hands never leave his pockets. Charming and verbally precocious, he informs his teacher, "Playdough is childish. I prefer reading books."

Liam would have his teacher believe that he's way too mature to play with sticky materials. But five-year-olds need to manipulate things to learn about them. Does Liam's "I'm-too-old-for-this-baby-stuff" excuse make sense? Or is the excuse his intelligent way to avoid something he can't bear to touch?

His teacher 'gets' Liam. She provides disposable gloves to protect his over-sensitive hands, and he begins to dabble in the finger paint and playdough activities that his peers relish.

Jasmine's tactile issues are in her mouth. She is a picky eater who prefers smooth food. She avoids school snacks by saying, "Mommy told me not to eat pretzels." Really?

Chris, another selective eater, says, "I'm allergic to apples." Really? These intelligent children have learned that they can avoid eating crunchy foods by making socially acceptable excuses, which their teacher cannot dispute. These children's oral sensitivities are getting in their way.

Occupational therapy and speech-and-language therapy help them improve their tactile and proprioceptive processing.

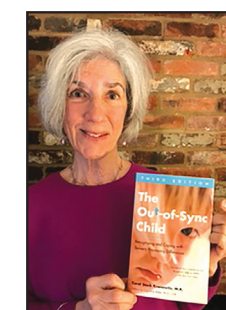
Eventually, they become more adventurous eaters.

Not tactile but auditory over-responsivity affects Drew. Drew can't tolerate the metallic sound of triangles, tambourines, and twanging guitar strings. When his class goes to the community room for music and movement activities, he wears earmuffs and presses his hands over them to block the painful sounds. Is Drew being rude -- or is his behavior communicating, "My ears hurt, and you grown-ups aren't helping, so I've come up with my own semi-satisfactory solution"? Smart boy!

The answer for Drew is noise-canceling headphones, found on the Internet. Environmental sounds are filtered out, making his life more peaceful.

Let's remember that when it comes to playing and participating in ordinarily fun activities, children with SPD would if they could.

Let's strive to understand the underlying rationales for their novel excuses or unusual actions. Let's recognize, applaud, and work with their sensible and truly intelligent behavior. ■



Carol Stock Kranowitz is the author of the "Sync" series, including *The Out-of-Sync Child*, 3rd edition, and *Growing an In-Sync Child* (with Joye Newman.) Visit her websites: www.out-of-sync-child.com and www.insyncchild.com to learn more.