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# Suggestions for Raising an In-Sync Child

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A mother tells me about an “educational” computer game that she bought for her preschooler who has autism and sensory processing differences. She tells me she doesn't want to make life any harder for him than it already is. So, in this game, all he needs to do is click the mouse, and presto: One, two, three oranges bound into a bucket. Isn't that a fabulous way to learn counting? She wonders – What is my opinion, as a teacher?

“How about giving him a bucket and three oranges?” I ask. “Then he can touch and hold them, smell them, toss them, and enjoy a real learning experience.”

She steps back, surprised, and says, “Oh, but that seems so old-fashioned!”

True. But while fashions change, children don't. Regardless of their developmental ages and abilities, they are children first. All children need many practical experiences that kids have always relished. They need to express their needs, run and play outside, take risks, and try again when they stumble. They need to relate to others and be in sync with their environment.

Here are 10 suggestions for engaging young children in the world around them.

## 1 Provide Concrete Experiences

Kids are sensory-motor learners. Sensory messages come in, and motor (movement) responses go out. Therefore, playing with an orange engages most of the senses and encourages your child to try different motor responses. He can roll it, toss and catch it, squeeze and peel it, sniff and taste it.

Enrich your child's play by providing other hands-on, three-dimensional



experiences. For example, furnish footwear to play Shoe Store. Let your child sort shoes by shape, size, color, texture, and how they fasten. Sequence them (sneaker, pump, boot; sneaker, pump, boot). Try them all on. Box them. Stack them. Take turns being Customer and Salesperson.

Playacting with a few tangible props like shoes is sensory-rich, as it develops auditory, proprioceptive, tactile, vestibular and visual systems. Playacting gets kids interacting. Playacting prepares children for real life. (Just askin' — does a video do that?)

## 2 Get Physical With Your Child

Because vigorous play is vital, go outdoors and encourage your child to swing, climb, jump, and slide. Indoors, gently roughhouse. For instance, if your knees can tolerate it and your child is little, get on all fours and play Horsey.

At first, your child may feel unsteady or even scared. Take it easy until she feels secure on your back. Give her time to learn how to stay balanced, how firmly to clench her knees, and how not to choke you! Subsequently, she'll be more confident and relaxed because she has integrated countless body-brain connections. Someday, she'll generalize these lessons about balance and body position when she mounts a real pony or bicycle.

Moving and learning go together!

## 3 Get Large And Small Muscles In Tune

Fine (small) muscles, which mature gradually, control the hands, fingers, toes, lips, tongue, and eyes. Development of these muscles depends on the strong foundation of the child's gross (large) muscles. Before working on complex fine-motor skills like manipulating a pencil, children require daily gross-motor opportunities to swing, hang from bars, climb on ladders, and paint the fence with a broad brush and a

bucket of water. Yes, playing outside helps a kid write!

## 4 Encourage Critical Thinking

Asking your child thoughtful questions may produce thoughtful responses. Now and then, when your child is watching a video, sit down and watch together. Ask questions to guide her into thinking critically: Would the hero make a nice friend? How does he treat less powerful characters? What helps him succeed—fancy equipment and bravado, or his own kindness, courage, and creativity?

If you can elicit an opinion from your child, that's great. If not, by asking these questions you are still showing your child what matters to you about a person's character.

## 5 Let Your Child Do The Talking

You and your child go to the ice cream parlor. The familiar clerk says, "Hi!" Your child freezes. Before you jump in with, "Say hi to Anita," give your child time to respond. A child capable of speaking may simply need a few extra beats.

When Anita inquires what flavor your child wants, please don't answer. If your child is incapable of producing language on demand, perhaps he or she can use gestural communication to point to the desired flavor.

If your child mumbles, "Vanilla," use the same wording in your response, such as, "Vanilla is your favorite!" or "Sounds yummy. I'll have vanilla, too." (Please don't say, "Good talking!" That dreary and overused comment may squelch further dialogue because it is irrelevant to vanilla or any other topic the child may want to communicate with you about.)



If you do all the talking, the danger for your child is "learned helplessness." Why make an effort to express his or her needs if you do all the talking? Take your time and model friendly conversation to encourage your child to be vocally responsive.

## 6 Encourage Good Reading Habits

Do you read for pleasure? When you show interest in books, you teach your children that reading is a lifetime pleasure. Let them catch you at it.

Everyday, if possible, sit in the same room with your kids and read for a while. Read passages aloud to one another. Talk about what you're learning from your books. Kids can benefit from understanding that all kinds of adventures await people who actively "go for it," that challenges beset all kinds of folks, and that problems may be overcome when all kinds of people work together.

## 7 Champion Chores

Children love and need to work. Heavy work activities energize their muscles, put their brain in gear, and help them pay attention to their environment.

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We do our children no favor when we take away opportunities to work. Indeed, the easier we make life for our kids today, the harder their lives will be in the future. Without sufficient motor activities, they may have low stamina, poor muscle tone, and scant experience in accomplishing simple tasks. Insufficient movement can also lead to irritability, irregular sleep patterns, poor appetites, and constipation.

Having your young child help with chores is a great first step. He can brush the dog, hose the car, push the stroller and vacuum cleaner, and haul non-breakables (such as bags of rice, beans, and kitty litter) from grocery store to car and from car to kitchen.

## 8 Make Mealtime Memorable

Sit down and share a daily meal. With you as a model for mealtime decorum, your child can learn self-help skills like cutting and pouring as well as more complex life skills like patience, sharing, and participating in the give and take of conversation. Should conversation get stuck, ask each family member to relate one incident of the day. Or say, "Tell us something funny (confusing, scary, incredible) that happened today." If your child can't describe an experience because of difficulty with expressive language, she

may still have sufficient receptive language to get the gist of what others are saying.

When everyone eats together, your child is nourished not only physically but also emotionally, so she feels a sense of belonging and learns to be mindful of the needs of others; socially, so she's able to function in a group; and cognitively, so she learns to meet challenges and plan solutions.

## 9 Honor Your Child's Interests

Say your son is fond of earthworms. He rescues and carries them home in his hand. And let's say you hate worms. Before you say, "Yuck," look at his face. Is he emotionally invested in these creatures? Curious about their work and place in the world? Eager to share his find with you?

This is wonder-ful!

Weave your child's particular interest into his daily doings. Does he love trains, or weather patterns, or dinosaurs? His interest is a strength – an extraordinary ability to love an idea, examine every facet, and remember details. Use this ability to motivate him to do something he'd rather not do. For example, say, "This pea is a food a brontosaurus would love, and you know why, because he's herbivorous. This chicken is something T Rex would eat, because he's carnivorous. People like us are omnivorous – we can eat plants and animals."

Here's another example of weaving that special interest into a must-do activity, such as getting out the door in the morning. If your child is obsessed with the planets, say, "Let's pretend the doormat is Mercury. The stoop is Venus. The sidewalk is – what do you think? Earth! Right!" Proceed until you reach your car, the Sun!

## 10 Make Fun A Priority

Play helps children learn. It stretches the imagination, encourages thinking skills, strengthens motor coordination, and enhances social development. Our daily

charge should be "Have fun!" not "Be good!" A. Jean Ayres, PhD, OTR, said, "Fun' is the child's word for sensory integration." Fun, like empathy and communication, begins at home. If you know and show how to have fun, chances are your child will, too. Go all out when you dress up for Halloween. Play make-believe games, like, "I'm the kid and you're the Mommy." Celebrate Backward Day: eat dessert first.

Make music together. Music restores order, improves communication, and is one of life's greatest pleasures. And it's inexpensive: Rhythm instruments include spoons, pots and pans, oatmeal-box drums, pencil "mallets," and cigar-box guitars (sturdy boxes encircled with rubber bands). Kazoos and slide whistles can add to the silliness. Beat a simple rhythm and invite your child to join in. Take turns following each other's beat. Change from simple to complex, from slow to fast, from loud to soft. Making music is especially fun when you and your child actively make it happen.

Want to get your kid in sync? Try these suggestions and see what happens! ■



Carol is the author of the "Out-of-Sync" series about SPD, and co-author of "In-Sync" materials about fun activities for all kids.



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