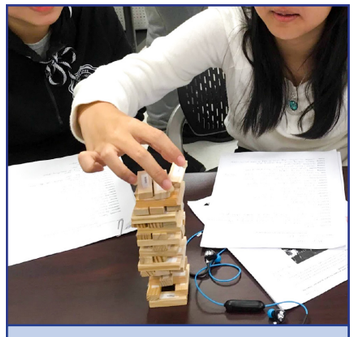
ANNETTE HIMMELREICH'S TEST-TAKING TIPS

Annette Himmelreich, LMSW

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

Remember Annette Himmelreich? She's one of the amazing contributors to *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up* (Tarcher, 2016). In the book, she describes how SPD affected her as she grew up in the 80s and 90s before SPD was even understood. Early on, she learned that the world was not going to adjust to her, so she must learn to adjust to the world.

For example, at long family dinners, she invented a chewing game to swallow her grandmother's tough, dried-out brisket. She would chew on the right side of her mouth once and then on the left side once, then on the right side twice and the left side twice, etc. On long car rides, she quelled motion sickness by playing little games, such as visually "jumping" over telephone wires, trees, or driveways. She found that focusing on a stable structure helped her cope with nausea caused by seeing the world as a confusing blur outside the car window. (The gut-eye connection is very strong!)



Playing Jenga enhances important skills.

As she developed, Annette learned to manage most of her sensory challenges. "SPD is just an irritation now," she says. She does not let it stand in her way of helping young people succeed at school.

Annette has taught English, both in Texas schools and in Russian orphanages. Today she is a case manager and social worker in the Garland (Texas) Independent School District. This richly diverse community outside Dallas includes families from Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan, China, India, Nigeria, Mexico, Central America, and many other countries. Annette's specialty is working with foster children, homeless students, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students, and the high schoolers who say with determination, "I'm going to be the first in my family to graduate!"

Graduating from high school in Texas depends on passing the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, called STAAR. This assessment measures a student's skills and knowledge in grades 3-8, and at the end of high school.

For many students with whom Annette has worked, staying in school, passing the test, and graduating isn't so simple. Some teenagers have an unstable home life. Some have suffered from abandonment, neglect, abuse, and trauma. Some have learning disabilities on top of all the other issues. And some have SPD, usually unrecognized or misdiagnosed.

Annette's father, a pastor, taught her to walk in another's shoes and to ask herself, "How does that person feel?" Having SPD herself, Annette has the key to unlocking the reasons for certain students' emotions and behaviors.

She knows how kids yearn to be outside rather than sitting at a desk. She knows how it feels to need to fidget or chew on something in order to stay awake. She knows how noises inside and outside the classroom can be distracting. She says, "Repetitive sounds are agitating. Certain songs with the words repeated over and over, and sirens, and looping car alarms are all so cringe-worthy that they cause pain in my brain."

Regarding the ways sensory stimuli can affect an individual with SPD, Annette truly "gets it." And then she gets going to galvanize her students to put everything they've got into test-taking.

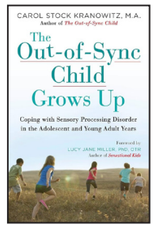
How does she do this? By being playful! For example, in preparation for the test, she has students play cooperative block-building games like Jenga to communicate and learn vocabulary. While watching Tom and Jerry cartoons, they share childhood memories and practice using irregular verbs, which are hard for ESL/bilingual/multilingual students. They lip-sync to songs to develop auditory discrimination. They practice funny tongue twisters to improve pronunciation as well as tactile/proprioceptive awareness in their tongues and lips. They throw picture dice to enhance their visual-motor skills while they formulate a story to tell their classmates. They paint with brushes, write on a whiteboard, and doodle on paper so their brains and hands work in tandem.

"I love using games to get them thinking," Annette says. "We play a game where they choose a vocabulary word, write it on a little paper, use it in a sentence, and then fold it up to shoot into a trash can with a slingshot. They do this in teams to see how many successful shots they can make." She adds, "Worksheets and computer-based learning have their place, but we need to get our students moving and being more creative."

Using the word "BET!" — an acronym for "Be Extreme Today!" — she encourages them to stretch their bodies and brains and to be their most attentive, most adaptive, very best selves. Then on the STAAR test day, she hands them a Sensory Toolkit in a snack bag — including earplugs, Jolly Ranchers candy, and a rubber pencil grip to twirl — and says, "You can rock this!"

The success rate of Annette's students? In her eleven years of teaching and seven years of social work, around 80% of her candy suckers, hair twirlers, and test question highlighters have passed the STAAR. When they understand their sensory processing challenges and employ some sensory-motor strategies, they are more likely to pass, to graduate, and to step confidently into the big world. ■

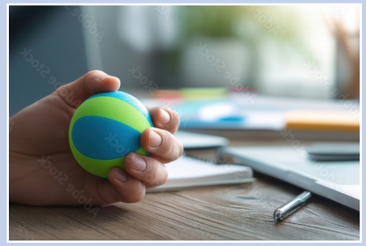
Carol is the author of the "Sync" series, including *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up* (Tarcher, 2016) and *Out-of-Sync Success Stories (Sensory World, 2025).*



Visit her websites www.out-of-sync-child.com and www.insyncchild.com to learn more.

ANNETTE'S SENSORY TIPS FOR TAKING TESTS

Take note that these tips are not exclusively for Texans!



Vestibular (Movement):
- Before the test, get out some nervous energy with jumping jacks and wall push-ups. This activity will also help you slow down and get your brain calm and organized.
- Take brief movement breaks during the test to stay awake and alert. If you have permission, go to the water fountain.

Tactile (Touch):
- Bring a hand squeezer for your non-writing hand and a fidget pencil.
- If you tend to twirl your hair when concentrating, do not get a haircut before the test! During the test, you will want to fiddle with that lock of hair.

Auditory (Sound):
- Use earplugs so you won't hear other kids' pencils scratching.
- Do not bring earbuds because you will not be allowed to listen to music.

Visual (Sight):
- Before answering questions, look at the test paragraph by paragraph. Methodically break down the instructions into digestible bites — a task called "chunking" — to keep you focused.
- Play a counting "game": Slowly and deliberately count the items you need to answer.
- Do an activity such as highlighting the specific questions that the test asks.
- On the multiple-choice list, cross out the two you know are not right; then, go with your instinct.

Gustatory (Taste):
- Quietly suck on candy, such as slightly sweet Jolly Ranchers.
- Bring other snacks that are salty or spicy to stay more alert, but be careful not to crunch too loudly so others are not disturbed.
- Do not eat chocolate. While it is a self-soother, when the sugar high comes down, the sugar crash will make you sleepy. Also, it can soften and get messy.

Olfactory (Smell):
- Bring a lavender, lemon, jasmine or other scented sachet or cloth to sniff and keep you calm.

Proprioceptive (Muscles, Joints, and Body Parts):
- If allowed, bring a cushion to make the seat comfortable.
- Before and during the test, while in your seat, press your palms and squeeze your legs together. Press your feet down as if to punch a hole through the floor. Open your arms wide and make circles in the air.
- If you must "stim" your foot, remember that everyone affects everyone else in the test room. Therefore, flex, point, and wiggle your foot in the air, but don't tap it noisily on the floor.

Interoceptive (Internal Organs):
- Before the test, drink water — or Annette's favorite, green tea frappuccino — to calm down when feeling anxious.
- Bring water to stay hydrated.
- Use the toilet before the test.
- Bring a bandana if you sweat a lot and a jacket in case the room is super air-conditioned.

Watch video here