

# THE "SO WHAT?" OF SENSORY INTEGRATION THERAPY: JOIE DE VIVRE

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The end goal of sensory integration therapy is *joie de vivre*—joy of life—attained through social participation, self-regulation, and self-esteem.

The Harrington family brought their son Jack to the STAR Center for our Intensive Program: a 30-session program of Occupational Therapy (OT), with a Relationship-based and Sensory Integration treatment approach combined with extensive Family Education. Jack was four years old and was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Jack, while becoming more verbal and trying to interact with his family, was so overwhelmed by his sensory environment that engaging with his parents or his peers was almost impossible. In a large room Jack would run from one object to another using only peripheral vision and flapping his hands.

Jack's OT helped his family learn to minimize the visual stimuli in his environment, use fewer words to communicate, and move more slowly. They began to play with Jack by engaging Jack at his level of play instead of encouraging him to perform at a higher developmental level. For example, when Jack said "uh, uh" and pointed up, the family learned to imitate his words, saying "Up, up. Jack up?" while pointing upward. Prior to this training, the parents were likely to respond by saying something like, "Look at Jack. I think he wants to be lifted up. Do you want Mommy to lift you up?" Note that the intention is the same, but to Jack all the words would flow by him without a specific meaning.

By the end of the second week, Jack began to look directly at his parents, show them his toy, and ask for help. His parents were thrilled that Jack was playing and sharing his toys with them. They said that for the first time Jack cared about their approval and whether they noticed what he was doing. When Jack and his parents left our program, they said, "I can't believe we have our boy back again. We are truly a family at last."

Did Jack's developmental levels change? As a matter of fact, they did. Improvements were documented in language, motor, and cognitive domains. But compared with the family's growth in understanding and being in sync with each other, the developmental gains seemed insignificant. Helping

families understand how to build a *sensory lifestyle* that focuses on setting up contexts, within which a child can regulate his eight sensory systems and reframing behaviors for the family so that the meaning of nonverbal behaviors is clear, makes it possible for everyone to join in interactions. This has an uplifting and profound effect on most families.

### Magic Moments

When children engage, they give back joy to their parents. We call those times that the child experiences a quick but beautiful connection with a parent a "magic moment." The child looks at you with joy of mastery in his face and smiles, you smile back, and the two of you share a secret. Pediatric therapists feel so lucky that their jobs are to play even when the objectives are developmental and neurobehavioral. The most gifted OTs manipulate the situation so that just as the child is about to experience the excitement of a new success, the flush of mastery, and the thrill of sharing that with someone who cares, they contrive for the parent to receive the gift of shared joy through relating. We strive to "give away" these magic moments to parents.

The goal of each therapy session is sharing and having fun. We tell kids, "There is one and only one big rule here [the child looks up at us with worry]...and this is it: Whatever happens, you are required to have fun." We look for the twinkle in the child's eyes. When we see it, we know that he knows our goal is to have fun, to set up the child for success, and to *share* that success with parents so that everyone can experience the flush of success!

Many therapists have been trained to design their treatment sessions going from activity to activity, trying to meet the goals of the IEP (individualized education plan) or completing tasks that the insurance company will accept. While these goals are important, nothing is as important as reconnecting the child and family in a positive, fun, and growing relationship. We find that within the environment of support, joy, and shared caring, the developmental aspects of the child's capacities flourish as well.

### Process versus Activity

The model we use is different from a traditional therapy model. By focusing on the "just-right emotional connection" first and the process that reinforces the relationship, rather than on developmental milestones, we boost the child's self-regulation and self-esteem along with his parents' confidence. When the process is fun, the child is more motivated to try, and because of the "just-right challenge" we support, scaffold, and rework the tasks until no matter what, he does succeed! The **process** is key, not the completing of one more activity.

Children's therapy looks **and feels** like play. Thus children engage in play to work on the parents' priorities and goals. And one of the most challenging areas our children have is learning to play with other children. They learn how to play by playing with their parents at home: how to lose; how to win gracefully; how to take turns; how to laugh, relax, and enjoy spending time together. These play skills are not taught at school or learned from friends, teachers, or books. These are life lessons and they are learned from one's parents. As parents, we must take the time to play with our kids!

The meaning occurs in OT not from improving developmental skills or sensory functions. Those are means to an end. The end goal is *joie de vivre*—joy of life—attained through social participation, self-regulation, and self-esteem (Cohn, Miller, and Tickle-Degnen 2000).

In future 2013 Sensory Solution columns, we follow a child through his day, addressing waking up, morning routines, making the transition to school, and so on. We will provide sensory and relationship solutions focused on enhancing the quality of life for children with ASD who have sensory issues. We hope to inspire and guide you toward joy as well as developmental progress. ■

### Reference

Cohn, E., L. J. Miller, and L. Tickle-Degnen. 2000. "Parental Hopes for Therapy Outcomes: Children with Sensory Modulation Disorders." *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 54 (1): 36–43.