

Autism and Neurodivergence

GoAEYC October 19, 2024

Agnieszka Moroni, MOTR/L

- Occupational Therapist
- Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Loyola University Chicago, 2010
- Master of Science in OT from Midwestern University, 2015
- Early Intervention (Birth – 3)
 - o Sensory processing dysfunction
 - o Autism Spectrum Disorder
 - o Feeding challenges
 - o Down syndrome and other genetic conditions
 - o Neurological conditions (brain malformations, strokes, etc.)
- Founder of TOTS Therapeutic Child Care Center, NFP
 - o Daycare for children with moderate-severe disabilities
 - o Now enrolling in Lake Zurich
- Married in 2010
- Working mom of four children

Time to chat:

What do you already know about Autism?

Logos:

- Puzzle pieces: many colors, many aspects to a person with autism, criticized as being a “problem to be solved”
- Infinity loop: spectrum of colors, infinite possibilities

Language:

- A person is autistic, has autism, or is on the (autism) spectrum
- Awareness → acceptance
- Describing behaviors as red flags → characteristics
- Is it a disorder? Or just a variation of normal? → neurodivergence

Definition:

Two core characteristics in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th edition)

- Persistent deficits in social communication and social interactions
 - o Speech delay (receptive/understanding and expressive/speaking)
 - Non-verbal kids may need visuals or a communication device

- Speaking kids may have difficulty with initiating/maintaining conversations, understanding ambiguous phrases (e.g., "sit down" vs. "take a seat")
 - Difficulty understanding social cues (personal space, body language, tone of voice)
 - Challenges in initiating or maintaining social interactions (reduced eye contact, brief answers, getting upset instead of asking for help)
 - Preference for independent activities
- Restricted patterns of behavior, interests, or activities
 - Repetitive movements such as hand flapping, rocking, jumping
 - Rigid routines must be followed or it triggers strong emotional response
 - Literal thinking (difficulty with pretend play, understanding that a cartoon cow and a photo of a cow are the same, "memorizing" how to solve a puzzle instead of truly problem-solving)
 - Intense focus on specific interests or topics
 - Common: letters and numbers, vehicles, mechanical objects (vacuums, computers, opening/closing doors, light switches, etc.)
 - Sensory processing differences
 - Seeking inputs, especially for calming
 - Avoiding inputs, often triggers fight or flight

Time to chat:

Share sensory ideas from your classroom

Most common: Sensory tables / bins

"Sensory" is the new hot word in marketing

- Toys
- YouTube videos
- Pinterest ideas

None of these are wrong. They are just an incomplete snapshot of what our whole sensory system really does and what sensory activities we should be doing with kids.

Time to chat: How many senses do we have?

- 5 basic senses
- 2 movement senses
 - Vestibular (head movement – upside down, spinning, etc.)
 - Proprioception (moving your body without looking at it)
 - You don't need to look at your legs while you walk. You feel them.
 - Using appropriate amount of force (e.g., carrying a kitten versus a heavy box or knowing how hard to push a crayon on paper)
- Interoception (how your body feels inside your organs)
 - Hungry/full
 - Bladder/bowel movements

Sensory Regulation:

We are at our best when we have JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT of input in each sense.

- Happy
- Learning
- Participating
- Playing with friends
- Sleeping well
- Eating well
- Self-care tasks

Sensory Dysregulation: TOO MUCH or TOO LITTLE

- Sad
- Angry
- Not following rules
- Aggressive
- Scared in uncomfortable situations
- Clinging to parents
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty eating
- Difficulty tolerating self-care tasks

Why does it matter?

Our sensory regulation is the foundation for all other development.

Reference: Pyramid of Learning by Taylor/Trott 1991

In-depth sensory training is available. Please contact me if you're interested!

Part 1: Could this be more than being "naughty"?

Distinguishing sensory dysregulation from poor behavior.

Part 2: Punish? Ignore? Hug?

How to effectively address sensory behaviors when they disrupt the classroom.

Strategies

- Use visuals for communication and for schedules (note: real photos are best!)
- Keep language simple ("First clean up, Then snack" instead of "You need to clean up first and then we will sit down for snack time")
- Use simple signs for "more" "all done" or "help"
- Invite them into social play, never force (this includes circle time!)
- Join them in their repetitive interest. Enter their world. If they're spinning something, sit down and spin with them for a short while.
- Incorporate their interest into tasks (e.g., if they're learning to draw circles, have them draw wheels of a car)
- Keep consistent routines (e.g., drop-off procedure)
- Prepare them for transitions, especially when changing location.

- Sensory strategies to calm them when they're upset.
 - o Movement: rocking, going for a walk, stepping outside
 - o Visual: watching something calmly moving such as rain
 - o Touch: deep pressure "hugs", fidgets, sensory bins
 - o Auditory: music, headphones, step out of the room
- Feeding strategies
 - o Offer offensive foods, model eating it, never force
 - o Allow parents to bring in foods
- Sleep strategies
 - o Rocking, hugging, singing, etc.
 - o Oral sensory inputs (drinking water, Chewy Tubes, etc.)
- Be flexible and patient
 - o May need to learn something MANY times more than others
 - o Break tasks down into manageable steps (e.g., washing hands, dressing)
- Celebrate small achievements
- Avoid talking negatively about them

How to Talk with Parents

- Sandwich (positive, negative, positive)
- Ensure them you are here to help and to work together
- Show videos when possible

Resources

- www.autismspeaks.org *controversial*
- *Forever Boy* by Kate Swenson
- *The Reason I Jump* documentary
- The Autism Little Learners Podcast by Tara Phillips

(Time for Questions)

References

Canva graphics

YouTube mall clip: National Autistic Society

Agnieszka Moroni's Contact Info

agnieszka@totscenter.org www.TOTScenter.org @totscenter (fb/IG) 847-495-2714