

## Strategies to Improve Community Participation

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In this newsletter, we will talk about strategies and modifications to improve your children's tolerance and participation in the community activities. We give helpful hints on how to make **play**, **behavior in public**, **eating in a restaurant**, **trips to the dentist**, **birthday parties**, and even **trips to Disneyland** more enjoyable for your child and your family.



### Encouraging Your Child to Play

Play is often referred to as the occupation of childhood. Play offers children opportunities to develop gross and fine motor skills, language, imagination, and social interaction. Due to problems with motor planning, sensory processing,

manipulation, and etc., children with special needs often have difficulty with play. Here are some strategies that may facilitate your child's play skills:

- ★ If your child is using mouthing to self-calm, try oral motor activities such as chewing, bubble blowing, and playing musical instruments
- ★ Children with sensitivity to touch may not prefer messy play, try heavy work activities and bear hugs prior to messy play
- ★ Incorporate your child's favorite character in play to facilitate his/her motivation
- ★ Establish play routines if your child has difficulty with transition since routines are predictable
- ★ If your child is impulsive in play, break down the task into small steps
- ★ Cause and effect toys are excellent for children with motor planning difficulties
- ★ If your child needs movement to stay organized and attentive, try playing on a moving surface such as a swing and rocking chair
- ★ Give lots of opportunities for gross motor play and alternate gross and fine motor play
- ★ Encourage a willingness to share and communication of affection and appreciation for the efforts of others

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### Behavior in Public: Stopping Tantrums



Children with special needs throw tantrums or meltdowns as a quick way to communicate "my nervous system has had enough" without using words. Here are some ideas that may help you better understand your child's needs and prevent him/her from frustration:

- ★ Learn your child's triggers: when it happens, what time of the day and where (before nap, after a long car ride?)
- ★ Learn the physical signs that occur right before a tantrum: yawning, scratching self, sucking thumb, whining, and other behaviors that might indicate your child's anxiety level is rising
- ★ Work out a sign that your child can give you when he/she can't maintain anymore, such as giving you a card that he carries in his pocket and places in your hand when he/she's overwhelmed. Make sure to establish rules around this—your child should understand that he/she cannot do it all the time, only when overwhelmed
- ★ Intervene at the first sign of a meltdown by taking your child to another room, and talking him/her through it to see if you can ease the difficulties. If you cannot solve the problem by talking, then it is time to go home. Do not force him/her through the negative situation, that may be the part of the experience he/she will remember

#### REFERENCES:

- *Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration* by Ellen Yack, Paula Aguilla & Shirley Sutton
- *The Sensory Processing Disorder Answer Book* by Tara Delaney

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## Perfect Parties for the Easily Overstimulated

- ★ Pick an activity that your child will enjoy. For example, if your child likes to play with water, make the party a swimming or waterplay party
- ★ Considering limiting the number of people who will attend
- ★ If the party is at your house, try to put decorations up a couple days ahead of time so your child can get used to the changed space
- ★ If the party is not at your house, try to bring your child there a couple of days before the party. This will give him/her a chance to get used to the new space and get a feel for himself in the new space before a bunch of people are surrounding him/her
- ★ You can try to stagger the invite times into two different groups of people. If there is a core group of friends that understand your child's difficulties in social situations, have them show up thirty minutes earlier than the next group. This will increase your child's comfort level with a few people so that he/she is more at ease when the other guests arrive
- ★ Planned "sensory breaks" for your child from the group. If the party is at home, he/she can go into his room for awhile, and if it is at a restaurant or other facility, he/she can walk outside and do some push-ups against the wall or similar heavy-work activities

## Magical Trips to Disneyland



A child with sensory processing difficulties often is easily overwhelmed by the noises and crowd at public places such as Disneyland. Here are some pre-trip strategies that may help prepare your child:

- ★ Try to schedule your family trip during the off season
- ★ Consider staying an extra day and making all the days at the park shorter
- ★ Prepare him/her through pictures and a promo video that talks about Disneyland
- ★ If additional family members are going, make sure to talk to them about your child's needs so that they will understand
- ★ Bring sunglasses and earplugs/headphones that your child can use if overwhelmed by lights and noises
- ★ Identify a couple of spots that you and your child can use to escape if he/she is feeling overwhelmed. The best quiet places are higher-end restaurants. You can just sit in a booth and order a drink for a break
- ★ Bring some chewy/crunchy food to eat (or squeeze toys to play) while waiting in the line

## Eating in a Restaurant



- ★ Get the menu ahead of time so that your child is familiar with the choices (now many restaurants post their menus online)
- ★ Ask for a booth; rounded ones are best because they are usually in a corner and offer more visual blockage
- ★ Request a table that is away from high-traffic areas
- ★ Bring activities or toys that will make your child occupied
- ★ Try to make going out to eat more about social/family experience than insist on healthy eating

## Pain-free Trips to the Dentist



These tips will help you know what to do so that your child does not "freak out" when going to the dentist:

- ★ Let your child know ahead of time what is going to happen at the dentist's office by using pictures to create a simple, positive story, and encourage him to re-create the dentist experience such as having him apply pressure with his fingers on own mouth and open his mouth wide while looking in the mirror
- ★ Apply deep pressure to his/her shoulders and back once at the dentist before the dentist arrives
- ★ Have your child wear a weighted vest or X-ray apron during the visit
- ★ Use a timer that lets your child see how long the appointment is going to last and let him/her hold a fidget toy or a weighted stuffed animal on his lap
- ★ Consider letting your child wear headphones to listen to favorite music
- ★ Ask the dentist to tell your child what is going to happen before he does each procedure

