

# Positive Strategies for Children with Sensory Integration Challenges

by Julie Rose and Nancy Rosenow

Julie Rose is a teacher and staff development coordinator at Dimensions Early Education Programs.



Nancy Rosenow is Executive Director of Dimensions Educational Research Foundation in Lincoln, Nebraska.



*As a group of children walked slowly around the block near our school, they stopped often to look up at the tall trees in the neighborhood. Each time Ella came to a new tree she would reach her arms in the air, forming them into either a triangular or circular shape. "Look," her teacher said to the rest of the group, "Ella's noticing the shape of the tree branches. She's showing us that some trees are shaped more like triangles and some more like circles. Isn't that right?" Ella nodded. Other children began forming shapes with their arms as well, following Ella's lead.*

At first glance there may not seem to be anything remarkable about this vignette, but for Ella something very special was happening. She was learning that she could communicate her observations about the world around her in a way that was interesting to other children. And she was learning that her teacher was paying attention to her style of communication and cared what she had to "say." As a child with sensory integration challenges who does not frequently communicate with words, this was an important discovery for her. Teachers encourage all children to use body movements to help form deeper understandings of the world around them. They know that all young children need to learn from kinesthetic experiences, but they also understand that for a child like Ella, these opportunities are vital. Without them Ella could become isolated and withdrawn, and stop seeing herself as a valued member of the group.

Through our work teachers, multi-disciplinary consultants, and researchers have together identified experiences and strategies that are proving very beneficial for children with sensory integration challenges. These strategies can be summed up by four broad recommendations:

1. Enjoy daily multi-sensory experiences with the natural world.

2. Provide purposeful movement activities frequently throughout each day.
3. Pay close attention to the way the indoor and outdoor environments are arranged, avoiding visual clutter, confusion, and over-stimulation.
4. Respect individual differences and celebrate unique talents.

Other articles in this section discuss the importance of some of these recommendations in more depth. Following is just a sampling of a few practical strategies from each of these categories that have emerged from our research observations.

## Multi-sensory experiences with nature

### **Take advantage of nature's ability to provide just the right sensory experience for each child's needs.**

Children remind us that life is one great big sensory experience. They show us every day how much they are learning through their senses. We know that children with sensory integration challenges are able to sense typically, but perceive sensory information atypically. Their brains analyze information in ways that may cause pain or confusion. Often that confusion is mistaken for attention disorders or behavioral problems. Successful sensory integration experiences allow children to process information through touch, movement, taste, smell, hearing, and vision in a way that is helpful for each individual. Teachers continually strive to provide the right amount of sensory experiences that will challenge and motivate children with sensory difficulties without overwhelming them so that they withdraw or feel sensory overload. Nature-based outdoor spaces provide a perfect setting for meeting each child's unique sensory needs. While one child may choose to quietly observe a ladybug crawling on a leaf, another

child may exuberantly fill and dump pails full of sand. A wide variety of natural materials provide ways for each child to feel comfortable and successful.

**Encourage children to use natural materials, such as pine cones, leaves, or sticks to create patterns and mosaics.**

To counteract some of the visual overload children are continually being exposed to in today's fast-paced world, experiences that help children notice details, patterns, and textures are valuable for all learning styles. They often help children who are on sensory "overload" to slow down and focus on the gentle beauty and wonder that can be found by looking closely at natural objects.

**Create opportunities for children to safely carry heavy objects and to engage in other full-body activities.**

Teachers can help children learn to safely lift, move, and build with heavy rocks, logs, and bricks outdoors. Through these activities all children can develop feelings of competence and body awareness, but children who experience over-stimulation will also discover an important and beneficial way to channel excess energy. Children who have difficulty slowing down indoors can be encouraged to use outdoor times to enjoy full-body activities like jumping repeatedly or climbing on outdoor structures. These experiences help stimulate the joints, which in turn provide proprioceptive input that helps children feel calm.



**Remember that experiences with insects and animals can be especially helpful for some children with sensory difficulties.**

In her book *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin, who herself has been diagnosed with autism, discusses how children with sensory integration challenges often have an easier time forming attachments with animals than with people. Creating outdoor spaces full of natural vegetation that encourages the presence of insects or animals is wonderful for all children, but can be especially beneficial for children with autism or Asperger's Syndrome.

### Purposeful movement experiences

**Provide experiences with "crossing the midline."**

By age three or four, children should have mastered a bilateral skill known as "crossing the midline." (Every time you cross your arms to scratch an elbow, cross your ankles, or read text in a book from left to right you are using this skill.) For children with sensory integration disorders, these kinds of bilateral activities

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are often difficult. By adapting musical games like “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” so that they encourage children to touch a right hand to a left foot, for example, teachers can provide practice with this important skill in an engaging and enjoyable way.

**Give children objects to hold during a walk to focus attention.**

We know that deep pressure is often calming to children with sensory processing difficulties. For some children, carrying a backpack with heavier materials such as books or blocks during transitional times or on a walk can help them stay focused. For other children, providing them with a magnifying glass or a view finder to look through on a walk around the block may provide a focal point that channels their attention and keeps them positively engaged.

**Provide many opportunities for children to move in ways that meet individual needs, and encourage parents to provide the same kinds of opportunities at home.**

This quote from the book, *Teaching for the Two-Sided Mind* by Linda Verlee Williams, addresses children’s profound need to move in individual ways:

“Since sensory and motor development are aspects of neural processing and of the development of thinking and reasoning skills, young children should be given as many opportunities to move in as many ways as possible. Most children have an inner sense of the types of movement their body/mind needs. Just as they knew to stand and walk, they know to spin and balance. When young children spend hours spinning or standing on their heads or jumping, they are meeting some inner developmental need which we as adults should honor.

“With our crowded city streets, small apartments, and the seduction of television, many children do not get the variety of movement experiences they need; some specialists believe that this lack of movement contributes to the learning disorders we see in school.”

**Encourage children to create body movements that represent themselves.**



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Since we know that children with sensory challenges often struggle with social interactions, movement experiences can provide an outlet for personal expressions that may not be available to them through verbal means. In our classrooms, each child is encouraged to create a body movement that is uniquely theirs. These movements are repeated over and over again throughout the year so that children get to know and appreciate each other’s unique ways of expressing themselves.

**Careful attention to indoor and outdoor environments – at home and at school**

**Choose visual images that help guide and inspire children.**

Display photos or art prints that help children “read” each area of the classroom and provide inspiration for hands-on activities. For example, hang posters of great works of architecture, like the Eiffel Tower, in the Block Area. Remember that less is more, and beautiful aesthetics matter.

**Post photos of children engaged in positive behaviors.**

Photos can provide “visual clues” about appropriate behavior for children with sensory challenges. Take

pictures of children who are working together in positive ways and display them thoughtfully in appropriate areas.

**Help parents think carefully about the use of electronic media in their home environments.**

All children should be sheltered from violent visual images in movies, video games, or on television, especially children with sensory integration challenges. In lectures to groups of educators, Temple Grandin often describes how as a child she took visual images so literally that she thought everything she saw on television was a guide for how to act. She says it concerns her to think of children being adversely impacted by the multitude of less-than-appropriate behaviors found on television today.

**Make sure outdoor spaces include a balance of well-separated quiet and active areas.**

Providing clear separations between quiet and active spaces will help all children be able to engage in outdoor activities with the right level of stimulation to meet their individual needs.

**Supporting and celebrating individual differences**

**Pay close attention to each child's sensory preferences.**

Children with sensory integration challenges include those who are hypersensitive as well as those who are hyposensitive. Perceptive teachers can provide ways to help children cope with their own unique challenges. In our classrooms, close observation helped teachers realize that one child who was hypersensitive was sometimes very bothered by wearing certain types of clothing, so he was provided with additional clothes he could change in and out of during the day. He could select items like sweat pants and soft shirts with no tags whenever he needed them. He also had difficulty with touch and preferred being held in very deliberate ways, instead of lightly and gently. Often times he would want to sit on a teacher's lap, in a firm embrace, in order to listen to a story or discussion.

Some children help us learn of their hyposensitivity by their movements. They may have difficulty sitting for any length of time, wanting to get up and down

constantly because they are seeking out sensory stimulation. Strategies that have worked well involve focusing their attention with tactile experiences. Teachers have reserved spaces by taping large squares on the floor and inviting children to experience their own place. This is never viewed as a punishment or isolation. The teacher might say, "I've made you your own special house. I'd like to invite you to come in." Children are usually motivated to enjoy a space created especially for them. Within that space they are then provided with a tactile experience, such as squeezing a soft rubber ball.

**Take time each day to plan carefully for individual differences.**

We cannot stress enough the importance of the deliberate planning it takes throughout the day to create positive, meaningful experiences for all children, but especially those with sensory integration difficulties. Teachers must be given the time and support they need so that this daily planning can take place.

**Balance the needs of all children in the classroom.**

Teachers must help all children learn to find ways to meet their own sensory needs that won't interfere with the needs of other children in the classroom. For example, it might be fine for a child who needs to move frequently to roll on the floor during story times as long as he or she does not roll over onto other children. Helping to visually designate a safe place for rolling (by providing a large blanket, for example), will respect the needs of all learners.

**Help each child develop his or her unique interests and talents.**

Too often, children with sensory difficulties are misunderstood and are viewed only as behavioral problems. Children often begin to develop very negative images of themselves. Teachers who help all children discover their unique talents provide an invaluable gift.

In a recently documented experience in one of the research classrooms, teacher Holly Murdoch was working with "Anna" who was building a structure by covering poles with fabric. "Dylan," who was working on the other side of the structure, suddenly blurted

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JOYCE WHITE

out: “Two cubed is eight, two squared is four.” “You’re right,” Holly replied, “It is kind of like we’re squaring this structure.”

Holly knew that Dylan has a strong interest in mathematics, but often struggles with appropriate social interactions. She was able to understand how Dylan’s seemingly unrelated words were connected to the building activity, and later helped Dylan use his facility for mathematical thinking as a link to a successful social experience. As other children came over wanting to enter the structure, she supported Dylan as he developed rules, a password, and a mathematical hierarchy of leadership for being inside the structure. (For example, Dylan would inform another child, “You’re third in charge.”) Holly knew that Dylan often had difficulty working with others; but by encouraging him to use his comfort with mathematics as a basis for his play, she helped him find a way to successfully interact.

Temple Grandin writes of the need to help children with autism spectrum challenges to develop interests they can share with others: “In my life I have replaced emotional complexity with intellectual complexity. People on the spectrum who are happy have friends with their same interests. Computer programmers are happy when they are with other programmers and they can talk about programming.”

Successful teaching strategies that make a positive difference for children with sensory integration

challenges begin with the understanding that all human beings do not experience or understand the world in the same way. When we let go of any need for a “one-size-fits-all” approach, we open the door to soul-satisfying interactions with every unique and valued child in our lives.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Natural materials — do you have enough?:** Start a collection of natural materials such as the ones listed in the article. Involve families to make it a successful experience. Describe what you need in a newsletter article, share it with families, and watch the natural materials accumulate!

**What’s on your playground?:** Look at the outdoor environment to see if you have natural materials, heavy objects to lift and carry, and insects and animals to watch. If not, make a plan to add them.

**Self-assessment:** Turn this list of good ideas into a self-assessment for teachers to use to evaluate their sensitivity and responsiveness to sensory integration. After the self-assessment, meet to discuss what teachers learned and what they are doing with the information.

**One size fits all?:** Talk with teachers about their views of the one-size-fits-all approach. If this is part of the teachers' world view, discuss ways to modify and amend this view to reflect the information in this article.