

Early Intervention

GAMES

B A R B A R A S H E R

Fun, Joyful
Ways to
Develop Social
and Motor Skills
in Children with
Autism Spectrum
or Sensory
Processing
Disorders



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Fun, Joyful Ways to Develop Social and Motor
Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum or
Sensory Processing Disorders

BARBARA SHER

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RALPH BUTLER

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Preface - - - - -

Attitudes toward autism have gone through many changes. In my first twenty years as an occupational therapist, I had two clients with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). They were considered exotic birds; their rocking, spinning, and hand flapping were called “self-stimming;” and their behavior was blamed squarely on the coldness of their “refrigerator moms.”

Now, these once atypical children are common in my caseload, and self-stimulating behavior is more accurately acknowledged as self-calming. Instead of being blamed, their moms are honored for their ability to cope with their sensitive children.

The jury is still out on the cause of autism, but what is apparent is that the brains of these children process information differently. Now that we understand the plasticity of the brain, modern therapies are aimed toward helping these children connect the dots in ways that other children do, so they can better fit into our world.

There are even people nowadays who propose that children on the spectrum and with Sensory Processing Disorders (SPD) are more rather than advanced less than their peers. A growing awareness of autistic savants, with genius mixed into their social differences, adds some muscle to that theory.

It’s an interesting thought. I think of Reggie, one of “my” kids. I was watching him blow bubbles recently and saw him mesmerized by the way the light refracted off the iridescent bubbles. If you really pay attention, bubbles *are* amazingly beautiful, and Reggie was just as delighted and appreciative of the fortieth bubble blown as he was of the first. (Talk about being in the present moment!) Reggie’s ability to notice details also makes him the only one in his preschool class to know the names and sounds of every letter in the alphabet. I envy his contentment in solitary play and his not seeming to care or notice what others think of him.

What would it be like if kids like Reggie were just seen as one in a variety of human possibilities? I won't be surprised if sometime in the not too distant future, it might be considered "cool" to be autistic or to have unique ways of processing the world. Such terms as Sensory Processing Differences will be used instead of Disorders, and we *all* will learn to be sensitive to our needs and how to regulate and calm our systems.

Meanwhile, we parents and therapists and friends who love these children can make them feel welcomed and find ways to help them acquire needed skills. One way will always be playing. Play is the brain's way of learning and our way to enjoy our lives and to give love to each other. Daniel Tammet, an autistic savant points out in his book, *Born on a Blue Day*, that what made his childhood miserable were the children who couldn't accept him as he was, but what made his development flourish were his parents who did.

May the games in this book bring you and yours many loving, playful moments.

Barbara Sher

Acknowledgments - - - - -

It's one thing to come up with games to play with children and another to find a staff willing to play with you. Playing requires willingness to break into song at any moment and being alert, innovative, and flexible to each child's unique needs. Our Early Childhood and Special Education staff of aides, teachers, and therapists in the CNMI public school system feel so good about the progress we've seen in "our" children that we modestly call ourselves the Dream Team.

To honor our staff's playfulness and competence, I dedicate this book to them. It was their willingness to happily play every game, many times, which gave me the ability to make games that work best.

Thank you, Joe Cruz, Yoli Lely, Mercy Tisa, Melinda Diaz, Jacob Villagomez, Mark and Patty Staal, Jerry and Rose Diaz, Dora Won, and Judy Hawkins, and helpers, Rita Olipai and Reyda Calibo.

I also want to express special appreciation to early intervention teacher Mark Staal, who had the vision and was instrumental in setting up the local program for children with ASD and SPD. He and Jerry Diaz made important suggestions about aspects to include in the book.

Huge acknowledgment also goes to fellow occupational therapist and dear friend, Karen Beardsley. Karen has a wide range of therapeutic experience, and I was thrilled when she agreed to be my first reader. She assiduously went through the text and, in her characteristically intelligent style, added a sentence, a thought, or a clearer articulation of a therapeutic intervention. For this, I'm very grateful.

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I also truly appreciate Kate Bradford, my editor, who did her usual meticulous and thoughtful tidying and rearranging to add the spit and polish to my vision.

And always I'm grateful to my illustrator, Ralph Butler, who knows to include the wide swath of cultures in his lively illustrations. He knows how to exemplify so clearly in pictures what I say in words.

I appreciate the strong support given to me by my new friend and kindred soul, Ida Zelaya. With her pulse on parental needs through her sensorystreet.com Web site, she understands the power of play with children who have sensory processing differences and shares my words with other parents.

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It takes a gazillion hours to birth a book, and each time I'm finished, I forget, like a woman after labor is over, how much effort it "was . . . until" I have already joyously begun the next book. It's easy to see why I'm especially glad for my loving partner and favorite playmate, Don Cohen, who keeps me company and well fed when I'm writing and joins me on fun outings when I'm not. He is a joy and a comfort for me, and I am deeply appreciative and pleased.

Early Intervention Games

Introduction - - - - -

Kids who are diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) come in all shapes, sizes, and strengths. Like children everywhere, they are all uniquely themselves, with their own preferences, their own needs, and their own sensitivities. A difference between typically developing children and these children is that children with ASD or SPD let you know, without a doubt, what their preferences, needs, and sensitivities are. They wear their needs on their sleeves.

If Joseph doesn't like loud noises, you know it. Maybe he will quietly put his hands over his ears, but he's just as likely to have a screaming melt-down. If Jason doesn't want to be disturbed and prefers to be left doing what he's doing, you're going to have a hard row to hoe getting him to do what you want. Susie doesn't like to be touched and she's not kidding. You get the idea. Typical children might be more willing to go along with your program, even if it's not their first choice, partly because they want to please or get praised. Children identified with autism spectrum or sensory integration issues can't always let your needs override theirs. If you want peace, you must pay attention to their needs. The challenge for parents, therapists, and others, including the child, is to figure out what the needs are.

You need to notice many things, such as:

Is there a sensation alarming my child and can it be modified or overridden by another sensation?

What in the environment is setting my child off and can I change it?

Is there something in his diet that has a negative effect on him?

What is her emotional state and how can I help calm her?

Can I help him cope by desensitizing, modifying, overriding, or avoiding something?

Would it be more helpful to distract my child's attention from her anxiety by helping her focus on something that calms her, or to change the situation?

We also need to notice and pay attention to ourselves. We all know what it feels like to not be able to think clearly because the radio is too loud, or to feel irritated by glaring headlights, or overwhelmed and even frightened by a jostling crowd. Usually, we are able to block out annoying sensations and focus on what is in front of us, but not always. Understanding the effects of such assaults on our sensory system helps us to have more compassion for the many people who can't tune them out and thus react negatively. To paraphrase the Serenity Prayer, we need to learn to control the sensations we can, avoid the ones we can't, and develop the wisdom to know the difference.

We need to learn to help those who can't do this by noticing their reactions to different stimuli and, when wanting assistance, to seek out intervention by occupational therapists or other professionals trained in treating sensory issues. Understanding of the child's needs is increased when parents, family members, therapists, and the educational team can brainstorm together and share their insights.

If there could be said to be a silver lining in this sudden increase in the incidence of autism and SPD, then it must be that we're producing a large group of parents and professionals who are increasingly sensitive to the needs of children. As this awareness grows, this increased knowledge is spreading. People are sharing their ideas in the neighborhood, in magazines and books, and on the Web. More people are understanding and trying new ways to help their youngster modify, cope, and deal with the world so that joy, not pain, is the main sensation of their lives.

Besides enlarging our sensitivity, these children are influencing one of the main challenges of this point in our history: accepting diversity. We're working on accepting diversity in terms of religion, ethnicity, and sexual

orientation. People are now beginning to call for a greater acceptance of neurological diversity.

Zosia Zaks, an adult on the autism spectrum and the author of *Life and Love: Positive Strategies for Autistic Adults*, adds to this perspective, writing on her Web site (www.autismability.com):

Most Autistic people do not want to be “cured” per se. We do not want our Autism magically erased, or erased over time via some method. You would wind up washing away who we are. This is important to understand. Many people across the spectrum, with a wide range of skills, talents, challenges, issues, and interests, are speaking out for a new understanding, are working hard to promote the benefits of neurological diversity. The goal should never be to make an Autistic person “normal” or “typical” or “just like his peers” because Autism is biological—neurological—and therefore Autistic people will always “be built” Autistic. Instead, try to work with us, as we are, so we can learn new skills, communicate, and enjoy our lives.

She also points out the importance of appreciating strengths:

For example, many of us absolutely love color. We can have strong aesthetic ideals. Some of us are entranced by sounds, textures, and images and this leads to an amazing depth of artistic talent in our community. Think of Einstein standing there “stimming out” visually on the trains that gave him the idea for relativity. Many of our sensory-bound challenges mirror sensory-bound insights that can have incredible impacts on art, science, music, and engineering.

Daniel Hawthorne, another adult with autism, says in his book, *A Reason for Hope*, “There are two things I would want to tell parents. One is to be attentive to helping their children work from their strengths, using their own unique talents to meet life’s challenges, rather than trying to constantly

compensate for their weaknesses. Everyone has his own unique strengths and weaknesses, and autistic individuals are no different. If they can learn how to best use their unique strengths, then they will live happier lives for it.”

I hope that the ideas in this book give you more ways to help children enjoy their lives and their own unique strengths.



The Games

The games in this book can be done in a classroom with many kids of different abilities, at home with one child and a parent, or with friends and siblings. Some of the aquatic therapy games can be done with just a water table or kiddie pool, but a few require a real pool, lake, or ocean. Some of the aquatic games can also be done on land instead.

Each game has the format described below:

T I T L E

Some titles are chosen because they explain the game, as in Blanket Ride, and others because they are cute (if you think A Kid Sandwich is cute). Feel free to change the name to fit your group. Some names can be changed to be more appropriate for different cultures. For example, Sushi Roll gives an Asian flavor whereas Burrito Roll would make a clearer image in a Latin culture.

G O A L S

This section lists the social, motor, and cognitive goals being encouraged, as well as the sensory system being stimulated.

M A T E R I A L S

This section lists any material needed for the games. All of the materials are easy to find, and include recyclables.

SETUP

This section describes the kinds of things to do or to have ready to make the game go smoothly—For example, if children and adults need to be in a circle, or whether you need to have a pile of shoes nearby.

DIRECTIONS

This Explains how the game is played.

VARIATIONS

Variations can include different materials to use or other skills to be developed.

WHAT IS BEING LEARNED

This explains the various lessons that are being addressed.

MODIFICATIONS

This section suggests ways to modify the game to help children with specific abilities or sensitivities.

Individualizing the games maximizes your child's social success because you modify games according to your child's learning profile and skill level. One way to create a profile for your child is to use a Social Skills Profile, such as the easy-to-use one provided in an excellent resource, *Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration* (see the bibliography at the end of the book). This, along with continuing observations, gives you a picture of the child's skills so you can see how you might modify the game.

For example, Lenny's profile indicated that he

1. Avoids playing near other children
2. Wants to be in control
3. Seeks out deep pressure, hugs, excessive movement, frequent jumping and banging into things
4. Has a tendency to stare off into space

5. Has limited visual tracking and does not use his eyes to guide movement
6. Is oversensitive to the sounds of others and often covers his ears

In playing the boisterous game below with Lenny, modifications had to be made at first until the game had been played often enough to become familiar and comfortable. With the initial modifications, the game does not alert his defenses and he can begin with a positive, nonthreatening experience.

The Game: Throw the Balls into the Box

In this game, children gather around a cardboard box on the floor (with its flaps open on the bottom). Each child is given a ball to throw in the box as the group sings to the tune of “London Bridge Is Falling Down”:

Throw the ball into the box
Into the box
Into the box
Throw the ball into the box
Where did the ball go?

Then, when all the balls are in the box, say, “Are they *behind* the box?” (exaggerate looking behind the box); “Are they *beside* the box?” (again, exaggerate looking beside the box); “Are they *in* the box?” (then pick up the box, and since the bottom flaps are loose, all the balls fall out!).

Children are delighted by the surprise of the balls falling out and are excited to grab a ball and do it again, but some children need the activity modified.

The following modifications to the game could be made to fit Lenny’s profile.

1. Avoids playing near other children

When playing a variation of the game where children take turns, let him throw first so he can then back away from the group into a more comfortable space.

Make a stool available for him to use if he wants to be away from the group but still see what is going on.

Give him direct feedback that specifically describes things he did well to reinforce a positive sense of self. The more comfortable he gets in his own skin, the easier it is to be with others.

2. Wants to be in control

Let him have some time with his favorite toy after he first throws the ball.

During some of the group playtime, follow his lead. For example, if you know he loves airplanes, make paper airplanes and let him and the others throw them into the box instead of balls.

As he becomes more at ease, let him sometimes be the one who gets to lift the box at the end and shake the balls loose.

If he is having a bad day and wants total control and refuses to play, make sure he either stays and watches one game or does one action and then uses his words to say, "I want to go." When he does this, hug him goodbye (if he likes hugs) and allow him to go play with his favorite toy nearby.

3. Seeks out deep pressure, hugs, excessive movement, frequent jumping and banging into things

Give him a congratulatory hug every time he throws the ball in the box.

When he is standing in the crowd, give him a deep-pressure, comforting touch to his shoulders and upper arms.

Give him a weighted vest or other compression orthotic to wear.

4. Has a tendency to stare off into space and tune out

Cover the box in a bright color and sparkle it up to gain his attention.

Position him so that he can see the group leader and the box better.

Use his favorite things to bring him back to the here and now. For example, if he loves Spiderman, let him pretend to be Spiderman as he participates in the game.

5. Has limited visual tracking and does not use his eyes to guide movement

Verbally encourage him to look at the box when he is throwing and sometimes do a hand-over-hand prompting. Later this can be reduced to just a simple touch prompt with a gestural cue.

You could also try using a made-up hand signal or signing along with speaking to reinforce his vision.

6. Is oversensitive to the sounds of others and often covers his ears

Until he gets used to the game, keep the singing soft or have the kids quietly take turns throwing.

Sometimes use the games as a starting point. If your child is throwing at a bowl in the Target Game and starts to throw the ball high in the air, modify the game to a basketball game. Lift the bowl high and have kids take turns making the basket. Or have one child toss the ball up, and you or another can have fun trying to catch it in the bowl on its way down.

For many more ideas on strategies and activities, see Appendix II and the Bibliography, where you'll find some wonderful, user-friendly books, Web sites, and listservs, such as Carol Kranowitz's *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun: Activities for Kids with Sensory Processing Disorder*; Dr. Lucy Miller's *Sensational Kids*; Mary Sue William and Sherry Shellenberger's Alert Program; *Tools for Tots: Sensory Strategies for Toddlers and Preschoolers* by Diana Henry et al.; and Ida Zelaya's www.sensorystreet.com Web site where parents trade ideas.