My Newsletter

MARC'S SENSORY OASIS

Sensory-based Occupational Therapy

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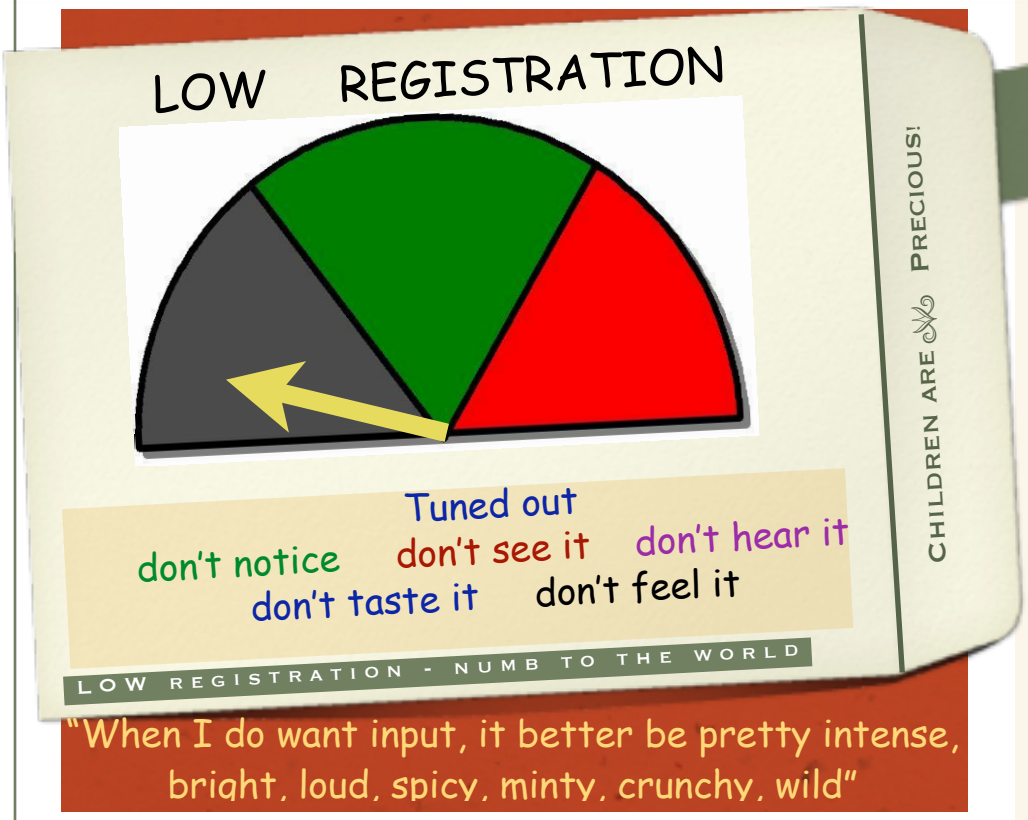

Support My Work

recommend someone to my workshop

Years ago, when OT Winnie Dunn was developing the Sensory Profile Assessment, the statisticians at the Psychological Corporation did a factor analysis of items on the Sensory Profile Questionnaire. Interestingly, all 125 items grouped into four categories. One of those categories became known as "**low registration**" (the others were "sensory seeking", "sensory sensitive" and "sensation avoiding"). Dr. Dunn began to see that these four quadrants represent four major components of temperament, or 'sensory temperament'. Over the years, it has become more clear that what we call temperament is actually about our sensory processing styles. Psychologists who specialize in studying temperament did not embrace this concept, and many still do not, as we live in a professionally compartmentalized world where fields of human science do not read each others' literature nor embrace each others concepts. The more we come to understand sensory processing and how it shapes our lives, however, the easier it is to understand that sensory processing is likely to be the chief component of temperament.

Introverts tend to be sensitive to sensory input, process information faster,

We ALL experience LOW REGISTRATION when we are down, depressed, tired, lacking in movement, flooded with language or facts. We use sensory strategies without even thinking about it.

and can become overloaded by sensory input. They therefore tend to be more cautious about new things, tend to mull things over, and weigh them before jumping into action. They retreat from busy environments when frazzled, upset, or over-stimulated. That **IS** introversion. That is also **sensory sensitivity**.

At the other end of the continuum, extroverts tend to have "**low registration**" and may unconsciously tune out sensory input that does not reach their higher than average neurological thresholds. People with low registration may seem distant, disconnected, and fail to notice subtle sensory inputs around them. They may appear disinterested by those who do not understand them. Symptoms can be exacerbated when they do not get enough movement, when sensory input is subtle or muffled, and when things get mellow. Typically, they deal with this by seeking to **increase** the level of stimulation around them. Classically, they will jump into any opportunity to feel alive and awake. Increasing the level of input around them raises their level of arousal, and helps them to process more of the input coming to them. Extroverts, or people with low registration, tend to either wallow in lethargy, or they seek a high degree of intensity and are willing to jump into action at the drop of a hat, as this is how they feel alive! They may seem to be very different in 'low stimulation' environments than they do in higher intensity environments, which they crave.

Many people with Down Syndrome, and a segment of the population with autisms, have a high neurological threshold, and can be classified as "Low Registration", at least in some areas People with a high threshold can really focus on something that interests them, as this seems to absorb all of their sensory processing energy, so they can be described as "uni-sensory". With a smaller corpus callosum, many males tend to have this quality as well, and will genuinely not hear you when they are absorbed in watching high action sports or engaged with a manual activity. People with low registration are often able to focus on one thing, to the exclusion of other things around them. The things that engage the attention tend to involve vision, movement, and activity. The things they tend to tune out most often include language and body awareness. When watching the game, or other visual stimuli, I may fail to hear the language being spoken to me, especially if I am not getting enough movement, or enough other sensory input that will help me meet my neurological thresholds. Take a person like this, with a high threshold, or a low registration temperament, and place them in a classroom with nothing in their hands, make them sit "criss-cross-applesauce" (how to extinguish this saying?) and watch them 'tune out' the world. This happens to a higher degree in males, and it also happens with extroverts, people with Down Syndrome, and many people with autism and processing differences.

When you want to keep these guys engaged, put something in their hands (fidget items - http://www.marclandry.ca/Marcs_Sensory_Oasis/Newsletter_files/newsletter%20April%202013.pdf). put something in their mouths (oral sensory - http://www.marclandry.ca/Marcs_Sensory_Oasis/Newsletter_files/newsletter%20January%202014.pdf), give them dynamic sitting options or allow them to stand/move/change positions (movement - http://www.marclandry.ca/Marcs_Sensory_Oasis/Movement_furniture.html), add some live, upbeat music, keep the environment bright and visually stimulating.

In other words, support sensory seeking (http://www.marclandry.ca/Marcs_Sensory_Oasis/Newsletter_files/newsletter%20February%202013.pdf). For 'low registration people, this sensory rich environment actually lowers neurological thresholds, stimulates the brain, facilitates language processing and language production. How many of you cannot maintain a long phone conversation unless you are pacing or using your hands in some way? How many of you become lulled into oblivion by the gentle movement of a car/boat/train?

When a 'low registration' person wants to perk up, notice what they do. Chew gum, cold drink, crunch on chips or celery, shake hands or feet, fidget, move, shake it up. These are not behaviour challenges that should be corrected, they are automatic strategies aimed at keeping the nervous system in an alert-awake mode. We should not teach people to stifle these automatic strategies, but we do.

Extroverts seek and maintain a very active lifestyle to maintain a level of arousal that helps them feel alive. They are not looking for 'fun' though this often seems to be the case; they are looking to meet the needs of their nervous system. Living in the gray zone sucks!

Many adults frown on allowing movement or fidget options, as they feel these distract young people from the work at hand. In reality, when you see a person with low registration initiate sensory activity, stimulation, interaction, you are seeing active self regulation through the brainstem, or Stage 2 Self-Regulation. If you support this, you will improve function, and you will eventually support the development of Stage 3 Self-Regulation, which is cognitively driven. Next month, I will explain in more detail the **3 stages of Self-Regulation.**

Whether a person is an extrovert or an introvert (low registration or sensory sensitive), the lesson is to trust the human organism. When we are not driven by stress, by external pressure, or a need to conform, we tend to seek out that which enables function, and this is more true in children than adults, because they are more genuine and less cognitively driven.

When children react subconsciously to engage with the sensory world around them, they are not trying to test us or make us crazy. If they are compliant, we force them into self-betrayal, and this interferes with learning as well as self regulation, until we have an unmotivated child who does not attend. If they have a strong personality and we do not allow them to pursue their natural instincts, we will often create a power struggle in which we try to force the person to self-betray in order to comply or avoid trouble. This can set up a child for either learning challenges related to poor attention and motivation, or behaviour labels and interventions.

Please note that children do not develop behaviour problems without adult input.

I have seen children with "behaviour disorders" develop into proud, motivated learners when they were provided with fidget items, dynamic movement and sitting options, and lots of heavy work opportunities that balance and re-set their systems. Just as the human organism is designed to develop in an orderly progression, so is the brain designed to learn and develop. The trick is not to treat a child like a behaviour problem unless you want him/her to be one. If you do not ask the child to self-betray, you will not arouse the stress response system, and you will maintain/develop a positive relationship that will support learning.

While it is that simple, it is not usually as simple as that. No one comes to school as a clean slate, and negative self-esteem and power struggles are often developed in the preschool years. This leads a little off-topic, but please allow me. Truth is, we all get annoyed when we see other people exhibiting traits that we also possess (and are not happy with). For example, if I have a hard time waiting patiently, it might **really** annoy me to see this behaviour in my child. Rather than accepting that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree and trying to understand the reasons for the behaviour, I jump to trying to force the child not to repeat my mistakes. The result is a more willful child who does not respond well to authority, or a child who complies but is dis-engaged from others and from learning. So, when the child gets to school, the job of the teacher is complicated. Add to that an overcrowded classroom, inadequate support, poor training in development and neurology, and the child with differing needs will be seen as a behaviour problem or a child who needs a diagnosis.

Now, allowing children to learn self-regulation and get their needs met can take time and be uncomfortable. It requires a teacher to operate out of her comfort zone and it does not bring in extra support. The truth is that focusing on the negative, labeling behaviours, and seeking diagnoses do bring in extra

support. Teachers have more training in behavioural sciences than development and neurology, so these do not take the teacher out of his/her comfort zone.

I have met teachers who thought that allowing movement, fidgets, and other sensory strategies represented chaos and resulted in feelings of anxiety and stress. In truth, all change is best managed in small and gradual steps. Believe me, my heart goes out to teachers! While I'd love to try it, I can imagine that being one adult trying to lead a mob/class of kids can be very intimidating.

I have been able to gently guide some few teachers into broadening their thinking and incorporating sensory strategies into their classrooms. This has taken years of relationship building, which is even slower with the consultative model in our BC schools. When a teacher tries one simple strategy and finds it to work, this can open the door to a new understanding. The teacher may see that neurology and sensory processing are relevant fields to teaching, and this may open the door to new ideas, new strategies, a new tolerance, and a new way of leading classrooms.

There has been a big push to understand and promote self-regulation in our schools, and this has had a positive effect. The emphasis has, however, been on 'third order' or 'cognitive self regulation' (more on this next month). The fact is that "Stage 3 Self Regulation requires an intact frontal lobe and a balanced stress response system supporting positive neurotransmitters. While a worthy goal, this requires a strong brain, a positive relationship, and patient and loving scaffolding. If we better understood and supported Stages 1 and 2 Self Regulation, we would set the stage for the natural development of Stage 3, understanding that the frontal lobe is not fully developed until the mid 20's.

In my workshops, I try to teach about the 3 stages of Self Regulation. I also try to teach adults about the continuum of sensory processing and how variable this is. I try to help adults to understand their own sensory processing styles, and why they engage in the sensory-driven behaviours that they do. This understanding opens the door to accepting what we see in our developing young ones, and prevents us from seeing their differences as behaviours or challenges to authority. This, then, allows one to stretch one's limit and try strategies that are new and different.

Sometimes, we can just watch what the bodies of young ones do when they are stressed or dysregulated, and this is truly educational as well. Countless times I have seen K or Grade 1 teachers look out at their wiggly group of kids, stop the lesson, and take a break to do "head, shoulders, knees, and toes" before resuming the lesson with no threats or negative behaviours.

I watched a video where a mom scolded her daughter for leaving the dinner table and running to the back yard to use the trampoline. The daughter told her mom that what she really wanted to do was reach over and punch her brother, and she thought that running outside and "jumping out" her negative energy was a better idea. In this context, the mother was able to support her daughter's development.

Many learners experience "Low Registration" and "High Threshold" during school. This is especially true of learners with different needs, and male learners. The school environment (as well as others) is a little too rich in language, a little too poor in touch, movement, heavy work (or lack of).

When your student/child shows poor posture, weak muscle tone, poor coordination, weak attention, decreased verbal output or language skills, and an overall lack of engagement/motivation, DON'T LOSE IT, DON'T SCOLD, DON'T FEEL ANGRY. Encourage SENSORY STRATEGIES! Have a movement break, give an Altoid, Listerine strip, ice cube, or celery stick (No Red Bull, please!), do chair push ups, jumping jacks, Brain Gym™, etc. Hand out fidgets or lacing cards, or take 5 minutes for a MindUp™ break. Give praise, encouragement and love, to increase positive neurotransmitters, and then get back to work.

Your students/kids will be refreshed and renewed, and you will have taken steps to build the positive relationships that you sought out when you chose to be a teacher or a parent. SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT and you will not need to control or blame behaviour!