

Pelham NH Special Education Preschool

Sensory Connection Program Workshop

Pelham, NH

January 23, 2012

The Sensory Connection to Helping Preschoolers with Special Needs

This workshop focused on sensory interventions and self-regulation strategies applicable to preschoolers with special needs. The recently developed SCP *Tool Time Activity Protocol* and Handouts were introduced. During a practice lab, participants paired up and used these handouts along with pictures of helpful coping strategies to develop a “What Helps? Poster” based on a case example of a challenging student. A mock Sense-ability Group, with activities adjusted for preschoolers, was used to demonstrate the power of a well orchestrated group process which facilitates positive peer interactions and offers multiple opportunities for students to experience success. In order to learn to appreciate the information provided by the *Sensory Profile*, the participants had fun determining their own sensory styles as they learned about the proclivities of being a Bystander, Seeker, Sensory, or Avoider.



Participant Feedback: *“Excellent Workshop - multitude of ideas from the sensory perspective - easy to implement and all ideas are affordable - which is a concern today.”*

The Sensory Connection Program is applicable for a wide range of ages from pre-school to geriatrics. Although concentrated on the adult population where sensory interventions are not used as frequently, the activities and self-regulation strategies of the SCP are equally as useful for young children including preschoolers. The program is especially pertinent to children with special needs.

The following aspects of the Sensory Connection Program were featured at the Pelham Workshop:

Learning Background Information on the Senses

Background information on the senses provides a backdrop helping professionals to understand the power of the senses and the ways we use them to facilitate self-regulation, comfort and function. Many sensory activities, such as the use of music for example, are used intuitively in the preschool setting. In the workshop participants learned how playing musical instruments, humming and singing help to facilitate the social engagement system described by Stephen Porges and engages the suck-swallow-breathe synchrony described by Susan Frick. A deeper understanding of sensory activities helps professionals to use them more effectively.

Discovering Sensory Preferences and New Sensory Input Ideas

In the workshop participants had an opportunity to experience a wide variety of sensory activities including weighted animals, mouth tools, vibrating items, massage tools, spandex items for deep pressure touch, and aromatherapy samples. Ideas included many easy to make tools and suggestions for inexpensive alternatives for popular tools. Throughout the workshop participants practiced many sensory rich activities that do not require equipment such as deep breathing, foot flexes, full body joint compression, slap and clap routines, chair push-ups and the kneel-stand position.

Understanding How to Maximize Function for Special Needs Students

Workshop ideas presented:

- Planning for “quiet time” breaks for re-charging
- Taking time to modulate
- Using sensory activities for transitions
- Planning for “Strong Sensory Input Breaks”

Learning About Tool Time and the Fanny Packer



In this workshop newly developed materials were introduced to help occupational therapists and teachers develop tool kits for individuals or classrooms. Handouts included a *Tool Time Protocol* outlining steps from prioritizing problematic situations to fostering independent use of tools along with a handout listing various tools entitled *Tool Box Items for Tool Time*. A related handout, developed for parents as well as teachers, describes situations needing calming and alerting with suggestions for popular tools for students to keep in their individual fanny pack.

Discovering “What Helps”

In a case study lab participants paired up to identify helpful strategies for problematic situations by creating a “*What Helps Poster*” for a challenging student. Participants cut out small pictures of helpful sensory input for times when the student is angry, scared, sad or overwhelmed. The “*What Helps Poster*” Activity is available as a free activity on the Sensory Connection Program Website.



Learning About Crisis Intervention for Preschoolers

Small children, especially those with special needs, have times of crisis or meltdowns. SCP activities include identifying triggers, warning signs, and aversive stimuli along with helpful strategies that can be combined in a safety plan. This plan can be used during school time and also shared with parents. Participants in the workshop discussed sharing information and handouts with parents to assure follow-through with helpful strategies and plans.

Participating in the Sense-ability Group

The six stage *Sense-ability Group* is the hallmark of the Sensory Connection Program and is featured and described in detail in the *Sensory Connection Program: Activities for Mental Health Treatment* books. Participants in the Pelham workshop had the opportunity to experience firsthand the magic of this group and the way the group process helps to foster social engagement. The group can be easily adapted to the pre-school setting. Most stages need minimal adaptation. The Learning Stage activities in the books are geared more towards mental health but any skill building activities can be substituted from learning the alphabet to counting or learning colors. A handout of *Learning Activities for Young Children* was included in the handout package and it will also be posted on the Sensory Connection Program Website free activity page.



Resources for Sensory Approaches in the Preschool Setting

During the workshop the following resources were recommended for understanding sensory systems and for ideas and approaches using sensory input that are particularly pertinent to preschool age children:

Brack, J.C. (2004). *Learn to move, move to learn!* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company

Williams, M. & Shellenberger, S. (1996). *“How does your engine run?”: A leaders guide to the Alert Program for self regulation.* Albuquerque, NM: Therapy Works, Inc.

Dunn, W. (2007). *Living sensorially: Understanding your senses.* Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

