

AUTISM AWARENESS



Creating a Sensory Integration Gym in your Home

By allowing them to be actively involved and explore activities that provide sensory experiences most beneficial to them, children become more mature and efficient at organizing sensory information.

BY HOPE ARVANITIS

If your child has been identified with sensory integration issues, or has difficulty with sensory processing, professionals recommend creating a sensory integration home gym to provide a fun, safe and motivating environment for movement and exploration. Sensory integration gyms offer new experiences and adventure for children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and help them attain goals in the areas of strength, sensory processing, movement, self-care skills, behavior modulation, language experiences, attention/safety skills and social interactions. Before we review ways to create a sensory home gym, let's learn more about SPD.

SPD is a neurological disorder resulting from the brain's inability to integrate certain information received from the body's five basic sensory systems. These sensory systems are responsible for detecting sounds, smell, tastes, sights, temperatures, pain and the position and movements of the body. The brain then forms a combined picture of this information in order for the body to make sense of its surroundings and appropriately react to them. SPD is characterized by increased or decreased sensitivity to stimuli. Individuals with SPD often have a decreased ability to organize sensory information as it comes in through the senses. SPD is considered the "invisible disability" because it is so often undiagnosed or misdiagnosed.

Typically detected in young children, the exact cause of SPD is not known. "It is very unfortunate that there is not enough awareness of this neurological disorder, even in the medical community," said Monmouth County, NJ pediatrician Dr. Hector Iglesias, whose grandson was diagnosed with SPD. "Individuals diagnosed with SPD have a problem integrating the sensory input accurately. As a result, they have a tendency to be easily distracted. Compounding the problem, they are clumsy with delayed motor skills."

While research indicates that sensory integrative problems are found in up to 70% of children who are considered learning disabled by schools, the problems of sensory integration are not confined to children with learning disabilities. SPD transfers through all age groups, as well as intellectual levels and socioeconomic groups. Children with autism and other developmental disabilities often have sensory integration disorder, but it also can be associated with brain injury, learning disorders, premature birth and other disabilities. Children with SPD cannot properly process sensory stimulation from the outside world.

Some signs of SPD include:

- *oversensitivity to touch, movement, sights or sounds*
- *underreactivity to touch, movement, sights or sounds*
- *a tendency to be easily distracted*
- *social and/or emotional problems*

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- activity level that is unusually high or unusually low
- physical clumsiness or apparent carelessness
- impulsivity, lack of self-control
- difficulty in making transitions from one situation to another
- inability to unwind or calm self
- poor self concept
- delays in speech, language or motor skills
- delays in academic achievement

Sensory integration therapy is often recommended for children with SPD. A health professional, often an occupational or physical therapist (OT/PT), will evaluate your child by observing his or her responses

to sensory stimulation, posture, balance, coordination, and eye movements. While many youngsters have a few of the aforementioned symptoms, a health professional looks for a pattern of behavior when diagnosing SPD. Therapy focuses on activities that challenge the child with sensory input. The therapist then helps the child respond appropriately to this sensory stimulus. Therapy might include applying deep touch pressure to a child's skin with the goal of allowing him or her to become more used to, and process, being touched. Also, play, such as tug-of-war or with heavy objects, such as a medicine ball, can help increase a child's awareness of his or her own body in space and how it relates to other people.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT TO EXPLORE

The goal of a sensory home gym is to craft a safe environment where children diagnosed with SPD can learn to explore and interpret sensations. These gyms provide opportunities for children to participate in a variety of sensory experiences within a comfortable and safe place. Sensory opportunities are provided at a "just right" level to enable the child to engage and explore sensations and successfully develop appropriate adaptive responses, ultimately building motor and social abilities.

Sensory rooms vary by purpose, but the main concept of any sensory room is to stimulate the senses in some format. They provide

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

Custom programs can help children with SPD register and combine sensory information to meet daily challenges

stimulating and/or calming environments when needed, and can easily be adapted to suit various needs. Although sensory rooms can cost thousands of dollars, it is possible to create one in your home or school for a fraction of that cost. The home gym typically is a large room containing items that might include a mini trampoline, therapy ball, squeeze toys, swings, bean bag chairs, suspended equipment, balls and mats where individualized multisensory experiences afford an array of new challenges in which a child can learn increasingly complex tasks. By identifying any underlying problems within specific sensory systems, families, with the help of professionals, can customize a program that helps children with SPD register and combine sensory information to successfully meet daily challenges.

Motor skills training methods that normally consist of adaptive physical education, movement education and gymnastics are often used by occupational and physical therapists. While these are important skills to hone, the sensory integrative approach is vital to treating SPD. The sensory integrative approach is guided by one important aspect—the child's motivation in the selection of activities. By allowing them to be actively involved and explore activities that provide sensory experiences most beneficial to them, children become more mature and efficient at organizing sensory information.

THE ROLE OF THE OT

Occupational therapists play an important role in the conventional treatment of SPD. By providing sensory integration therapy, OTs supply the vital sensory input and experiences that children with SPD need to learn and grow. Before creating a sensory integration home gym, experts advise families to consult a professional well-versed in SPD and sensory processing.

Typically, it's an area in which occupational therapists (OT) with experience can be of significant assistance.

"For the home gym to be appropriate and successful, the child should first be assessed



PHOTO PROVIDED BY FLAGHOUSE

by the OT to determine his or her skill levels, interests and sensory processing abilities and patterns,” said Carole Soricelli, MS, OTR, director of Trinitas Children’s Therapy Services in Springfield, NJ. “What types of sensations does the child seek? Which ones does the child avoid? How do these behaviors impact family activities, roles and routines? After the evaluation is completed, the therapist should work with the family to determine long- and short-term goals for the child.”

Soricelli noted that other factors to consider when creating a home sensory gym are the family’s budget, safety issues, providing graded opportunities and creating a space that incorporates the concept of universal design to the extent possible. “The more typical a gym is, the more likely the child’s siblings and/or peers will want to share it, thereby creating new opportunities for social engagement and growth,” Soricelli said. “Items that are universal are more easily made or purchased.” It’s fairly simple to find products to turn one of your rooms into a sensory room for your children. Many items can be found at garage sales, dollar stores or purchased from vendors including FlagHouse.

“Giving a child a safe environment where he or she is allowed to play and explore is crucial for development,” Soricelli added. “For children with sensory issues, sensations that they experience through play are not always correctly interpreted. While some children may experience fear of certain sensations, others may seem to crave more.”

INTEGRAL TO WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Sensory integration home gyms are integral to working with children with autism. “It appears that a high percentage of children with autism have sensory issues,” said Jami Hughes, senior OTR at Trinitas Children’s Therapy Services. “Some children can hold themselves together during

school and need an outlet when they get home. The sensory gym can provide a place where they can unwind and transition to the home activities, such as doing homework, eating dinner and engaging in after-school activities. If problem behaviors are related to sensory issues, a home gym can improve a child’s behavior. If it’s available to them when they become overly stimulated, it provides a place to which they can retreat in order to get back to a more balanced

state. An OT can consult with the family on an ongoing basis as to what is working and what is not. Changes can include altering the particular activity, duration and time of day.”

Many parents, including Bloomfield, NJ residents Mia and Mike Zurich, discover that a home gym is highly beneficial for children with

SPD. Their five-year-old daughter, Neve, was diagnosed with High Functioning Autistic Spectrum Disorder. “Your best guide is watching their behavior,” said Neve’s mother, Mia. “Neve is happiest after certain physical activity. We noticed that after time at gymnastics class, swim class or the park she was better able to pay attention, eat and stay on task. We noticed that she seemed to improve her behavior and tolerance level. We took note of her activities, particularly swinging, climbing, jumping and hanging. We also noted her putting blankets around herself or going under them, finding ways to cocoon herself. Observing her behavior to fulfill her own needs were our cues to what we needed to provide for her in our home.”

The Zurichs first worked with an OT to develop appropriate activities to address particular issues. “We spoke with Neve’s OT as well as many professionals and paraprofessionals who work with her on a daily basis to assist us in deciding what to purchase,” Mia said. “They assisted us in narrowing down her specific needs. We then began building our home gym slowly, adding pieces at a time when our daughter began showing signs of needing certain types of input or stimulation. Each item that is added sometimes takes Neve a bit of

time to respond to, but typically, most additions are positive and provide her with a new way to ease her symptoms. To us that means everything. It means a happier, more willing child and that allows us to keep opening doors for her.”

The Zurichs first placed a trampoline in a vacant room and soon thereafter, a pull-up bar in one of the doorways. “We next added a therapy ball, a bean bag chair and a balance beam,” Mia said. “We know this is her favorite go-to spot to feel calm and relaxed. The home gym either grounds her or reduces unwanted stimulation that she clearly battles daily. Our experience in meeting these needs for her has been as important as perhaps a most primal need such as hunger. I equate it to having a hungry, tired and cranky child who, after having a small meal, can return to her normal sweet self in just moments. There will always be trial and error in developing techniques and systems that work for your child. They change constantly so watching out for their reactions or behaviors are keys to success. You have to follow their cues.”

By providing treatment at an early age, the SPD may be successfully managed. The ultimate goal is for the individual to be better able to interact with his or her environment in a more successful and adaptive way. “Having our daughter happy and able to engage is the main advantage of having the home gym,” said Mia. “The most important aspect of the gym is having tools at your fingertips to get us through a challenging moment. A home gym gives you the tools you need to provide your child with her innermost physical and emotional needs,” Mia said. “Isn’t that what every parent wants for their child?”

Dr. Iglesias suggests that parents wishing to become better educated about SPD read *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*, by Carol Stock Kranowitz, M.A., a pre-school teacher. The newly revised edition features information from recent research on motor skill problems, vision and hearing deficits, ADHA, autism and other related disorders. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Hope Arvanitis is a journalist living at the Jersey shore.

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