

Dynamic Environments for Persons with Developmental Disability

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People with severe developmental disabilities are often considered the most challenging group of people with which to work. This article introduces a way to incorporate individuals with developmental disabilities into integrated settings and therapeutic intervention programs. It is an article based on personal experience and includes some, but certainly not all, of the research that supports the use of these techniques.

Throughout the article, the pronoun "we" is used when referring to people with special needs. First, regardless of ability, people have the same basic needs. Second, people have the same feelings although they may be expressed in an exaggerated intensity when coupled with sensory deficits and motor impairments.

This combination creates a challenge for therapists when designing therapeutic programs for people with developmental disabilities, for we

are sometimes faced with severe behavior problems and little or no response to activities that excite and motivate other individuals. In addition, since we have not had to explore alternative learning styles for ourselves, the most effective methods are the least understood and under utilized.

To assist in designing programs, we introduce information about brain development, bonding, learning styles, structured sensory activity and the importance of process. This is a brief overview and more information can be found in the references listed at the end of the article.

First, the most primitive part of the brain, the brain stem, is the first to develop and responds directly to touch, movement, sound and taste. The nerves that carry these messages to the brain are also the first to become myelinated, insulated and functional in an individual. There-



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fore, when we want to develop a rapport with a person who has a severe developmental disability, we are more effective when we utilize these channels of communication consistently, in numerous ways and in a number of different environments. Second, we often find that individuals with severe developmental disabilities do not bond with others. This is demonstrated by self abusive behavior, screaming, throwing objects and attacking others. In addition, their learning style is such that when they do become involved with the material and bond with the instructor, they generalize and retain information rather than becoming preoccupied with interfering behaviors. Therefore, our first goal is to teach bonding, for it is through bonding with others that we feel secure, safe and can accept, rather than shield ourselves from, new experiences.

John McGee (1987:16), a proponent of bonding, stresses in the book, *Gentle Teaching*, that people with mental retardation need bonding more than anyone else and describes how to reduce maladapted behaviors by teaching individuals with severe disabilities to accept human reward. Myers-Briggs theory about learning styles complements John McGee's belief in bonding. In *People Types and Tiger Stripes*, Gordon Lawrence discusses Myers-Briggs theory and how it applies to learning. Because of the way people learn, especially those with developmental disabilities, we can determine that their learning style is Sensing Feeling. Sensing, in Myers-Briggs theory, is the term used for perception of the observable by way of the senses, not insight (Lawrence, 1979:7). Feeling is the term used to describe the judgement process. In other words, feelers make judgements based on feelings, not logic. This has important implications. As therapists it helps us determine what teaching methods are effective.

Third, the use of structured sensory activities, rather than sensory bombardment, facilitates learning. A structured sensory activity is defined as a series of connected experiences. These activities can be conducted throughout the year and should occur in several different environments. Temple Grandin, a recovered Autistic, shares with us her own personal account in support for sensory activity on the Oprah Winfrey Show, January 10, 1989 (Templeton, 1989:11). Temple states:

You can't let these kids withdraw. You've got to pull them out of it. Now the reason that children withdraw is because there are sensory problems. Loud noises just hurt my ears. When a loud noise goes off, I put my hands over my ears. It hurt. People touched me. It was like a tidal wave of stimulation. You know? My ears were like an open mike just taking in everything. I couldn't modulate stimulations. So you've got to work on these kids and pull them out, and there's a lot of sensory activities that can be done that are really helpful.

Structured sensory activity also provides varied experiences about the same subject. About fixations Ms. Grandin states:

Now when I got into high school, instead of - you know, some of the psychologists wanted to stomp out fixations, but that's the worst thing you can do. If a child is interested in airplanes, well, then you need to read books about airplanes. Do maps about airplanes and broaden out that interest. So instead of just being a narrow thing like multiplying numbers, (referring to Dustin Hoffman in "Rainman") it becomes something that can be useful in a job ... "

For instance, we can apply these principles to activities surrounding apples. In the winter, we hike through the snow to look at an apple tree, feel the bark, break a branch and seek rotten apples. In the spring we walk to a tree and see the buds, the blossoms, touch the petals and press the petals in a book. In the summer we watch apples form, eat a green apple, cut an apple. In the fall, we ride the tractor to the orchard and pick apples from the tree or off the ground, cut apples, cook them, add spices, make sauce, pies, cakes, cookies, cider and breads. We plan an Apple Fest, apple bake sale or Halloween Party where we serve homemade apple products. The possibilities are endless.

Structured sensory activities allow for process and people learn when they are involved in a series of activities or parts of an activity. Process, by its very nature, involves a series of steps that provides continual feedback and allows the nervous system time to assimilate information. It may not be the most expedient method in the short run, but it is essential if we are to assist people to become confident and competent members of the community.

With today's emphasis on instant meals and microwaves it is difficult to understand the importance of process. Should someone spend time making things from scratch when it is more efficient to teach someone to use a microwave? NO! In her work, Mary McCracken discovered that it was important to teach emotionally disturbed children more, rather than less. This is true of all people with disabilities for learning is therapeutic. It allows one to feel comfortable in a number of different situations, increasing an individual's self confidence and raising his/her comfort zone in a greater variety of situations.

Learning is fun and cooperative when we share the process. First, choose a medium with which you feel comfortable. For some it lies in

music, weaving, bread making, dance, outdoor education or science. While developing activities, incorporate numerous types of materials to stimulate different parts of the brain, so if one area of the brain is damaged another will respond.

Second, establish an environment that is fun and cooperative. We choose to learn and retain information and this applies to people with developmental disabilities. And, as sensing-feeling learners, they are acutely aware of how we communicate our knowledge. When we communicate through our body movements, facial expressions, eyes, voice and hands we share our enthusiasm. When we are responsive to the needs of our students we reduce the incidence of inappropriate behaviors, thus facilitating the learning process.

Third, start the activity by centering the energy. Forming a circle provides a focal point, opportunities for touch and allows people to model each other. Open the activity by greeting everyone, telling them how glad you are to see them and explaining why they are gathered together. Don't be alarmed if you need to stop after 30 seconds. The organizational phase is always difficult and it is more effective to maintain their interest than finish your introduction.

Follow with an activity that includes participation by everyone, preferably doing the same thing. This gives people a sense of unity. Then, work with individuals separately or on a project. Just before concluding, bring everyone together with a closing activity.

If, at any point in time, you see an occurrence of disorganized behavior, bring people together and assist them to support each other. How? Take a closer look at the formation of a football huddle, observe church groups, or ask a Girl Scout about the Friendship Circle. These are just three techniques that develop a sense

of community and cooperation. Choose the method that works for you and your clients. Connecting with others, unity and harmony are important components for individuals with developmental disabilities. Since they can not create it themselves we need to structure the environment to provide them with community through consistency and establishing support with other members of the group.

Fifth, listen to the clients' needs. They tell us how to share our skills, whether they prefer light or firm touch, when we can enter their space or when its best to retreat and try again. Sixth, do not be afraid to make a mistake or risk failure. Sometimes we have learned the proper technique but more often we need to rely on the application of general principles, our intuition or trying something different because our present strategy is ineffective.

The results we have when we use these techniques are consistent. People realize that others exist, they identify themselves as part of a group, reach out to each other and anticipate the activity. In an integrated setting, when the entire group is organized as a cooperative unit, the more able participants become assistants and facilitate the growth of the others. In addition, it is difficult to be disruptive when others are engrossed in a cooperative activity. For, when surrounded by positive energy. we are affected by it and vice versa.

In conclusion, it *is not what we do but how we do what we do!* Often we are so concerned with the right technique, amount of time and the appropriate audience that we forget to listen to our own experience and natural sense of timing. When we listen, first to ourselves and then to our audience, our programs become more effective. Try different approaches - if one doesn't work try another.

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