

101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism, Asperger's, and Sensory Processing Disorders

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INTRODUCTION

I WAS FIVE, almost six years old, when I first understood the power of play. My mother had just passed away, and I felt lost. My father found an older couple to babysit my sister and me after school so he could work. One of the other children they babysat was a little girl about my age. She had developmental disabilities and did not speak very much. She was standing and waiting in the driveway almost every day when the school bus dropped me off at the babysitter's house. I remember not knowing what to say to her or even how to act, but looking forward to seeing her there waiting.

One day when I got off the bus, she was holding a ball. She threw the ball toward me, and it dropped to the ground. I did not know what to say to her, but I knew what to do with a ball. I put my books on the grass, picked up the ball, and threw it back to her. She laughed and then moved her arms forward to try to catch it. The ball landed on the grass again. She picked it up and threw it back at me. I caught the ball and returned her laugh. Her willingness

to engage me in a game of catch started a connection that was a childhood lifeline for me.

Many years later when I became an occupational therapist, I thought of Sheila and how powerful the act of participating in a simple game of catch was to my life. It wasn't until I began my career that I could reflect on how powerful it was to *her* life also.

In my early career, I returned to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin where I participated in a leadership training program at the Waisman Center in Madison. As part of that program, I was assigned to a family who had a little boy with neurological difficulties. I was assigned to the family not as a therapist but rather as another family member. I ate dinner with them from time to time, went to the park with them, was there at bedtime, and even babysat on some occasions. By being with this little boy and his family during everyday activities, I could see how sensory processing and communication difficulties impacted his daily life and how things that were enticing and fun for other children were a reason for fear and avoidance to him. But I also saw firsthand how his parents used sensory strategies, in the form of play, to help him engage with the people in his life. With both of these memories, the big "Aha" for me is the power that play has to teach, develop, and connect children to their world.

I cannot say enough about interactive, physical play as a basis for teaching children skills that are fundamental to their physical and social world and to their cognitive capabilities. The dynamic nature of play spurs nervous system development by connecting the brain and the body. In addition to my own experience, research has shown that there is no substitute for play for promoting learning at the nervous system level, as well as for teaching more refined language, social, and cognitive concepts. During play, children are provided the opportunity to use their bodies to manipulate objects in their physical world, which is the only way to truly understand

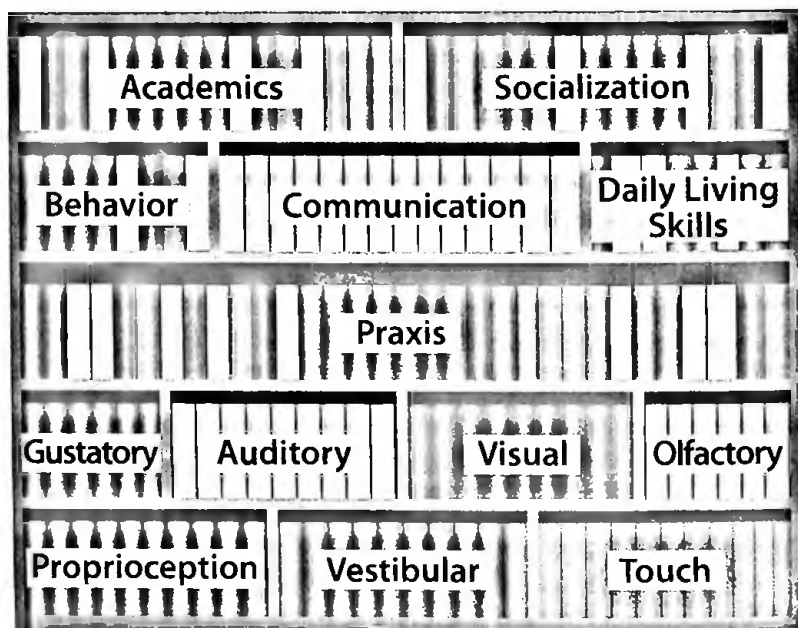
the physical and spatial properties of their world. Because of play's interactive nature, it sets the perfect stage for teaching language concepts and reinforcing an intuitive understanding of others.

As a pediatric occupational therapist, I have spent the last two decades working with children who have neurological difficulties. When working with these children, the primary goal of my therapy is the acquisition of new skills (sensory, motor, social, and academic). I realized many years ago that a child's motivation to participate in an activity is one of the most important factors in determining successful engagement. Successful engagement is the first step to learning. It is with this idea in mind that I created games or adapted activities that focus on particular skills *and* are highly enjoyable to children. I have been compiling dozens of games and activities over the years, many of which are in this book.

The activities and games in this book are organized to reflect a model of child development called the Brain Library™. I developed this model as a way to explain to parents and educators how important our early experiences are for future academic and social success. The experiences that we engage in during our early years of life introduce, develop, and refine skills that our brains and bodies will need to access throughout our lives. Books are metaphors for experiences. Each of our experiences, beginning in utero, in a sense writes books into our Brain Library.

In the early years, the majority of our experiences are sensorimotor. These experiences write books that build the foundation of our Brain Library. The books of the Brain Library are organized into three main sections: the foundation section, the integrated skills section, and the capabilities section. The *foundation section* houses our basic senses: vestibular (balance and motion), proprioceptive (body position), tactile (touch), visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), gustatory (taste), and olfactory (smell). The *integrated*

The Brain Library™



Skills section contains the skills that allow us to interact and thrive as human beings: praxis (ability to plan movement), which takes up an entire shelf; daily living skills; behavior; and communication. The *capabilities category* includes the key factors to success in our modern world: social intelligence and cognitive intelligence. Please note that you'll find more detailed definitions of these and other terms in the glossary at the end of the book.

Your child's brain is in a constant state of gathering, storing, and retrieving information while he is developing. The stored books are used as references to give a context for when your child is presented with a new activity, as well as to provide a framework for how to navigate the current situation. This process of gathering,

categorizing, and storing new information in the Brain Library for later referencing is the basis for learning.

As you go through the activities in this book, keep in mind that they are designed to accomplish three goals simultaneously: first is to reference and develop sensory systems, second is to introduce learning concepts, and third is to infuse language into all aspects of your child's life. Many children with neurological difficulties such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Asperger's syndrome, and sensory processing disorder process information in a way that impedes them from readily seeking out experiences that lead to exploration about themselves and the physical environment surrounding them. It is my belief that as parents, educators, and therapists, we must set up the physical world (activities) in such a way as to entice engagement and experiences that will write and store books in children's Brain Libraries for their future success.

101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism, Asperger's, and Sensory Processing Disorders includes games and activities that incorporate strategies proven to be effective in helping children apply meaning to novel and play situations. By giving children tools to participate and "have fun" in a new game or activity, you are laying the groundwork to increase their engagement in the world around them.

Children with neurological difficulties often do not track to the established developmental-age charts. When deciding which activities will best promote your child's development, it is important to remember that your child's skill level may be different from his or her chronological age. With that said, keep two very important things in mind when playing with your child. First, patience is more than a virtue—it is a necessity. Second, if your child is having difficulty understanding the game or has sensory fears that are preventing him or her from completely engaging, it is important

THE *HOW* OF ENGAGEMENT

IT IS OFTEN said that play is work for children with neurological difficulties, especially autism, Asperger's syndrome, and sensory processing disorder. This is understandable since many children with a neurological challenges struggle with expressive and receptive language skills, motor planning, as well as sensory processing. These struggles ultimately impact the ability of these children to initiate and engage in free play. The challenge is compounded because they have difficulty learning by watching others—another key element of play. Also, social interaction, in and of itself, is not highly motivating for many of these children, especially children with autism or Asperger's, so they are not naturally inclined to seek out other children to play with. However, reports from parents, educators, and therapists, as well as my own experience show that when these children are taught effective ways to

to adapt the game so that you alleviate fears and increase engagement. For example, if the game requires a swing and your child is afraid, lower the swing a bit so she can keep her feet on the ground and rock back and forth. It is important to remember that your child may not understand all the components of an activity but may be successful in one component of the activity. Capitalize on that, keep reinforcing the other parts of the activity, and it will gradually increase your child's understanding of the entire activity.

Today, he'll stack one block upon another—eyes, fingers, nerves, and muscles working together—never realizing that with this simple task, he's laying the foundation for all those tomorrows when he'll spell his name, compose his first story, write his first love letter, and, before you know it, pen a bestselling novel and then, of course, win the Nobel Prize.

—Pediatric Occupational Therapy Association

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engage with objects and people to expand their sensory, motor, language, and social skills, they have fun!

ASSUME A CONNECTION

Increasing a child's engagement in the world around him or her is the main objective of the games and activities in this book. Getting and holding the interest of some children may seem futile at times. The challenge when playing with and teaching children with neurological difficulties is that we, caretakers and educators, judge a child's interest based on the feedback he or she gives us. However, children with autism, Asperger's, or sensory processing disorder may not give typical feedback, even as infants. We may find ourselves decreasing or changing our engagement level, ultimately giving the child less input or fewer experiences. Often our motivation is to protect our children or simply not to overstimulate them, but instead we limit their opportunities to learn how to connect.

As a therapist, I see that children with neurological difficulties are exposed to fewer sensorimotor and language experiences compared to typically developing children, often because these children don't give feedback that shows they are interested in playing or being spoken to. Some may even give negative feedback to parenting input, such as arching away when we hold them, averting eye contact, not watching the caretaker with their eyes, as well as having adverse reactions to certain sensory stimulation, such as movement or touch. When a young child doesn't appear to register what we say or do, or appears to register it in a negative or fearful way, the natural reaction is to pull back and give less. We may not even realize we are doing this. It is simply a natural response that occurs during all human interactions.

When we smile at or talk to babies, they smile back or even laugh and coo; then we smile and coo back, responding to the baby's positive feedback. When that doesn't happen, we start doing it less because we are not getting the expected feedback. Interaction is reciprocal, so when someone talks less to us, we also tend to talk to that person less. When parents put their child on a swing at the playground and the child screams, most parents take the child off the swing—and it may be a while before the parents try to put the child back on the swing. If the parent gets the same reaction on the next attempt, that parent may never try the swing again. The same applies for other experiences, such as touching certain textures, listening to certain types of music, or eating different types of foods that your child may react to negatively. Soon the lack of response or the negative response changes our behavior as adults because we intuitively pull back on input that is not garnering positive responses from the child. In essence, we as caretakers become trained by the child to verbally interact less or even guard the child from sensorimotor input the child has reacted to adversely.

When we interact with any children, including children with neurological difficulties, we have to assume that they are connecting to us and that they are getting something from the interaction *even if it doesn't seem as if they are*. We cannot judge their level of interest strictly by the feedback they give; otherwise we are prone to give less. We need to be careful not to allow ourselves to give less, as these children need more, not less, input. As you participate with your child in the activities in this book, assume that the child's nervous system is enriched by the experience. Assume that you are connecting to your child and he or she is connecting to you, even if it doesn't seem like it. Remember, for children with neurological difficulties to store and access information, they need higher levels of input infused in many different ways. The key is ever-increasing engagement of your child.

BABY STEPS

If an activity is perceived as too complicated or too long, many children will not engage. To be motivated, they need to perceive activities as being “fun” because the children who don’t have a clear picture of where to begin and where the activity is heading will be reluctant to participate. This is true for neurologically typical children as well as for children with neurological difficulties. Therefore, one of the keys when teaching a child a new game or activity is to break the activity into smaller parts and demonstrate one part of the activity exclusive to the other parts. Once a child understands and has mastered one part, you can start adding more parts to the activity. You are stringing together mastered tasks that if done sequentially complete a whole activity or game. Keep this in mind as you go through the games and exercises in this book; if your child has difficulty understanding the entire “game,” try breaking it down into smaller, more manageable tasks.

MOTOR LEARNING

While you are watching another person perform a physical activity, motor neurons in the brain called *mirror neurons* fire as if you were performing the activity yourself. For example, when you watch somebody throw a baseball, the same motor neurons that fire in that person’s body when throwing the ball fire in your body when you watch him. Studies have shown that individuals with autism do not have the same mirror neuron responses as people who are considered neurotypical. Since many children with neurological difficulties have a difficult time processing movement information or replicating motor actions, having them watch somebody do something may not be enough—you may have to physically guide

your child through a new motor action several times before his or her body “gets it.”

If your child appears not to know how to make his or her body do what you are asking, then your child’s brain may not be able to learn motor tasks by observation only. Physically teach your child by moving his or her body through the new activity while verbally saying what the child’s body is doing. For example, if you are showing a child how to pull himself across the floor on a scooter board, move his arms in an alternating pattern in front of him so his body can feel the motor movement. Coach him the entire time, telling him to pull with his right arm and then with his left arm. Once the child’s body understands how to move to accomplish the action, the child will be able to perform the action independently.

REINFORCERS

Some children are motivated to engage in a new activity simply because it is novel, while other children will shy away from anything new, or even familiar, unless a tangible reinforcer is present. Simply said, some activities are internally motivating (naturally reinforced) for some children, while other activities will require external reinforcers to motivate a child to attempt or engage in the activity. This does not mean that the activity is not fun for the child. It simply means that your child has difficulty *perceiving* the activity as fun or something the child is capable of doing. Once the child is engaged or has some mastery over the activity, the child’s understanding of the activity increases, as does the child’s enjoyment. So the cycle begins: with increased enjoyment comes increased engagement, which begets increased enjoyment.

A reinforcer can be tangible such as a food item or a sensory toy, or it can even be embedded in the activity or game. For example,