



## Closing Circles

### Thinking About Your Child's Health: Considerations for the Child with Special Needs

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It is very important to consider the impact of health and wellness on behavior and developmental progress. Unfortunately, challenges with eating, sleep, or illness are often seen as separate from the developmental issues your child may be facing (i.e.; language, movement, or learning differences). In fact health issues are closely related to developmental growth. In DIR®/Floortime™ we look at the child's overall individual profile, including their physical health and wellness.

Sleep is a profoundly important aspect of health and difficulties with sleep, regardless of the reason, result in the child being tired during the day. A tired child is more irritable, less energetic, and less available for learning. Solutions to sleep problems can be as simple as establishing a consistent sleep routine. Other sleep issues are more complex possibly due to a sensitive regulatory system, reflux, sleep apnea, unrecognized seizure disorder or other medically related disorders. It is crucial that we begin by being sure that every child has enough rest and investigate causes and treatments when sleep is an issue. Parents should discuss their concerns with their pediatrician. They may be referred for a sleep study, or to see a sleep specialist such as a neurologist, a pulmonologist, or an otorhinolaryngologist (ENT). Many disciplines address sleep, and a multi-disciplinary approach may be needed to understand the interaction of biology and psychology.

Another aspect of health to consider is the child's natural rhythm of activity and rest throughout their day. There is a wide variation in how much activity each child needs. Some children crave movement, and need to jump, run, crash and spin, while others need a more gentle approach, with simple walking or swinging. All children need 'recess' or free movement periods built into their day. Is your child getting what they need?

In addition to activity, every child needs rest. How much and how often also depends upon their individual profile. Some children may fatigue more easily due to low muscle tone

and therefore need more frequent and longer rest periods. A child with a chronic illness, sleep difficulties, or undernourished, may also need more rest. Are we able to consider and recognize each child's individual needs and plan a daily program for them with adequate periods of rest? Nutrition plays a big role in a child's ability to focus and learn. Many children with developmental challenges have eating and dietary challenges.

Children with sensory processing differences are often selective eaters. In order to help them increase their repertoire of accepted foods it is important that families receive advice, including consultation with a registered pediatric dietician to ensure that their child is receiving sufficient calories and nutrition. Occupational therapists and speech pathologists with specialized training in feeding can help your child learn to accept more foods, as well as address oral-motor skills for feeding. A team approach, including a mental health component is useful in tailoring support for each child's development and family patterns. It is important that every child has adequate intake of food and fluids throughout the day, including during the day at school. The school nurse may be an advocate in supporting nutrition at school.

Some children experience pain with eating due to gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD). A careful evaluation by a pediatrician or gastroenterologist may help identify this treatable condition. A major impact on eating is bowel movement patterns. Children with autism spectrum disorders often have irregular bowel movements. Some of these children have specific food intolerances or food allergies. A careful evaluation of the eating and bowel movement pattern by a pediatrician, dietician, gastroenterologist, and/or allergist can help evaluate these concerns, as well as other possibilities for discomfort related to the GI tract.

Some children with special needs seem to have a vulnerable immune system, and are prone to frequent and more prolonged illness. Others are very robust. Sometimes illness results in obvious (albeit temporary) setbacks in developmental skills, but for some children there are chronic symptoms, such as nasal congestion, asthma, cough, weakness, vomiting, or frequent otitis.



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It is important not to be complacent about these health issues.

It may be difficult to isolate a cause or treatment, but it is important to evaluate and manage these conditions in partnership with pediatric specialists, as well as to consider their overall impact on behavior. Be sure your pediatrician listens to your concerns.

Particularly challenging for children on the autism spectrum is their inability to recognize and express pain. Some children “under register” pain due to their sensory-arousal profile. Illnesses, such as ear infections or dental pain, are more difficult for a parent to notice and therefore seek medical advice, if the child does not complain. Pain from GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) or other GI discomforts may result in acting out, retreat or seemingly regressive behavior. How often is your child’s aggressive behavior the result of a headache, a stomachache, sore throat or a toothache? It is important to remember that physical discomfort may be “expressed” through behavior. Any sudden and uncharacteristic departure in behavior may warrant a medical check up.

Parents and professionals need to be aware of and vigilant for the possibility of underlying atypical seizures. The incidence of seizures in autism is reported to be 11 % to 33%, while a much higher rate (~60%) have atypical EEG patterns. Seizures may present as a brief staring spell, an outburst of laughter, or a repetitive movement-and as a

result are often difficult to distinguish from other behavior. A high degree of suspicion is necessary in order to trigger a referral to a pediatric neurologist and once evaluated, the diagnosis and best course of treatment may not be clear. Careful collaboration with all therapists who know the child is extremely helpful in monitoring the child and assessing treatment effectiveness. A 24-hour, or sleep EEG is usually necessary to identify subtle seizures. Fortunately, many centers are now able to do this by telemetry, in which the child can go home wearing the monitor.

It is important to consider the health of the child as a connected and integral part of behavior, development and learning, rather than separately. Too often a behavior problem is perceived only as an act for some limited purpose; while closer reflection may lead us to another possibility about what this behavior may be telling us about the child’s physical strength, stamina, or discomfort. Many children with ASD and other developmental disabilities are generally healthy, but as noted they have a greater risk than the rest of the population for special health needs. Educators and therapists play an important role in helping parents to recognize the connection between health, learning and behavior. Parents may have concerns about their child’s health but may have difficulty finding professionals to listen, believe, or consider these issues with them. Let’s all work together to notice the signs of health or distress, and consider how it impacts every interaction.

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