

Web-Based Radio Show

Frequent Questions Regarding Children with Special Needs


Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

October 7, 2004

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you to our web-based Radio Show. Thank you for joining us. Today we're going to focus on questions that come up frequently and ones we haven't been able to get to over the past few months. I would encourage those of you who are listening now – I know some of you listen to the show later because we archive it and this is a hard time for some people to get away from children and other demands of life – but those who are able to listen now, we encourage you to call in. We finally have a new “box” that should be able to successfully get your calls. So, I can give you our telephone number. You can call us at 877-907-8889. Again, the call-in number is 877-907-8889 and it's also listed on the Floortime Foundation website, which is www.floortime.org. So, those who want to call in live, you can call in anytime since today is going to be a question and answer day and you don't have to wait for the second half of the show. Typically we have topics in the first half or first two-thirds and questions in the second part.

Today as we jump into our questions, I want to start off some of the questions that come up rather frequently and then we'll go to some of the more specialized questions. One of the questions that come up very frequently is how to handle self-stimulatory behavior. Frequently, listeners have written in about one or another self-stimulatory patterns, such as staring at a fan; the child wiggling his own fingers and making funny movements with them and staring at them; the child doing some self-stimulatory activity, sometimes moving their bodies against someone else's body or moving it on the floor in a certain way. A lot of parents are concerned about their children's making repetitive sounds, particularly in class or other settings where it may distract other children or the teachers. Often, these can be little clicking sounds with their tongue or other oral motor type sounds and sensations.


The key thing about self-stimulatory activities is for us to all to realize that they often serve for the child a number of purposes. One purpose is the child is often trying to create some sensations in their own bodies that they find either organizing or pleasurable.



So if they're touching something or visually taking in something by staring at a fan or making a certain sound, they're receiving some sensory information from that. They find that sensory information – the sight or the touch or the smells – or their own movement patterns – the feedback they get – because the body produces feedback when it moves and we sense our own movement which is why all of us fidget a little bit – the child experiences that either as organizing or pleasurable. It provides something of use and value to the child in terms of where the child is at that particular point in development. It doesn't mean it will continue to be useful or continue to be interesting to the child or satisfying to the child, and this will get at the bigger issue that I'll come to in just a second. But it does mean that it's providing something temporarily of use to the child.

Now the question is how can we help the child find something better that will be even more organizing and more pleasurable and more satisfying. One of my first teachers in child development was a man named Reginald Lourie, one of the pioneers and fathers of child psychiatry in this country. He had a wonderful saying that I'll never forget: When you want a child to give something up, give him something better. In other words, don't take it away; offer him something better that he can use. To offer a child something better, you have to know what it is the child is deriving from that particular activity or from that particular object. Then we can try to find something better.


So let's say a child is making sounds that are disturbing to the class; that child is seeking sound sensations in his mouth that he finds organizing, pleasurable, or satisfying. The first thing we say is "how do we understand that, what do we think they're using it for?" That's just through observing the child and making your best guess and hunch. Obviously, if it's a verbal child you can ask them and if you ask in a supportive way, not a critical way, you're likely to get an answer. So if you say, "Gee, that looks like a lot of fun. That looks like something you do a lot. You must have a good reason for that." The verbal child may be able to tell you that it feels good or that they're imitating a cartoon figure on television. We see a lot of children who don't have autistic spectrum disorders, but who just have regulatory problems or learning problems or activity control problems or impulse control problems, who will do a lot of these things and they'll be able to talk about it. But if you do it empathetically in terms of the way you approach it and say, "Gee, that looks like something you do a lot of; that must have some special value," just like you were admiring their doing it and you want to know more about it, just like they told a good joke, the child might describe what it is. They might say, again, it's like so-and-so on TV or "This feels good in my mouth, it keeps me paying attention," or "It keeps me from falling asleep," or "It helps me feel alert." I've even heard adults who have unusual patterns say, "It makes me feel alive, it makes me feel like I'm more in the world."



So we all have different ways of using physical sensations and we should all be aware that as adults most of us have our own favorite little self-stimulatory activities, whether it's scratching our head or wiggling our toes while we're talking or fidgeting with our legs or patting our knees or fooling with a pencil, etc. So, we all have our own little ways of keeping our bodies to what we view for ourselves as some optimal level of sensory input, some optimal level of sensation. With children who are not as socially sensitive or aware, they may not do it in a way that's secretive enough. We all have ways that we try to keep hidden or not too obvious and some of us are more successful at that than others, depending on what our needs are and how aware we are of the social world of the moment. Some of us organize our sensory world in terms of calisthenics or sports activities or music or other hobbies that we may select. You could argue that listening to a symphony or going to a museum and looking at beautiful pictures are all parts of ways of keeping your sensory system alive and cooking and ways of achieving a level of satisfaction and self-organization.

So, it's with that degree of empathy and understanding that we want to understand the child. Now with a child who's pre-verbal, who's not able to tell us, we have to observe the child and figure out when does the child do it more, when does the child do it less. For example, if we're interacting with the child and engaging the child and having lots of what we call "circles of communication" where we're rolling a ball back-and-forth, or playing a peek-a-boo game, or exchanging sounds or funny faces, or hiding his favorite toys and he's searching for them, or if we're doing pretend play – if we're doing any of these activities, does the child then make more of his clicking sounds or less? Do they do more of their rubbing motor movements or less of their rubbing motor movements? Do they stare at the fan more or less? Often, we may find that when we have them interacting with us, they do it less. We may find they do it more when they're alone, sometimes we may find they do it more when they're being overwhelmed or overloaded with too much sound, let's say, or when the environment they're in is too rigid and demanding too much of them. Or we may find they do it more when they're aimless or not involved or engaged. But each child may have his own context for doing it more or doing it a little bit less.

So the idea is to observe when it occurs and try to infer from that what meaning it may have for the child. Is it a way of the child filling up his body with sensation when nothing much is going on or is it a way of calming down when he's overloaded or stressed? Careful observation will be very, very helpful. If you give up and say, "Gee, I can't find a pattern here, I can't make any rhyme or reason of it," my advice is don't be so fast to give up. Don't be so fast to give in to that helpless feeling of "I can't figure this out." Just count to 10, take a deep breath, be patient and say, "Let me observe a little bit




more.” If there are two parents in the family, see if Daddy can help or Mommy can help observe – or even a sibling can help, also. Get the teachers involved if the child is doing the pattern at school, or get the therapist involved. And see if all of you together can figure out when this occurs more frequently, and from that you can infer what some of the principles are that keep this cooking.

Once you have that, or even some hypothesis about that, then there are two things that you do in terms of the intervention program. One is you try and offer better ways of achieving that same sensation. So, for example, for a child who’s doing a lot of movements in the mouth, you might get a harmonica or a sort of playful little children’s version of the flute. Using funny straws with circles on them to drink through is good for oral motor practice, too, or playing this ball where you blow a ping-pong ball across the table and you have ping-pong ball races. This obviously would require a child who’s a little more intentional and organized, as opposed to a child who’s more aimless. But try to find games and activities where a child is using his mouth and using those mouth movements. A very good game to play with a child that’s making a lot of sounds is a sound game. If the child can imitate a little bit, you can make up your own little songs without words, just with sounds, So, it could be instead of a random “bop bop tch tch tch tch” sound on the child’s part, it may become an interactive song where it would go “tch tch tch tch tch / bop bop bop bop bop / boop boop boop boop boop - where you experiment with different sounds and different rhythms and you try and help the child get into that activity in a rhythmical way.

The basic, larger principle is try to offer the child experiences which produce the same sort of sensations as the self-stimulatory activity, and work up the developmental ladder in terms of our functional developmental and emotional capacities. So, start off with simply sensory experiences as part of the first stage where we work on sensation and regulation. What we’re doing is we’re now doing the sensation but we’re trying to vary it more, so we’re expanding the world of sensory input, just like we do with a new baby or at the first stage of our intervention program – expand the sights and the sounds. So now we’re expanding the types of sensations in the mouth by making different sounds. We can also offer the child different things to chew on – you know, carrots and celery or different textures of food. We might also expand the child’s sensory world in other ways – different smells, different things to touch.

What we want to do is help the child, though, use these primary sensory experiences, which the child is trying to bring more of into his body, in more of an interactive way. So here, too, we start at the bottom with rhythmic activity – that’s how a new baby relates to the world – with some shared rhythms or back-and-forth movement together. Even before babies are interactive, they’re rhythmically involved. So we can




hold the child and move rhythmically with the child while we make sounds together and try to synchronize our sounds with their sounds. If the child likes to touch things, we can do the same thing with touch – expand the world of touch and texture, and then touch things together and move together as we touch them. For the child who’s looking at things, again – we can kind of look together and then move the object the child is looking at to get rhythmic activities. So if the child is looking at things that spin we can put something that spins on the top of our head and then move it from left to right and back and forth and then get rhythmic movement with the child so we get rhythmic looking together. So, we try to get rhythmic activity.

Then we can move to the second level where we get the child very engaged in that object or that activity with us so there’s a strong affective engagement. Then we move to the third level where there’s back-and-forth, purposeful interaction. Sometimes we call it “reciprocal back-and-forth interaction” where we’re opening and closing circles. So now, we would have the child make a sound and we would make a sound back and the child would make a sound back to us and we would have sound games. But now it’s not just rhythmic, simultaneous use of the same sounds – it’s the back-and-forth communication of sounds in a little back-and-forth game. The child says “goo,” we say, “ga.” The child says, “click-click,” we go “click-click-click-click-click.” We could play copycat games with the child doing copycat rhythms or just interactive games, and do the same thing with different types of touching or different types of looking.

Then we could start going to the fourth level where we get many circles in a row of interaction – again, around that self-stimulatory activity – so now we’re trying to create a problem to be solved. So, for example, if a child likes to touch things we could play a little game where the child has to find their favorite “touchy” surface while not looking and feel around in a basket with lots of objects. That’s a game where the child obviously has to be able to interact at that level, but we can facilitate that around self-stimulatory activity. So now the self-stimulatory activity becomes a motivator for our level four of functional emotional developmental capacities, that is, the ability for complex shared social problem solving, where you and the child are searching together for their favorite object to touch. So, we work up the developmental ladder.

Okay, we’re going to take callers in just a second – we’ve got a couple of calls coming in. If you ask them to hold for just a minute we’ll be able to take their calls.

If we’re lucky we can even make symbolic play around the self-stimulatory activity where we have the dollies staring at the fan together and talking about the fan or we have the dollies making funny sounds together. And then if they really are advanced, we can have the child talk about what it feels like when he plays these activities and is



involved in these self-stimulatory games. Also, the other principle of prevention and intervention is that what we do is we offer the child the opportunity to proactively get involved in these activities that bring more sensation into the body. So, not only do we work up the developmental ladder from rhythmic activity to engagement to back-and-forth reciprocal actions to shared social problem-solving and then to using these self-stimulatory activities in creative play - so now we've got a high level – then, we proactively do it as part of a regular sensory motor workout, which we want to do three or four times a day for 15 or 20 minutes. We try to bring these activities into the sensory and motor workout.

Now, for an older child who's more coordinated this can involve sports activities, this can involve dance activities, or it can just involve obstacle courses and games. Or it can just involve blowing bubbles. It can involve all kinds of fun things – it can involve finger painting! So, now we have socially sanctioned organized activities done proactively that create sensation in the body that the child finds organizing and pleasurable. Then the last step we do – the absolute last step we do for the self-stimulatory kids is we try to help the child – if he's verbal or even if he's not verbal – help his teachers and other adults understand how the child uses it during times of stress or during times of isolation. Obviously we want to reduce those stressful times and times of isolation because we don't want the child overwhelmed with too much noise and too much commotion and we don't want the child isolated where there are long times when he's on his own. So children who aren't yet very interactive and verbal need to be engaged with an adult most of the time. Alone time should be for five or ten minutes here and there when you have no choice because you're cooking or going to the bathroom. There should be someone interacting as much as possible with him most of the time.

So we reduce the isolation, we reduce the stress and overload, and we also show the child how to use some of the more advanced activities, like some of the more organized games that we're doing proactively during these stressful times so if they get overloaded at school, how they can do something that's a little bit more socially appropriate, but achieve the same goal. So they might have some healthy chewing gum to chew on or be able to even excuse themselves to a nurse's station or go to another part of the room where they're not likely to bother someone. Also we like to proactively build into the child's day – often every hour or so – some proactive sensory activity that gives the child proactive sensory input that prevents the child's need for the self-stimulatory activity. So you want to give the child socially appropriate ways to handle the stress when there will be stressful situations. Be proactive and work up the developmental ladder, but

its all starts with understanding how the self-stimulatory activity plays a role in the child's life.

Now, I think we have a call waiting, so let's take our first call.

SG: Hello

Caller: Hi. I talked to you before on the radio show.

SG: Well, great, welcome back.

Caller: Thank you. I have one specific question about my daughter, Alexis. She is two and a half and she is non-verbal. My first question is related to what she likes to do. One thing that she likes to do, which is to smell my hair, she will grab my hair really tight and start smelling it, sometimes lick it. And I've been having trouble stopping her from doing that.

SG: Tell me what you try to do.

Caller: Well, what I've been trying to do is to try to open up her fist and then grab it away. I haven't been able to think of anything else that would stimulate her smelling sensation or something.

SG: And what else do you do with her, in terms of playing with her and your interactions with her? What kind of program is she involved in?

Caller: When I play with her I guess I basically try to do the floortime model – see what she is doing and then try to engage with her doing that. A lot of times she will play with me, but a lot of times when I see her she will just come over behind me and grab my hair.

SG: Now when she's coming over behind you, what are you trying to do usually? In other words, what were you just doing a moment before? Are you playing with her, are you reading a magazine?

Caller: I would be playing with her. I guess mostly when she gets excited she will come up behind me.

SG Oh, so, when she gets excited she'll want to come behind you and pull your hair . . .

Caller: Right.

SG: . . . and then smell your hair.

Caller: Right.

SG: Does she like to pull the hair on her dolly or smell her dolly's hair?

Caller: (laughing) No, she doesn't like that. I did give her a doll and she would just swipe it away. She's never liked dolls. That's the thing.

SG: Have you tried other things that have hair-like textures, you know things like ropes or even getting a wig?

Caller: No, I've thought about that, but I haven't got that yet.

SG: All right. Now, can she do any kind of pretend play? I know she's not verbal.

Caller: She would get those little Lego figures and we have a dollhouse and she will put those figures in the house. That's the extent of it.

SG: And does she copy that? Does she do that spontaneously and creatively?

Caller: She does that spontaneously.

SG: Does she make different sounds like – can you have little babble games with her?

Caller: She babbles quite a bit, but when we try to babble back to her she will stop. That's the other thing – that's my second question, actually. She's not verbal, but we thought we heard her singing the ABC song one time and we thought we heard her singing the "Itsy Bitsy Spider."

SG: That's terrific.

Caller: But that's just one time – we're never able to get her to repeat it.

SG: Is she getting speech therapy?

Caller: She is.

SG: Is she getting a lot of oral motor work in her speech therapy?

Caller: Yes.

SG: Okay, she is. That's good, because you want to do oral motor exercises with her three or four times a day and, obviously, we won't go over the complete DIR program, but she obviously needs a complete DIR program. But here are some ideas about how to use her interest in your hair to get more pretend play and more interaction

and use it proactively: What you might do is get a wig, a real inexpensive wig from the Halloween shop - Halloween is right around the corner so there are plenty of stores that carry these things – so it has the same texture as real hair and you can even put different smells into the wig by just using hairspray or something with an odor to it. See what she likes. Then put the wig on your head . . .

Caller: Right.

SG: . . . and then you can make a little game out of it, like you're playing with her and she's getting excited and you could say, "Are you going to get my hair? Are you going to get my hair?" and look at her and point to your head with the wig on it. Okay?

Caller: Yes.

SG: Okay? And then, don't make it so easy for her. If she starts going behind you, then you run to another part of the room and you can hide. Now she has to find you. Okay?

Caller: Right.

SG: And then you can say, "Where's Mommy? Where's Mommy?" and then you go to another part of the room. So now you're getting lots of circles of communication, right?

Caller: Right, right, right.

SG: And then you can stand up and you can say, "What do you want? Do you want Mommy's hair? Huh-huh-hair?" And see if she'll go "huh, huh" and make the "h" sound, all right?

Caller: Right, that's a good idea.

SG: Okay? So now we're getting some sounds, all right? We may even get the word. If she manages to say "huh" or "hair," then you can bend down and pull the hair and then she'll pull the wig off and you'll say, "Oh! You got all Mommy's hair!"

Caller: Right, right, right.

SG: And she'll be excited and gleeful, jumping around. Okay?

Caller: Right, right, that's a good idea.

SG: So, you see what we've done is we've turned something that "you find obnoxious" into motivation and more interaction.

Caller: Right, right.

SG: Okay? So I want you to try that and call me back and tell me how that goes. But that's the whole idea, and I don't know if you even heard what we were just talking about, but it illustrates beautifully – this example illustrates beautifully – the principles we were just talking about. Understanding what it means for the child, what they like to do and how to turn it into their advantage to get higher and higher levels of functional and emotional developmental capacities. So, here we're getting lots of interaction going and maybe even some words.

Caller: Right.

SG: Okay?

Caller: Okay.

SG: Good! Good luck.

Caller: Great, thank you.

SG: Bye, bye. Okay, next call. Hello?

Caller: Hi, Dr. Greenspan!

SG: Hi! Welcome.

Caller: Thank you very much.

SG: How can I help?

Caller: I've got a six-year old boy who's doing very well. He is in full-day kindergarten – half-day in a smaller program and half-day immersed with the regular kindergarten kids with some aides who provide support. From a sensory point of view he is very good, very much like a typical six-year old. His receptive language is good with a little bit of weakness in his left ear. His expressive language right now is his biggest difficulty, in relating and communicating.

SG: His expressive language?

Caller: His expressive language, yes. We've been implementing a DIR-based program for the last few years now, employing the Floortime principles, but also speech and language, occupational therapy, and some in-home aides as well. Everything's been going great, but recently he's maybe plateaued a little bit and seems to be doing a lot of scripted language from books or television. I think it might be trying to compensate for

some anxiety that he has. Maybe it's starting school, but we see it across the board. My question to you is what are some tips or recommendations I can get out to the larger team as to how to deal with this?

SG: Can you give me some concrete examples of some scripted language he'd be using?

Caller: Pretty much all day long there is a running monologue . . .

SG: For example?

Caller: . . . just relating parts of a story he's read in a book or something he's seen on TV. When he's not actively engaged with you in doing something, he just falls back and . . .

SG: So, in other words, when he's actively engaged with you he doesn't do this?

Caller: He doesn't do this, but it's a lot more difficult to get him engaged and his tolerance is lower and it's setting him off and he's getting very anxious and maybe falls down on the ground or runs away. It's a lot more than it's been in the past. So, it's harder to get him engaged recently, so I'm looking for any type of recommendation.

SG: Okay, I've got you. It's a good question. Give me a concrete example of what he might say - his exact words when he's scripting.

Caller: He's very fluent and he's got very good diction, it could be from just a storybook – a Hop On Pop book.

SG: What would he say? What exactly would he say?

Caller: Oh, "hop on pop," "pop hops on dog," "dog hops on pop," you know, whatever the story is.

SG: Yeah, so I don't know if you've been listening to the first part of the show where we talked about self-stimulatory activities, but this is a perfect example of using scripts, you know – stories, in a self-stimulatory way, as opposed to, "Hey, Daddy, let's read this story together" or "Dad, let me tell you about this book I just read." That would be an interactive way of using it, right?

Caller: Right.

SG: And he would say, "Daddy, now listen carefully, I memorized this whole book and now I'm going to tell you the story, okay? "Hop goes to the store and" blah

blah blah blah blah. But here, what he's doing is he's just doing it as a self-stimulatory activity to himself. And what we were talking about in the first part of the show is how children use self-stimulatory activities sometimes to handle stress or overload, other times when they're bored or just being aimless. But it's another way of getting sensation into the body to keep you excited or stimulated, or to just organize yourself when you're being stressed – a way of kind of pulling away and kind of organizing within yourself. You seem to be feeling it's more of the latter in this case than the former.

Caller: Yes, I do. And the only change in his program has been we've been doing a lot more auditory work on his left ear to mitigate some of that weakness.

SG: What kind of auditory work?

Caller: Reading books and stories to him where the headphones are only on the left ear.

SG: Okay. Well, chances are – again, you never know for sure – but chances are that whenever you see a change in a child's pattern, where they're beginning to do – again, it follows our theme of self-stimulatory activities – when a child is beginning to use it to stay calmer or to organize themselves and they're pulling away from the world and there's something new you've been doing that could conceivably be considered as overloading like working on that left ear, then your best bet is, your best hypothesis to start with, is that your hunch is correct – that that activity is a bit overloading. So you want to do two things at once: You want to go back to the basics and work back up the functional and emotional developmental levels. Always go back to the beginning, starting with calm regulation and rhythmic activity, getting the child re-engaged, back into interactive communication, back into shared social problem-solving, and then back to using their language interactively. Now, if the child is verbal and already very related as you're describing your child, this can all occur in a half-hour to an hour, but then it has to be repeated many times a day. But you also, the second thing you need to be doing, is reducing those factors that are overloading or stressing the child. So, if you're doing a lot of work on that left ear – playing music and doing things to one ear and not the other to help the child use that ear more, which is understandable as a goal and may even be laudatory as a goal, you've got to say, “Okay, we're doing it a little too much and it's too overloading right now and we're therefore losing more than we're gaining.”

Caller: Right.

SG: So, you need to modify the approach a little bit and say, “Okay, let's give him a little bit of a rest.” How long have you been doing this now, the work on the left ear?

Caller: About a month now. He does it once a week through a program. We've been doing it more and more at home, finding opportunities to do it.

SG: Right. So what I would do is give him a little break from it for a little bit. Maybe wean it down gradually so it's not a sudden shift, okay?

Caller: Right.

SG: Wean it down gradually until you just give him a break. You've been doing it for a month so let's see, wean him down over the next week or so and then give him a couple weeks' vacation. As you're weaning him down and giving him the vacation from this particular activity, you're working on the fundamentals. So, you're going back to lots of rhythmic, regulating activity, lots of just warm engagement, lots of just fun – you know, with the two of you – really focusing on the floortime basics.

Caller: Right.

SG: Okay, again, the key to basics of the floortime for a child who's been overloaded and stressed is the rhythmic, shared, regulated activity together that's pleasurable and well under his control – lots of basic engagement with pleasure and joy and lots of two-way back-and-forth communication and getting as many circles in a row as you can get. Okay? And then obviously you're doing pretend play and imaginative things as well as much as you can muster together, but in a very calm, regulated, soothing way.

Caller: Right.

SG: If school is stressful at this time . . . he's going to school from what time to what time?

Caller: It's a full day, so he's getting on the bus around 9 o'clock and getting home about 4:00pm.

SG: Yeah, so what I might do is I might also consider, depending upon how much progress you get in the first few days weaning him from this auditory work and increasing the amount of fundamentals in the floortime, but if you are not getting enough progress then I would shorten his school day to like a half a day where you pick him up, just temporarily until we get him back to his baseline. Okay?

Caller: Right.

SG: And again, with much more one-on-one work home with mommy and daddy – basic floortime work and basic foundation building. In other words, with a child with

special needs, the goal is that as soon as you lose the fundamentals of engagement and two-way back-and-forth communication and self-regulation you go back to the basics and rebuild them. In other words, you never get caught out on a limb where you have the illusion, “Okay, we’re going to give up some of the fundamentals because we’re going to really rework this left ear or this right ear or this right foot, and we’ll do it fast and, yeah, the child will temporarily be in a state of disequilibrium and be under stress, but we’ll have improved that left-ear functioning well enough and then we’ll reestablish the basics.” Okay, that’s the temptation to excessively work on something. But that’s a little bit like an adult who’s exercising and says, “Okay, my muscle is beginning to feel tight, but I’m going to try to do five more reps here, and then I’ll relax,” and all the sudden on the fourth rep the muscle pulls and they’re out of commission for three months because they got a little greedy on their muscle reps thinking they could get away with not “listening to their body.” There’s a colleague of mine who emphasizes that all the time and she says, “Doctor, listen to your body.” And she’s helping me with a stiff neck I have temporarily (I hope it’s temporary) and I enjoy her saying, “Listen to your body.”

Caller: That’s very good and there are times when he is engaged, when he is really “on,” so to speak, he’s all there. Very recently in putting him to bed he lied to me saying, “I want to go give mommy a kiss goodnight,” when in fact he wanted to go downstairs and play and we found that very encouraging.

SG: That is not only encouraging, it’s perfect. So it shows you what you can do when you get him regulated. So get him regulated again and, if necessary, cut the school day in half or in two-thirds and you give him liberal mental health days. If it’s a beautiful day and you have time to take off from work and mommy has time, don’t be afraid to take what we call a mental health day off from school. Okay?

Caller: Yes.

SG: You know, a self-imposed holiday – call it your family name holiday. And so do a lot of the basics, wean him down, give him a little break for a couple of weeks, and then resume your left ear work, starting with a much-reduced load. So, whatever you’re doing now, cut it by two-thirds and go to a third or even a quarter of what you’re doing now and see how well he tolerates it. And if you find him tolerating it well, he can build up maybe to a half or two-thirds of what you’re doing. But as soon as you see the first signs of stress, go back and drop down a notch, only this time try to notice it more quickly. So, what I would do is go back to the foundation pieces, work up the functional and emotional developmental levels. Let’s reduce the stress in his life, including reducing the time at school, if needed. Let’s give him a break entirely after a weaning period from the auditory work on the left ear, then reestablish that at a quarter, and maybe

go up to a half. I might just stay at a half because again, you'll make progress without losing anything that way, whereas the other way you take the risk of his getting stressed out again. And when you're asking a child to use a function of their mind, like only working with the left ear and working with different sounds, it can easily be overloading, particularly to children who have sensory modulation challenges. But even a person without sensory modulation challenges could be stressed if asked to do a lot of auditory work.

Caller: Right. Okay, well thank you very much.


SG: He should do very well. The fact that he could say that at nighttime when you're nice and relaxed, that is your clue as to what you need to do more of.

Caller: Right.

SG: And the general principle for all parents listening is whenever you see the fundamentals – the building blocks of shared attention, engagement, regulation, and back-and-forth communication – beginning to slip and the child is going more into his own world – and here, it's not the scripted part that's the worse part, it's the fact that he's using it to retreat into his own world – whenever you see that, that always tells you that something needs to be changed in the program – something is overloading the child or something is under loading the child. Either we're not engaging him enough or we're doing a little too much of a good thing, like too much weight lifting. So, then we go back to the basics and rebuild. And, often, if we're doing it as you're doing it now, at the early signs of overload, we really don't lose anything. We learn something about the child – what's the right way of pacing new capacities and we get the child cooking again real fast.

Caller: Great. Thank you very much. Have a great day.

SG: Okay? Good luck. Now we're going to return to our basic discussion and I want to thank those two callers for calling in. Interestingly, both of them – and it wasn't planned this way – both of them really elaborated and were perfect examples for our basic topic or the first theme we talked about which was self-stimulatory activity. Both these children were using self-stimulatory activity in different ways. The first little child who was pulling and smelling her mommy's hair was doing it when she was excited. There we talked about how to turn that into an interactive game by getting a wig and even getting to the level of pretending and maybe helping her to use a little more language. So, that's an example, again, of how we were using our developmental ladder – our functional and emotional stages – to say okay, how do we use this interest to promote further development and, at the same time, give her the satisfaction that she wants, which




is touching things that have the texture of hair. So, she's getting what she wants and yet she's doing it in a more interactive way, and maybe in a more symbolic way.

The second little boy was a perfect example of what happens all the time. I wish I could share with you just how many times a day I see situations where – for the best of reasons – we're trying to help a child, but inadvertently we're overloading the child. It could be either because in the school program we're being a little too structured and a little too demanding, or at home there's too much noise or we've exposed the child - for example, we've just painted his or her room to make it beautiful, nicer for them, but the odors of the paint are too overloading for the child and the smell is actually getting to the bloodstream through the particles in the air from the fresh paint that's still gassing out a little bit, and the child becomes stressed and the child then begins getting a little more active or more irritable or more scripting and self-absorbed. The key is always the same – go back to the basics. Always build from the foundation up and remove the source of stress. In the case of the painted room, you may have the child sleep in another room until the paint is really “out-gassed.” So you keep the windows open, have some fans in the room, and let it out-gas. If the child's school is too demanding, you might modify the program, shorten the day a bit, take some mental health days, and work on the foundation pieces and work back up as we suggested with the second caller. And then, invariably, you can get back to helping the child master the challenge you were trying to help the child master, but maybe in a more gradual way with better self-regulation.

Now, what I want to do is turn to another very common question that I get asked all the time – not just about self-stimulation – but about repetitive activities – the child who's lining up their toys or lining up their cars. Basically it's a question about perseveration. Many, many children perseverate. And the principles of helping a child with perseveration, with repetitive activities, whether it's lining up cars or opening and closing a door, or saying the same words over and over again, is really the same principle as we just talked about for self-stimulatory activities. It follows the same basic set of guidelines, only with perseveration we're dealing more with the child's desire and pleasure in certain motor activities – it's the doing rather than the receiving.

With self-stimulation, it's the sensations the child is experiencing that are the key clues as to how to work with the child. With the repetitive behavior, it's the motor activity. But, interestingly, the tie-in or the overlap is that the motor activity like lining up the cars or opening and closing the door, also has its sensory components – the child is enjoying the sensations of seeing those cars lined up, of making the same movement with his hands. The child who is opening and closing the door is enjoying the feel of the door opening and closing. So, there's always a sensory component. There may be a visual component if the child is opening and closing the door and getting the rhythmic




movement pattern. So, there, when you're looking for your clue as to what the child is trying to do, you look for the motor side of the clue and the sensory side of the clue. What is the action that the child is finding pleasurable and organizing or stress-reducing or just filling up their otherwise boring or lonely or isolated existence? What is that providing for the child? And what are the sensory components – what sensations do they get in their body from doing that? So always ask what the sensory components are, what the motor components are, and what you think the affective or the emotional components are that they're feeling as a result of that – excited, or organized or some other feeling that you think they're getting. Look at the motor, the sensory, and the affective components.

With older children, who are already verbal and symbolic, there may be some symbolic components, like with an adult who does crossword puzzles – that's a self-stimulatory, repetitive activity, but it's also highly symbolic and it's obviously something socially acceptable. A person listening to a symphony and is playing the story over in their minds that goes along with the symphonic movements, picturing marching soldiers or picturing dancing ballerinas, you know, may be their own symbolic interpretation of that symphony. Obviously, listening to opera and replaying the story can be such an activity. So, we all as adults have many ways of relaxing and there's almost always a sensory and motor and affective – or emotional – component, and often, if the child or the adult is ideational or symbolic, an ideational or symbolic component.

So, often we'll fantasize while listening to music or doing an activity. Those of us who like to mow the lawn or do carpentry or sports or certain kinds of callisthenic workouts, often we may have certain imagery we employ while doing it. So, this is a ubiquitous and broad-ranging and human activity and as a good rule of thumb, whether it's perseverative activity or, going back to the earlier discussion of just sensory-based self-stimulatory activity, always look at it from the point of view of the sensory system, the motor system, and the affects or emotions the child is feeling at the time. Also, see if there are any symbolic components involved for a verbal child who's already symbolic or who's symbolic in a visual sense but not yet verbal. Then from that you get a sense of what this means for the child, and then by observing you see how the child is using it. With the second caller, it was to reduce stress and retreat from the world and with the first caller it was to kind of continue the level of excitement and kind of up the stakes a little bit.

There may be other purposes, too, that we discover by watching the child. Then, we follow the principles. We go back to the baseline, help the child do that – in this case, the motor activity – do it in an interactive, engaged way with shared attention and sometimes rhythmic – we can open and close a door together, we can line up toys




together, then once we make sure the child is having pleasure with us and is enjoying our being with him, we can make it more interactive – hand them the car, they take it and put it in a spot or remove a car from a certain place and say, “I don’t think it goes here,” and the child may take it back from us and put it back. So, now we’re getting lots of back-and-forth activity around the lining up of the cars.

We might want shared social problem solving, so we try to make it more complex – we have to search for just the right car to find where to put it. Or we may offer a totally competing design for the cars and put them in a circle where the child shakes his head “no” and shows us how he really wants a straight line and we start negotiating – a little bit of a circle, a little bit of a line. In that negotiation, even though we let the child have his way initially, there’s a lot of shared social problem solving. We might see how far we can extend the line, you know, from one room to another room. Or see if he’ll let trucks go in the line, as well as cars.

So, there are lots of ways to make this go into a problem-solving game. We can put various barriers up that have to be surmounted, just like you were building a bridge of cars or a railroad track of cars and now you have to overcome a crevice or a mountain and get around it. So we can use blocks and other things to make this more problem solving and almost creating obstacle courses to complete the line of cars. Then, we can obviously make it symbolic where there are little dolls that want a ride in some of the cars or want to jump across the tops of the cars or go from one car to the next car.

After you get to that level and the child is verbal, we can have discussions about it – about which design of car is better, this design or that design? Should we just do cars of one color or another color? As we discuss this and negotiate, that becomes the fun part – that becomes the flexible and creative part. The lining up of the cars may stay looking like a repetitive activity, but now there’s so much dialogue and discussion – the comparison between blue vs. red and big vs. little, which one you like and which one you don’t like – that we’re getting emotions into the discussion, we’re getting lots of cognitive skills into the discussion and, most importantly, it’s back-and-forth, it’s engaged, it’s shared, it’s problem-solving, and it’s creative. Okay? And it’s logical, and so we’re practicing all our functional and emotional developmental levels while providing the fun for the child doing a motor-based activity that has some predictability to it.

Also, with the lining up of cars, what can we do proactively if the child likes certain motor activities? Do they like fine motor activities that require careful matching? Or there may be other kinds of classifying activities we can do proactively that are motor-activity based. We can also ask whether the child prefers these sort of precise, motor-




based things like lining up cars or putting certain kinds of shapes into piles, but do they avoid other activities that have balance and coordination involved in them or that have more unpredictable actions in them, like throwing and catching a ball? So, slowly, we want to expand the child's motor repertoire by finding fun and exciting ways to have a motor and sensory workout three or four times a day that begins expanding balance, and begins expanding left-right coordination, begins expanding the sequencing of actions in non-repetitive ways where you have to take three or four steps to solve a problem – you know, setting up obstacle courses. We can even use the interest in cars to do that. To get a new car, we have to go through an obstacle course to find that new car, and so forth and so on.

So, basically what we're doing is we're always – whether it's a self-stimulatory activity or a perseverating activity – we're always finding out the meaning of that activity for the child, using that to work back up the developmental ladder from regulation and rhythmic activity all the way up to symbolic activity, and we're going to bring into it an expansion of the very area of the nervous system that's used. If it's motor activity, we're going to expand the range of motor activities. If it's sensory based, we're going to expand the range of sensation. So that little girl interested in hair, we're going to expose her to different smells on the hair and different kinds of touch and maybe different kinds of wigs. With the motor-based activities, we're going to expand into a whole repertoire of balance and coordination activities from the child's interest and here's the last principle we'll talk about – you also want to expand the different sensory pathways that are used, whether it's a self-stimulatory activity or a perseverative activity. If the child is focusing on touch, bring in sight and sound and smell, as well as movement. If the child is focusing on movement, build in more complex movements, but also build in sights and sounds and smells and textures into it.

So, increase the breadth of the sensory motor activities involved so that all the senses are being used in a coordinated way and work up the developmental ladder so you have higher and higher levels – from engagement to purposeful action to problem solving to symbolic activity. So what we have now is, we use the child's self-stimulatory activity or perseverative activity as a basis for going up the functional emotional developmental ladder, then for expanding the range of motor and sensory experiences so the child's using all their processing abilities together. We're getting the whole mental team working as a team together working at a higher and higher level of functional emotional developmental levels, all through the perseverative activity.

Now, it's not always obvious to parents or to clinicians how to do this – how to bring in more visual-spatial or more sight-based activities into a motor pattern. But let's just come back to our example of the child lining up the cars. Okay, as we have bridges



and as we have to get over mountains with our line of cars, the child has to begin solving some visual problems – that’s visual-spatial processing and reasoning. If the child needs our help, they have to use words – that’s using words in the equation, etc., etc., etc. So, what we need to have in mind is the general framework and then do different trial and error things to see how to help the child constantly expand.

So, what we’ve been talking about today is motor and sensory-based self-stimulatory or perseverative activities, and we had a couple of calls that actually fit in quite spontaneously into these two subjects. But it probably wasn’t by chance that these callers fit into those two subjects, because so many questions I get fall into these broad categories and so many parents are concerned, and appropriately so, about these behaviors that don’t seem typical. They do reflect some of the differences in the way the nervous system of children with special needs – or children with some learning challenges or just some children without obvious challenges function – everybody’s nervous system is a little bit different. The key is to use that difference to promote development of all the senses at higher and higher functional emotional developmental levels. And if you remember that principle, and you remember always going back to the beginning to get regulation reestablished and remove the stresses in the child’s life or the non-involvement in the child’s life – the child is just on his own too much – if you remember those principles, we can always use a child’s natural interests, however unusual they may appear, for the child’s own benefit.

Now, next week we’ll talk about some more of the problem areas and some more of the questions we haven’t gotten to. So, next week we’re going to do a question and answer time also, and one of the topics I’m going to talk about is scripting and echolalia, i.e., repetitive verbal activity and repetitive symbolic activity. So, we’ll talk about scripting, echolalia, and about how to help children become creative and spontaneous and interactive in their use of language and words rather than scripting and echolalic. We’ll also answer some of the additional questions that have been accumulating over the last few months and open up for your calls. Again, we encourage you to call in. Now we have our system working – we had two successful call-ins today, so the new equipment is working. You can email us in advance with your question and we’ll call you back to set up a call-in time for you or you can call in spontaneously during the show next week with your questions. Now that we’re equipped, we hope you’ll take advantage of this new option.

Thank you for joining us and we’ll speak to you again next week. Bye bye.