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Jessica and Isabella were immediately drawn to the new chalk available on the patio. As soon as they saw the big basket, they found an open space and began testing the colors. They seemed attracted to the brighter shades — choosing to use them first. They began experimenting with differing amounts of pressure as they filled in the space with chalk. Isabella worked slowly, noticing the brightness of her colors. Jessica worked quickly, examining the amount of chalk dust that was accumulating as she moved her chalk across the ground like a windshield wiper.

As the girls continued to fill the space around them with different shades of chalk, they noticed more about how the colors blended and spread.

As they spread the dust with their hands:
“Look at how much pink there is now!”
“The blue is so big now!”

As they mixed the dust:
“We can make a new color.”
“Yeah, a new kind of pink!”

Jessica also looked at Isabella and saw that her black pants were covered in the chalk she was sitting in, “Your pants are now that blue!” Smiling, Isabella stood up to examine herself, then made a deliberate choice to sit in the red chalk dust. Happy with the way her pants looked, she filled the ground with the two colors and stretched her legs on top of them!

After Jessica moved on, Isabella stayed engaged with the chalk, continuing to watch the amount of chalk dust grow, and mixing it with her hands. Using different colors and creating little piles, Isabella waited to gather a certain amount before blending them together. “I’m making a wish,” she shared, “cause it just looks like it!”

Later, Jessica and Isabella returned to the chalk, and began to fill in a large portion of the patio with the same vibrant colors that had been so attractive to them earlier. The two used the chalk in a variety of ways, rubbing it on its side, holding it upright and making lines, and using their hands to spread the dust around. As they worked, the girls discussed their drawing:

“It’s an ocean. We’re drawing the whole ocean!”
“And there are so many colors in the ocean that we’re putting pink and blue!”
“And you can see, here, the waves,” Jessica said as she moved her hands through the chalk dust representing the movement of the ocean.

Sheena, Deb, and Jess work together as teachers at Crescent Park Child Development Center in Palo Alto, California, where they are fortunate to spend time each week observing and thinking together about the remarkable things that children do.
Jessica studied the chalk she was using. “Look,” she observed. “They’re shrinking! They’re getting smaller and smaller!” “Yeah,” Isabella agreed, looking at the chalk. “And this one is the biggest ’cause I didn’t really use it yet. And the blue one is the smallest ’cause we used it for the whole, whole ocean!”

The girls continued to make comparisons about the qualities of the chalk:
“This one is smoothest.”
“This one is pointier than the others.”
“This one has the most dust!”

Soon, they were deliberately changing the shape and texture of the chalk by rubbing it against the rough concrete.

“This one is shrinking again! It’s smaller and smaller!”
“Now I can make this one have a point!”

As Jessica looked closely at the chalk, she acknowledged the color of her hands — pink with chalk dust — for the first time: “Look at my pink, pink hands. They’re pink from the ocean, and a little blue.” She then made note of the chalk dust on Isabella’s face. “It’s like make-up! We’re putting on make-up!”
Jessica spread the chalk dust from her hands onto her cheeks, and used a finger to gather some blue dust from the ground for her nose. “Look,” she and Isabella called together. “Look at us! Will you take pictures to send to our moms?”

**A Drawing Experience or a Sensory Experience?**

We recently brought this story to our planning time with Deb, to share the photos and notes we had collected of Jessica and Isabella working with the chalk. As we discussed what unfolded, we became more and more fascinated with the chalk work of the children. We were particularly struck by how the girls immersed themselves in the chalk, covering their faces, hands, arms and bodies. Was this a sensory experience rather than the drawing experience we had planned? Our conversations greatly expanded our ideas about the nature of sensory exploration for young children.

Before these conversations, we thought of sensory experiences in typical ways: water play, play-dough, sand play and finger-paint, where children mix, spill, splash, and make a mess. We didn’t consider chalk a sensory activity. But observing Jessica and Isabella’s immersion in the chalk helped us go beyond the usual way of seeing. Deb suggested we expand our idea of sensory experiences to study the notion of aesthetic experiences.

Webster’s definition of *aesthetics* is an abstract concept meaning ‘perception’ in Greek. Aesthetics offer a focused and metaphorical way of knowing and experiencing the world that involves engaging with your senses, feelings, attitudes, processes, and responses to objects and experiences. Aesthetic experiences involve awareness and appreciation of the beauty found in the world and allow us to become totally lost in the moment. This definition certainly described the girls’ experiences with the chalk.

**Space and Materials as an Aesthetic Experience**

As Isabella and Jessica explored the chalk, their experience was informed by the space in which they worked. The chalk was carefully presented in a large basket with a handle. As the girls worked, they scattered the many pieces of chalk around themselves, making all of their options visible, and each color easy to reach.

The patio is large, and boasts a sizable patch of pavement that is free of traffic. Additionally, there are many variations in the texture of the pavement, some spots being rougher than others. As the girls explored, the fact that the surface they were
drawing on was large and that it changed subtly, seemed to enhance their experience.

The quality of the chalk also added to the girls’ explorations. The intensity of the colors and the large amount of dust that the chalk produced contributed to the girls’ deep focus on the materials and to the long period of time that they were engaged.

We noticed the girls experimenting with each piece of available chalk and ultimately settling on those that were the brightest. Later, we were struck by the girls’ almost exclusive use of ‘hot pink’ and ‘bright blue.’ In our observations, we noted the girls were filling a huge space with chalk marks with great variation in line quality, with big, solid patches of pavement being filled. They used full body movements to make the chalk marks and move the dust around the space and to apply pressure to change the chalk from solid to dust. They delighted in covering themselves with the colorful dust. The girls showed us that chalk offers much more than a drawing experience. As they immersed themselves in the chalk, we learned that chalk also provides a rich sensory experience.

Uncovering Emotion and Metaphor

The apparent change in Jessica and Isabella’s intention in the course of their work with the chalk intrigued us. Initially the girls were eager to explore the chalk, to discover its many possibilities and, if you will, to befriend it: to get to know it as intimately as possible, physically and emotionally. At this time, they didn’t seem to have a sense of ownership of the space where they worked, and instead appeared entirely focused on being with the chalk. We observed that the girls used the chalk deliberately, drawing a vast ocean, comparing the dust to wishes and sharing their discovery of the chalk as ‘make-up.’ They understood each other in a deep way, fully sharing the emotional and physical experience of the chalk with each other. These joyful connections seemed to transport them to a rich aesthetic world of wonder and imagination.

As we continued to discuss our observations of Jessica and Isabella, we recognized that their work exemplified a value that we both hold dear: it is imperative to get to know materials well before they can be used to their fullest potential. The girls’ deep investigation of the chalk and our curiosity about their process informed the rest of our dialogue. We are grateful to Jessica and Isabella for showing us how much more children see and engage with the sensory world than we imagined. We are now committed to presenting materials with an awareness of their fuller aesthetic possibilities and making time for children to explore them fully as Jessica and Isabella did with the chalk. Whether we observe children using paint, glue, clay, or chalk, we will be eager to see children covering their hands, arms, and faces and then reaching out to each other. From the initial dip of a finger to the colored water running down their arms at clean up, children see that life is meant to be experienced with all of their senses!
Are Your Children in Times Square?
Moving from Sensory Overload to Sensory Engagement
by Sandra Duncan and Michelle Salcedo

Accompany us on an imaginary trip. Imagine that we are standing in the middle of Times Square, in the heart of New York City. Be still and let your senses explore the environment. What do you notice? How does your body react to the stimuli? If we were standing there together, you would probably describe the dazzling and sometimes blinking lights, the myriad of bright colors, the vast crowds, the towering buildings, the ever-present sounds, and perhaps some interesting smells. All of those sensorial elements combine to create the Times Square experience.

Now, think about the typical early childhood classroom. In many ways, the environment is much like Times Square:

- **Lights glare overhead.** The neon bulbs are shining continuously, now in many states, even at naptime.
- **Bright colors are everywhere.** The bright, primary colors are on the walls, furniture, equipment, décor, and sometimes even on the floor.
- **Noise is constant.** There are sounds of children playing, yelling, crying, and laughing — and the noise of adults’ conversations, children’s toys, and perhaps music playing. There may also be environmental sounds such as a heater, air conditioning fans, or traffic noise.
- **Space is confining.** The classroom overflows with tables, chairs, cubbies, shelving units, bookcases, large muscle equipment, and a plethora of supplies, toys, and materials. While the classroom may not feel crowded to you, it would if you are a toddler, always surrounded by five other toddlers. And, young children may feel dwarfed by the high doors, lofty ceilings, and towering fixtures that are present in some learning spaces.
- **Smells are overpowering.** In the air, there might be a mix of strong odors typical of early childhood classrooms.

For many people, Times Square is a travel destination, an exciting place to experience. You can see it in their faces. They are revved up. If you could see inside them, you would notice their blood rushing a little faster and their hearts beating harder with the stimulation of the surroundings. For a time, there is a wonderful sense of euphoria, adventure, and fun. Eventually, however, these altered physical states can lead to behaviors that are not all positive.

In Times Square, people may push through the space as they rush from one spot to another. Or, they may stop, look around, and become completely overwhelmed by sensory overload. In these circumstances, people will often behave in ways they typically would not. For example, a woman wearing a t-shirt that reads “Minnesota’s Nicest Grandmother” pushes someone out of her way to get into a store. She is reacting to Times Square’s constant sensory overload by the increased physical activity of pushing others . . . and a lessened ability to control her emotions. If adults exhibit challenging behaviors when faced with environmental sensory overload, it is not surprising that these overloaded environments can impact negatively in children as well.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHILDRENS CHOICE ST. MICHAEL, PRINCE ALBERT, CANADA

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As the Chief Academic Officer for The Sunshine House, Michelle Salcedo has the honor and privilege of developing curricular programs to meet the learning and developmental needs of thousands of children across the country. In this role, Ms. Salcedo oversees the education team in the creation of curriculum and curricular-related resources, as well as training and support for the multiple locations. Michelle holds a Bachelor of Arts from University of Detroit Mercy in Detroit in Developmental Psychology with an emphasis in Family Life Education. She also holds a Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education from Concordia College.
Being in Times Square is an experience that many people enjoy for a couple of hours every few years. When it gets to be too much, they duck into a store, catch a show, stop for some refreshments, or head back to their hotels. For young children, leaving the classroom is not an option. For many, children live in environments like Times Square eight to ten hours a day, five days a week. And their response to these chaotic environments is often increased challenging behavior and decreased engagement and learning.

Moving from Sensory Overload to Sensory Engagement

As early childhood professionals, we must strive to create spaces that caress, as opposed to assault young children’s senses. Spaces that are conducive to learning and prosocial behaviors are those that are high in sensory engagement rather than sensory overload. Sensory engagement comes from the natural incorporation of interesting items for children to explore through their senses.

Teachers can take many steps to make the transition from sensory overload to sensory engagement. Although there are many ways for children to experience sensory overload — such as space confinement or noise pollution — this article will focus on the power of lighting and illumination, and how teachers can use the power of light to create an environment of sensory engagement. Consider the following ideas and strategies about classroom lighting to begin moving your children out of Times Square and into a sensory engaging classroom.

Rethinking the Classroom’s Lighting Landscape

Light is a powerful and important element of the early childhood classroom. Too much harsh light causes overstimulation, fatigue, and irritability; not enough light produces squinting and loss of concentration. Using light effectively improves children’s behavior, concentration, learning, and even moods (Greenman, 2004). The overall mood in the classroom can also be influenced by the amount, type, and placement of light.

A classroom’s mood is determined by a primary source of light, which is usually overhead fluorescent lights controlled by an on-off switch. Teachers typically have two options for classroom lighting: turn all the lights off or turn all the lights on. And, just like Times Square at night, the classroom’s harsh fluorescent lights glare brightly all day regardless of what is happening in the classroom. In order to move children out of the Times Square atmosphere, it is important for teachers to create moods in the various areas of the classroom by rethinking and modifying the lighting landscape.

Tip #1: Conduct a Classroom Lighting Assessment

Many teachers feel trapped by their classroom’s lighting situation because they are not electricians. Some teachers do not have the financial support to make big lighting changes in the classroom. Others have become accustomed to what is available and manage to live with current conditions. All of these teachers are considering light from the perspective of standard lighting systems: usually overhead fluorescent lights with on-off light switches. Rather than considering light from the traditional perspective, teachers should consider light from an illumination perspective. Illumination is much broader than the conventional overhead lighting system because it includes direct natural light, indirect artificial light, reflected light, as well as control of light sources and strength (e.g., dimmers, 3-way light bulbs). Since illumination elements such as table lamps and rope lights are much easier and more affordable to install, teachers can easily transform their Times Square classrooms into calm spaces of illuminated beauty.

Begin the transformation by conducting an assessment of the classroom’s current light quality, which can be achieved with glare control, appropriate light distribution on classroom surfaces, and flexible lighting controls. By conducting an assessment, teachers can develop a realistic vision of what is possible in the classroom to improve lighting and illumination. Light assessments can give a picture of what currently is so you can make a plan for what could be.
WHAT’S YOUR CLASSROOM ILLUMINATION?
Directions: Select either True or False for each question below.

_1._ There is only one source of artificial light in the classroom.
_2._ The primary source of classroom light comes from overhead florescent lights.
_3._ The primary source of classroom light comes from overhead lights that only have an off/on power switch.
_4._ Window coverings (e.g., blinds, curtains) prevent sunlight from coming into the classroom.
_5._ In addition to the overhead lights, there are only two sources of artificial light (e.g., table lamps, clip-on lamps) in the classroom.
_6._ There is only one source of light that provides flexible light strength (e.g., dimmers, three-way bulbs).
_7._ There is only one level of light, and this light is at the ceiling level.
_8._ There are no light sources that are intentionally incorporated within a learning center.
_9._ There are no intentionally planned classroom areas that are designed for children to investigate, experiment, and interact with light.

Scoring: This tool helps assess the classroom’s lighting and illumination, which is the first step in transitioning from a Times Square environment into an illuminated place of beauty and learning.

If you responded frequently with a ‘T,’ you may want to consider implementing some of the ideas mentioned in this article. If you responded frequently with an ‘F,’ you are on your way to appropriate classroom lighting, but still have some work to do.

As early childhood professionals, we must strive to create spaces that caress, as opposed to assault young children’s senses.

Tip #2: Enhance Classroom Mood with Lighting

Within each classroom, there are many different areas for children to enjoy, such as the science, writing, blocks, home living, and library centers. Each center has a distinctive mood, which is created by the level of activity and physical energy children expend in the area (Olds, 1997). The library or quiet center is a tranquil space requiring not only warm, soft, and textured elements (e.g., pillows and cushions) but also needs appropriate lighting to reflect the center’s mood. The home living area is filled with the clutter of children’s dramatic and active play experiences; the home living area requires lighting that is bold and vibrant. The writing center’s mood is focused. Because children are busily experimenting with writing tools and concentrating on the work at hand, this center needs focused lighting. It is important that teachers align the learning center’s mood with the most suitable type of lighting.

Tip #3: Create Multiple Levels of Illumination

Since classroom areas have a variety of moods, they require more than a single source of light such as overhead florescent lighting. Classrooms need many sources of illumination of different types and at multi-levels: ceilings, floors, and shelves.

Multi-Level Illumination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ceilings/Walls</th>
<th>Floor</th>
<th>Shelves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanging lamps</td>
<td>Floor lamps</td>
<td>Clip-on lamps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandeliers</td>
<td>Octopus-style lamps</td>
<td>Battery-powered lamps, lanterns, and candles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track lighting</td>
<td>Pole lamps</td>
<td>Task lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skylights</td>
<td>Light boxes</td>
<td>LED rope lights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scones</td>
<td></td>
<td>Under-the-counter lights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recessed lights</td>
<td></td>
<td>Table lamps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White boards</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flashlights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotlights</td>
<td></td>
<td>Overhead projectors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By infusing light at varying levels in the classroom, teachers can illuminate areas of importance and interest to the children. For example, hanging prisms in windows to create interesting light effects or providing a classroom area where...
children can experiment with light can also add interest and create excitement for young children. Using fixtures or lighting elements at various levels of the classroom will also distribute light onto ceilings and walls.

When incorporating light and illumination into the classroom, it is important to be aware of safety issues. Ideas for safe illumination include:

- Using low-heat (e.g., LED) lighting
- Placing floor lamps behind shelves that have been positioned at an angle in classroom corners
- Tucking electrical cords behind shelving units
- Being proactive by protecting light bulbs, lamps, and tubes with shields or covers
- Plugging in electrical cords in areas out of reach of children, such as behind immovable cabinets.

Incorporating just a few of these ideas will make a dramatic difference in lessening the Times Square effect in your classroom.

**Tip #4: Plan Children’s Sensory Engagement Using Light and Illumination**

Along with designing a lighting landscape, teachers can provide experiences that allow children to immerse themselves in manipulating light to promote children’s sensory engagement in the classroom:

- Encourage children to experiment with light by making a homemade light box. (For information on how to create a homemade light box that is inexpensive and easy to make, go to www.teachpreschool.org/2012/01/guest-post-a-homemade-light-table-for-preschool.)
- Provide flashlights and a variety of open-ended materials that are transparent and translucent for children to experiment and discover.
- Use an overhead projector, slide projector, or spotlight positioned to cast light on a wall, and invite children to create shadows with their bodies or other objects such as puppets.
- Give children materials to make a shoebox shadow theater. Begin by cutting off the bottom of a shoebox and covering the opening with waxed paper that is secured with tape. After the shoebox shadow theater is constructed, provide flashlights and small objects such as plastic animals or wooden people. Encourage children to create a shadow play by manipulating the objects between the flashlight and the paper. (Adapted from Peep and the Big Wide World program.)
- Provide unbreakable mirrors in the block center. Children can explore light and reflection while building on these reflective surfaces.
- Give children opportunities to work with light and shadow using a spotlight or overhead projector along with recycled objects and materials.

Reducing the chaotic effect of Times Square in your classroom, by even a little, can have a dramatic impact on
children’s behavior and learning. By designing a space that engages as opposed to overloads children’s senses, you create an environment of wonder that engages their senses and invites children to explore and discover.

References


Resources


Peep and the Big Wide World
www.peepandthebigwideworld.com/media/pdf/peep-event-shadows.pdf

Science Kids (Fun Science & Technology for Kids)
www.sciencekids.co.nz/gamesactivities/lightshadows.html

Children’s Storybooks


Creating In-Sync Environments for Children with Sensory Issues

by Jane Humphries and Kari Rains

When Abe joined the program as an infant, the teachers in the classroom began to notice issues that made caring for Abe just a little more sensitive. As Abe grew into a mobile toddler, he would cover his ears when classroom noise got loud, cry when other children touched him, and often hide under tables to get away. The staff wanted to meet Abe’s individual needs, but they felt inadequate. The teachers knew of early intervention services provided by the state and encouraged Abe’s parents to seek these services. At first, Abe’s parents were very upset by the staff’s request, which created tears and frustration with each other. Denial and grief that their child was not ‘normal’ were emotions that affected Abe’s parents, but also parents in the same circumstances. Luckily for Abe, the staff and director were patient and empathetic, and they listened. After completion of multiple assessments and meetings with Abe’s parents and center staff, Abe was diagnosed with sensory integration issues and work began to include several qualified specialists in his care.

Initially, most of the work done with Abe was in the home environment. Over time and as issues were being sorted out, the director began to observe the teachers becoming increasingly anxious about how to meet Abe’s needs while also caring for the other children in the classroom. A couple of the teachers mentioned at a staff meeting that they weren’t ready to handle Abe, and the thought of his joining their classroom in the fall was creating stress for them. Abe was not the only child in the group that needed attention, and as he got older and bigger managing his behavior in conjunction with the behavior of some of the other children in the group was increasingly overwhelming. Abe’s parents could sense the teachers’ apprehension. Fortunately for Abe, his family, and his teachers, the state’s early intervention program provided training and expertise within the center environment. The director, who was central to the ongoing coordination effort, found herself playing a significant role in determining how to best serve Abe and his family while also supporting the other children in the classroom as well as the staff. Let’s take a closer look at this director’s journey.

Over the past decade, directors have had a multitude of different diagnoses brought to their attention. While diagnoses vary, each comes with an expectation by parents and other adults caring for children to deal with and meet children’s needs. These expectations for individual children can sometimes be quite difficult to meet due to lack of funds and staff expertise in certain areas. In the case of Abe, it was important that the director and staff have a better understanding of sensory integration issues in young children. While researching and talking with professionals, Abe’s teachers found that children with sensory processing problems may present very similar behaviors as a child who is diagnosed with ADHD. From having difficulty focusing on tasks, modulating their desire to touch objects and people, and engaging in constant movement and excessive talking; while the behaviors may look similar, the outcomes can vary greatly. These same behaviors can lead to a misdiagnosis of ADHD if they are not addressed appropriately. In Abe’s case, his parents and teachers sought out and worked with professionals in the community who provided a correct diagnosis and treatment plan suited for home and for the child care program.

While a diagnosis of sensory integration dysfunction can be complex, here are some of the basic ideas that surround it:

- Sensory integration is a neurological process.
- The brain gathers sensory information from the envi-

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Kari Rains is a Certified Child and Parenting Specialist and Child Development Specialist for Child Guidance at the Oklahoma State Department of Health. She has published two books, Shakespeare Makes Me Puke and It Doesn’t Hurt That Bad and Other Lies My Mom Told Me, as well as numerous research articles in her field. A 1995 graduate of Perkins-Tryon High School, Kari earned her undergraduate degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders and her master’s degree in Child Development, both from Oklahoma State University. Kari lives in Stillwater with her husband, Darrick, and three young children.
We use our senses to learn about what is going on around us and to interact appropriately in our environment. Through touch, hearing, taste, sight, smell, movement, and balance we learn, interact, and organize the sensory information around us.

We process the sensory information in our world simultaneously.

When the sensory integration system is intact, the child’s accessibility to learn is on “Go.” When the child has difficulty in this area, it interferes with learning.

With Abe, when children are sitting together during circle time, he sees the teacher and other children, feels the carpet square beneath his legs, hears other children playing outside, and smells the paint from an earlier art activity. His brain (and those of children with similar issues) is constantly taking in information from all five senses, and organizing and then responding to that information. When the brain, or central nervous system, is unable to process this information correctly, a sensory processing problem can occur.

Abe, who is a child with a sensory processing problem, may have difficulty sitting in circle time. A sensory processing problem with touch makes sitting on a carpet square feel like sitting on sandpaper. As a result, Abe may not be able to sit for any length of time and will have trouble attending to the group activity.

Teaching Strategies that Work!

Becoming a champion for all of the children in the classroom was the direction that both the director and Abe’s teachers embraced. Efforts in this area included:

- Helping children work together to accept each other’s needs. The children wore laminated badges of interesting shapes and colors to show when they wanted others to know about how they were feeling. These included red badges that were in the shape of a stop sign that said, “Stop! No touching today, just words!”
- Modeling actions and words. For example, when a child went over and grabbed Abe’s arm, he forcibly withdrew his arm and began to scream, due to unannounced, unexpected touch. The teacher said, “Abe doesn’t want your help. I’ll play with you or help you find something else to do.”
- Setting up environments that best support children. Turning off the music during free play.
- Providing ear phones when planning any loud activity. Offering Abe a ‘cool-off tent’ or special cubby he could sit in when he needed to get away.

One area of explanation provided by the early intervention team that helped Abe’s teachers was understanding differences on the diagnostic spectrum. Abe was found to display sensory defensive behaviors. However, other...
children on this diagnostic spectrum may display sensory-seeking behavior. Children within the SPD diagnostic category may respond to sensory input with a wide spectrum of responses — ranging from overly responsive to under-responsive — sensory-seeking to sensory-defensive. It is important to seek more information from professionals when sensory processing dysfunction is suspected. The strategies, activities, and interventions may be significantly different when dealing with sensory-avoiding behaviors as opposed to sensory-seeking behavior.

Overall, with pre-planning and explanations by the teachers, Abe’s teachers learned flexibility and recognized that there were no ‘cookie-cutter’ approaches when working with him and the other children exhibiting challenging behavior in the classroom.

Supporting Teachers in Their Work

The director recognized the demands this work made on the teachers and provided breaks more often while also lending assistance throughout the day. The staff had to remain calm while displaying a gentle firmness with the children. One such example was naptime. The teachers accepted that naptime would always be difficult for Abe. And in many instances, napping would not happen. This meant Abe needed something to do during nap. He was given access to ‘fidget toys’ including squishy balls, dog and cat toys with textures, silly putty, handheld water and maze games, and books. His cot was placed away from music and windows. Weighted blankets were made for Abe to help keep him on his cot.

Along with a carefully planned activity, the classroom needed to offer a stimulating — but not overstimulating — environment that met all of the children’s needs. For the director, this included assisting staff in planning activities that incorporated sensory elements:

- **Use new materials and equipment.** During circle times, bean bag chairs (vs. carpet bag chairs) were found to be more effective. Abe and other children with challenging behavior were seated on the outer edges of the circle or in teachers’ laps.

- **Establish physical boundaries.** Teachers used big boxes filled with a variety of things like packing peanuts, beans, and blankets to help children learn about their bodies in space and to develop spatial awareness. The children also used wet chunky chalk to outline their bodies during outside play. Blanket rides, for Abe and others, were a very successful body play. A child would sit on a heavy blanket or comforter and another child would pull the blanket with the child on it. For the older children, an obstacle course was added.

- **Develop new cues for transitions.** An egg timer was used to help pace clean-up time. In addition, posted schedules with movable pictures provided visual prompts for the children to follow. Additional visual cues, such as turning off the lights to signal a break in activity, were also used and found to be effective with Abe.

- **Anticipate difficult situations.** In larger groups, placing Abe and other children with challenging behavior at the front or end of the line helped to avoid chaotic or ‘too touchy’ situations.

- **Institute new practices.** The teachers found that giving some children jobs to perform was a great strategy: carrying the clipboard, holding the toy bucket, sweeping, wiping off the tables. Holding the teacher’s hand also worked well. Abe, as well as some of the other children, also wore weighted backpacks throughout the day to provide an anchor and sense of security.

- **Provide manipulatives.** Children were given a soft
Being Flexible and Embracing Change

The journey of this director and staff began with a commitment to Abe and his parents. By learning more about sensory integration, everyone began to understand that changes to the environment and flexibility were necessary:

- They learned that what worked one day might not work the next.
- The director supported the staff by recognizing that supporting children with sensory integration issues required lots of energy.
- They tapped into state-supported intervention programs and other resources.
- The teachers, mindful of children’s different sensory needs, guided their play so children with complementary sensory systems were able to play together while also learning to adapt to Abe’s needs.
- They provided a carefully balanced adaptation to the classroom structures and a focus on multiple activities and strategies within the classroom environment to help Abe and his classmates.

Children such as Abe that are diagnosed with sensory processing problems begin their academic careers in the child care setting. Planting the seeds of success in early childhood settings will help these children and families as they continue their journey into other educational environments. The sensory strategies, adaptations, and activities children learn today will have a considerable impact in the future. As this director and teachers found in their journey with Abe, their commitment began with him, the other children, and all families served in their program. Further, a willingness to seek out resources and assistance, adapt and embrace change in the classroom, and extend their professional learning and growth were all necessary ingredients for a successful classroom and support for Abe.

Resources

Books


Website

Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation
www.spdfoundation.net/
Every early childhood program has its own aspirations for the children and families it serves:

- Maybe you care most that children make friends and resolve conflicts peacefully.
- Maybe your passion is helping children and their families connect with the natural world.
- Perhaps you hope children will claim and master many expressive languages to make their ideas and imaginings visible to themselves and others.
- You may be committed to helping every child gain competence and confidence in early academics: writing, reading, and counting.

Whatever it is you hope to achieve, your success will depend on how fully you are able to help each child and family develop a sense of belonging in your program. To learn is to risk and to venture — and most of us won’t risk and venture unless we feel fundamentally secure where we are. We must feel that we are on the ‘inside’ of someplace safe in order to step outside of ourselves and grow.

So how, as the people already inside, do we open our programs fully to the people we serve? How do we create a culture in our programs that ensures each member of the community will feel a sense of belonging?

Here’s what I heard when I posed this question to some of the parents, teachers, and children who have been part of our program.

**Welcome Me**

“We felt welcomed immediately. You made us feel welcome with just the simple things like making a point of saying ‘Hello’ and asking ‘How are you?’ every morning. It felt like you really wanted to know how we were; it wasn’t just the ‘polite’ thing to do.” — Mikele, parent

“It’s very easy to get friends here. Because people like you the minute you walk in. Even if they don’t really, really like you, once you’re really in there, they still do like you. And you don’t even need to be nice to them. They just say, ‘Hi.’ I remember that it was easy to get into the school.” — Noah, age 5, reflecting back on starting school when he was 3.

Whenever and however you first meet the children and families who will become your children and families, you have the opportunity to help them feel welcome:

- Do you have a system for matching incoming families with ‘buddy families’ for play dates before school begins?
- At program open houses, are there plenty of teachers and parents there with smiles, handshakes, and greetings?
- When you host visitors, is their presence announced on your morning message board?
- Do you let current families know who is coming, so they will be prepared to introduce themselves?

“To know that not only are people willing to have you in their circle but happy to have you, is a gift.” — Susan, parent

**See Me**

“Moving from outside to inside has to do with being received in some way. . . . Reception that involves attention and acknowledgment of who you are. The people on the inside show an interest in how you experience the world and particularly this place we share together. Respect is embedded in the concept of welcome.” — Margie, parent

In 1990, Donna King, informed by her graduate school study of child care quality, worked with a group of teachers and parents to found Children First, a small, nonprofit early education program in Durham, North Carolina — and she has been teaching, directing, and, most of all, learning there ever since. She has three children — Cara, now 21; Anna Grace, now 18; and Josh, now 16 — all graduates of Children First.
“An absolute commitment to seeing and appreciating kids as individuals. I think recognizing each person is fundamental to a sense of belonging.” — Kristin B. B., parent

When you orient new families, do you focus on things you want them to do: finish the paperwork, send extra clothes, sign in and out? Or do you use this opportunity to launch the profound work of seeing that child and family with clarity and appreciation?

This is the time to ask families about their hopes and dreams, their challenges and vulnerabilities, their fierce beliefs and their deep questions. You are setting the tone for a new relationship of meaningful collaboration.

And in the weeks and months and years after orientation — each time we write an e-mail, compose a newsletter, put together a required form, sit down for a parent conference, document learning for a child’s portfolio, or ask about the weekend — through our tone and our choice of words, we have the opportunity to say it again: “I see you, in all your particularity, and you are more than an interchangeable part of this place.”

“Here’s how you make friends. You learn their names.” — Niko, age 4

“With four children over 9 years, it would have been easy (and frankly, natural) for the children to be ‘Berlin-Schulmans’ but that was not the case. They were Jake, Eli, Micah, and Becca and they were each seen, each time, with fresh eyes and complete acceptance.” — Brenda, parent

It begins with names. Ask people what they would like to be called: Beatrice or Bee or Bea? Sarah, or Miss Sarah, or Ms. Meyer? Post photos with names in a prominent place so that people have support in learning to put faces and names together. Find ways to make a project for children of learning ALL the names — not just the children, but their parents and siblings, too. Consider name quizzes in mailboxes, photo matching games, and lunchtime conversations about family names.

Show Me

“When you walk in you begin to know you are being encouraged to be in the world with sensitivity, caring, support, and beauty. This is a world that encourages community as well as allowing for individual exploration. The environment says, ‘Yes!’ It feels like all things are possible, and it does not take long to want to be there, to want to join, to leave the outside and come inside.” — Kristin, parent

“There is external evidence that you belong here. When you first come, there are pictures of yourself and your family all over the school. Your needs are anticipated. And there is a transparency about what’s expected. ‘Can I find my way around? Can I make sense of this place? Do I know what different parts are for? Is there someone to guide me if I can’t?’ I can look around and figure out what to do and that gives me a sense of agency.” — Margie, parent

Crafting the environment offers countless opportunities to create a culture of belonging. An environment that is orderly, beautiful, and comfortable invites confident engagement, the feeling that, “I know what to do here, so I belong here.” An environment with spaces and materials that children and families can claim for their own — mailboxes, coat hooks, snack cups and bowls — establishes ownership. And prominently displayed photos of children and their families say it most clearly of all: “This is your place.”

Give Me Time

“It was very strange at first, but as the year goes by you feel that it’s kind of like your home.” — Andy, age 5

“Like you could just take your time making friends. You don’t have to do it straight away.” — Alena, age 4, offering advice in a Welcome Book

“Well, the way I did it was just make a friend, one at a time. One step at a time. That’s how I did it.” — Oliver, age 4, reflecting on how to make friends in a Welcome Book

“‘Feeling on the inside’ to me means that I felt completely accepted for who we are as a family. That I could talk to any parent or teacher in the community without the awkwardness of being guarded, so as not to say something that may offend somebody. . . . So I was a little scared of being my complete self, at least until I figured out how this magical community worked so well and how I could contribute to it. That took a long time.” — Mikele, parent

“‘The image that comes to my mind here is of a little kid shyly peeking out from between the fingers of both hands, which are covering her eyes: she’s watching, she is taking it all in, she wants to see, she needs to know that she can do it at her pace . . . and that whomever she’s interacting with will wait patiently and not dismiss her presence just because she is not fully ‘in’ yet. How could she be, all at once?” — Judy, parent

Take a hard look at structures in your program that rush or abbreviate relationships. The more time a group of children, teachers, and families are together, the better. Show
patience, communicate consistently, and radiate a steady confidence that everyone will surely make their way to the inside. This lays the path to belonging.

Accept Me

“I believe that a large part of feeling that you belong starts with the feeling of being accepted for who you are. I never felt judged and I never felt that my children were being judged.” — Paula, parent

“The key to feeling a true sense of belonging and moving from the outside to the inside has to do with a feeling that you are . . . not only accepted, but valued and appreciated for all of who you are.” — Khristine, parent and teacher

“I remember you telling us before we enrolled: ‘If Niko were to bite another child, he doesn’t become an anonymous biter. We talk openly about this stuff.’ This put me at ease, knowing that we were all in it together and could trust in the community to work together on whatever came up, as best we could.” — Kristin B. B., parent

“I love my school so much and I want to kiss it. . . . Because it’s a safe school, that’s all.” — Max, age 4

In some ways, it is simple. If you want to make your program a safe and accepting place, you simply say it, over and over: “This is a safe place, and I won’t let you hurt anyone here, and I won’t let anyone else hurt you, either.” And then there are subtler strategies that communicate acceptance:

■ Inviting families and children to be open about their challenges and difficulties.
■ Generously using the phrase ‘still learning’ when those challenges present themselves.
■ Approaching families as soon as you think something may be wrong — especially when you suspect they are unhappy with you or the program: “I’m not completely sure what to do, but I have some ideas, and we’ll figure it out together.”

Put Me to Work

“You don’t get a sense of belonging from being catered to. You get it from contributing to the community. You belong when you feel connected through action of some kind (playing together, working together, a cause, a task). There has to be meaningful exchange for true belonging. A valuable part of the experience is the invitation to give of yourself.” — Margie, parent

“I help almost everybody in the school. I help them if they fall down; I would help them get back up. If someone gets hurt, I go over and see if they need anything, I think the nicest thing the teachers do is, they’re like, ‘Seth could you please go down there and rescue that ball?’ The nicest thing is when they just ask me to help.” — Seth, age 5

In a community, everybody pitches in. If children are to feel competent and valued, they need to do real work every day: put away blocks, wash the paint brushes, fetch a washcloth for an injured friend. It’s equally important to match families with tasks that are satisfying for them and genuinely important to the functioning of your program. Give parents some ideas about what you need, and ask what they can do: web page, fence repair, legal advice, laundry? Hold your first Saturday workday early in the year so that families can connect as they work beside each other moving mulch, weeding a garden, or painting outdoor blocks. Then take advantage of ongoing opportunities for shared labor.

“What makes a good school is clean-up time, so you can learn to cooperate.” — Sam, age 5

Help Me

“How some people meet their friends is by, once you get to school, somebody might help you with something and they might become your new friend. Friends play with you. Friends help you when you need help. Friends do a lot of stuff to make you feel like you’ve always been there.” — Anna Grace, age 5

“It wasn’t until the immense outpouring of support that our family received after my father died, that I really felt like an insider. The amount of love and care that every family showed for us sent me the message loud and clear: we were loved, we were supported. These actions really felt like they came from the heart . . . from the strong will to help one another in time of need.” — Mikele, parent

When you belong, you know who and how to ask for help. You trust that if you are hurt or upset, someone will stop and check on you and offer aid. When you belong, you know people will listen when you speak, and they trust you to listen, too. You feel surrounded by what we call ‘the caring conspiracy.’

Inform Me

“Just saying ‘Hi, I’m gonna be your friend’ is not okay. You have to agree with the other person. You can’t just tell them to be your friend.” — Susanna, age 5, offering advice in a Welcome Book
When you give prospective families clear, complete, and unapologetic information about your program — emphasizing your high expectations for family involvement and the principles and policies you will not compromise — they know what they are getting into from the beginning. When a family makes an informed choice, they are on their way to belonging. After the choice is made, a steady flow of information keeps the path to belonging clear. For children, you can provide a “Welcome Book,” a collection of photographs and words from teachers and children outlining routines, introducing spaces and materials, and even explaining rules — all in a tone that balances genuine excitement about the opportunities ahead with an acknowledgment of how tender and scary it can feel to be new. Families will need plenty of written information, including clear instructions about required paperwork — but also something more playful, like an invitation to work with their child on pages for the program’s “Family Book.”

**Allow Me**

“We feel we belong when we are allowed agency, and share power. When you belong, you are part of a story.” — Margie, parent

“Belonging is not only about being accepted for who you are (or worse, tolerated for your particularity or ‘difference’), but really being valued for the way you add to and transform the collective.” — Laura, parent

How does your program change from day to day and year to year in response to the actual people who inhabit it? For both children and their families, a sense of belonging comes from making an impact:

- Children see their work displayed with care.
- Children watch their friends act out their dictated stories, knowing that later all the families will be reading those same stories at home via e-mail.
- Parents claim a territory or a task — the compost, the flower garden, shelving books — and get public acknowledgement for what they contribute.
- Families see the odds and ends they donate to ‘creation station’ end up as fancy spaceships and baby food and magic wands.

How visible is the history of your program and the ways it has been shaped over time by individual children, parents, and teachers?

**Celebrate Me**

“The feeling that you are welcome and respected — celebrated, even — happens in layers and deepens over time.” — Susan, parent

“Belonging comes through thoughtful rituals that include parents. By having families create important presents, and including us in special days, not as spectators but as singing participants.” — Ilene, parent

Ritual is a powerful and versatile tool for creating a culture of belonging. Carefully consider the occasions you choose to celebrate. Do your rituals clearly reflect your values? Do they deepen people’s connection to those values and their connection to each other? We love birthdays as an opportunity to:

- hear stories from families about things their child has learned over the years.
- invite the birthday child to name ambitions for the future.
- ask everyone else in the community to reflect on what they especially appreciate about the birthday child.

We treasure our December “Stone Soup Feast” as an opportunity to pause and celebrate this moment when we know we have evolved from being new to each other to being, as a favorite song puts it, “Friends of the Family.” And we embrace our end-of-year Graduation Celebration as one last chance to celebrate each child’s unique contributions to our community and to express our absolute belief in their potential to make the most of whatever comes next.

**Inspire Me**

“And of course, belonging is about the way being with others in the collective transforms you.” — Laura, parent

“I remember the very first meeting where you asked us what we wanted for our children (all huddled up in a small space together). This made me feel like we were going to take a preschool parenting voyage together — and it was going to be a fun trip!” — Ilene, parent

“I feel a sense of belonging when I am invited to be my best self.” — Sarah, parent and teacher

Inspiration happens where your intention to create a culture of belonging meets up with the broader purpose of your work:

- Why should someone want to identify with this place and belong here?
- What in your program speaks to the best in people?
- How does your program invite people to identify and reach for their own highest aspirations?

“I said it the first day and will say it again: I wish I could stay here forever.” — Kristin, parent

“I’m not a preschooler. I’m a Children Firster!” — Jack, age 4