

Finding the Words...to Self-Regulate!

(Part 1)

Welcome to a new column and a brand new topic: how our kids find words to promote their own self-regulation! We know only too well that the world can be over-stimulating, demanding, and even scary for our kids with ASD. And, of course, the kids feel this acutely! But often, they come up with words that help make things safe again. And, these words can work, as long as someone is there to understand them!

So how do our ASD kids use language to calm themselves? In a broader sense, how do they find the words to self-regulate? And, how can they enlist our help in creating environments that promote self-regulation?

First let's ask ourselves this question: how do neuro-typical adults do it? We don't even think about it most of the time, but, when we're nervous, we talk to ourselves to calm down. "It's ok," we say, "you've done this a thousand times before." We use self-talk to keep ourselves moving forward during busy days. We remind ourselves, silently or in a whisper: "Don't forget the ice cream before you leave the store." We sing to ourselves to stay awake or to keep from being bored. And, we organize ourselves before many of the multi-step tasks of our day. Talk is a tool, and we "find the words" that work for us throughout our day.

We also create the kinds of environments we want through talk. We ask the rhetorical question, "How do I look?" before the party, and our friends know this is not the time for honest critique and reply, "You look great!" We plead, "But I look

so terrible in this dress," and again, our friends know to deny this. "Oh, you do not!" they scoff. "You look wonderful!" So, we settle down, move away from the mirror, and go to the party with a modicum of self-confidence. In our hearts we

know that at least our friends love us enough to tell us what we need to hear!

Our kids are the same...they know their family and friends love them the way they are, and just knowing that is helpful in itself. But our kids' pleas for more specific reassurance often fall on deaf ears because the pleas are nonverbal, or difficult to decipher. As a result, our kids often don't get the help they need to create a safe environment around themselves. What do our kids sound like? And what can we do to "listen" better?

Here are a few scenarios from a typical week at our clinic. I think at least one of them will ring some bells with you.

Story #1: Russel is an optimistic boy, with the ability to create stories that promise a happy ending. Russel thrives

in most environments, as long as there is a sensory room for him to visit periodically. Russel hates loud noises, however, and has a healthy fear of being surprised by them. "There's no vacuum cleaner upstairs," he hopefully states, creating the environment he wants with his words. "Right," others reassure him, and he moves on with confidence. Recently, there had been a very loud shampooing machine in our building, and Russel commented as we walked in, "S is for shampooer." Enigmatic, perhaps, but I knew what he was talking about.

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“I’m not sure if it’s here today,” I said, and Russel replied, “There’s no shampooer upstairs,” using hope to create the ideal world. I knew I was part of that hope, and promised to check it out for him.

Russel can mostly fend for himself. As long as people who love him listen carefully, and read between the lines, Russel has the capacity to use his words to self-regulate and to feel safe and secure in his environment.

Story #2: Mickey, too, is a happy person...a cheerful young man with a ready laugh, and the strong desire to share joy. Mickey likes to talk about his favorites: people, activities, foods, and places, and thrives on joking with people he can count on to share a chuckle. Mickey is positive above all else, and never utters a discouraging word of any kind. If his stomach feels terrible, he won’t say anything about it; he just won’t eat. If he’s angry, he will write about his feelings, but will never give them voice. If he feels sad, he will seek out the most cheerful people in his environment, and trick them into laughing with him.

“Close your mouth,” Mickey instructs me. Then, with his smile and grin, Mickey makes me giggle, then laugh out loud as I unwittingly open my mouth again! Sooner or later, depending on the day, the game starts all over again. I close my mouth; I try not to laugh, but it never works for long! Before I know it, I am laughing again...and all is right with the world! Like I do with my friends who ask how they look, I know the magic formula with Mickey, and I help him create a safe, happy environment!

Story #3: Bevin doesn’t have the directness of Russel, nor the transparency of Mickey. His communication is more metaphoric, and not so easy to read...until it’s too late. Bevin might pull out a cryptic line from a movie or roar like a lion with hopeful authority, but he often fails to “find the words” to tell others what he needs as he goes along in his day. Without easy access to words to modify his environment, Bevin often just puts on his headphones and blocks it out. The environment just keeps on buzzing around him, however, until Bevin finally erupts and finds some words

he regrets afterwards. “Shut up!” he finally demands, but, instead of enlisting support, these words offend and create anxiety in others. As his long-time friend, I do actually “shut up” when Bevin tells me to, and I try not to take his words personally. But I also realize I should have stopped talking many minutes before, back when Bevin was silently screaming for more space to move around in, and absolute quiet.

I have learned a lot about “shutting up” from Bevin, though, and we have even negotiated several two-hour peer parties without Bevin going over the top. How? By honoring his unspoken pleas, and giving him freedom to move around, to find quiet places to be alone and regroup, and plenty of physical supports when he chooses to be within the group.

There are so many things our kids can teach us about their own sense of safety and well-being. These stories have just touched the tip of the iceberg of self-regulation. Our kids are often wiser than the world gives them credit for, and it’s up to us to recognize this. That our kids can “find the words” at all when the environment gets rough is amazing. And that we can help them be understood is cause for real hope for their bright futures!

In the columns to come, we will further explore self-regulation, from the perspectives of the kids who live with dysregulation daily. We will address what we can do to support our kids’ endeavors to make their world safe, and help them broaden their circles of communication. After years of being with these three friends of mine, and many others, I’ve learned my role in many different “one act plays.” I know that my part in these “social scripts” makes life safe and workable for my young buddies. It’s something I would do for any friend... 📌

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Finding the Words...to Self Regulate!

(Part 2)

“Here comes the Papa,” announces Bevin.
“Oh, I don’t think so...he never comes home at two in the afternoon,” replies his mother Linda.

But, three minutes later, Bevin is proven right, and Papa enters the front door. Linda calculated that three minutes before, her husband had just turned onto their street...five blocks away!

“We call him ‘Sonic Ears,’” Linda added, with a sigh and only thinly veiled humor, as she relayed her story to me.

“It’s getting worse,” she continued. “The listening therapy he did years ago was great, but I think he needs it again.” She was right: those super-sonic ears had become over-active again, and Bevin found everyday sounds too loud, and loud sounds over-powering to the point of pain. That he wears his noise-busting head phones virtually all the time is no surprise.

The surprise, however, is that Bevin can make it through the school day at all! “He’s a good boy”, notes his mother, “and he wants to learn, but he pinched a teacher last week, really hard this time.” In middle school, that doesn’t wash well. We had found him a good PT in the community again, and decided we should try to get him back into OT and listening therapy as well.

As we continue Bevin’s story in this second column about finding words to self-regulate, let’s compare three of his very different reactions to auditory input:

- When the sound is just right for him (a familiar car five blocks away), he is able to access good language.
- When the sound is too loud for him (conversational loudness, with one other person), he tolerates it for a few minutes, or even a half hour. When he can’t stand it any longer, he puts on his ear phones or engages in “self-talk” to drown it out. If he is pressed to listen beyond his tolerance, however, he automatically delivers a movie line, like, “Shut up!”

- When the sound hurts (too much background noise, multiple voices, loud voices), he tolerates it as long as he can with a combination of noise-busting ear phones and self-talk. If pressed to listen or respond, however, he falls apart and may resort to “self-defense” or pinching.

Bevin is clearly suffering from sensory defensiveness, which has been part of his 14 years of life. When he has sufficient “heavy work” built into his life (vigorous exercise all day long at summer camp; regular and appropriately-intense PT work; well-selected listening therapy), the ear phones come off, and Bevin is engaged much of the time. His language blossoms, and all is right with the world. But, for most of the school year, none of these things were available, and Bevin and his family have suffered dearly.

So, as we begin to learn more about Bevin’s sense of safety and well-being, we realize that we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg of his experience of dysregulation. Sometimes, the only ones who make us really understand how it feels are the adults with ASD who have the sophistication of words, like Temple Grandin. As she often says, the sound of the school bell in her childhood felt like a dentist’s drill in her ears. But she considers her own auditory

sensitivity minor compared to others on the spectrum: “An auditory sensitivity to noises, when sounds hurt the ears, can be extremely debilitating...Severe sensory sensitivity can be a MAJOR barrier to learning in children...” When I looked at Bevin’s face these last few weeks, when things really got bad, he looked like someone with a migraine headache who could barely keep his eyes open in the intense sunlight.

As we have said before, our kids are wiser than the world gives them credit for, and when they don’t talk about the pain, it may be for good reason. Who wants to talk about how bad it feels? It’s like adding insult to injury. But, Bevin has remained

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bravely-communicative during this crisis, knowing he can pull himself out of the depression of self-acknowledgement, and that his family and friends will help.

This is the conversation he and I had last Thursday, on our way to his PT appointment. He looks forward to these escapes, not only because they get him out of the cacophony that is the hallway of his school, but because he knows he will be learning some new skills for self-regulation.

- B** *Me hurt everywhere.* (quoting Petrie in *Land Before Time*)
- M** *I know, Bevin; I can see it in your face.*
- B** *I'm OK.* (stating what he'd like to be true)
- M** *You will be OK; Mom and I are getting you into OT again.*
- B** *You've got to be kidding.*
- M** *No, really...we're going to do the paperwork Friday.*
- B** *Me hurt everywhere.*
- M** (I don't respond this time; I don't want to make it worse.)
- B** *Don't be ridicilus.* (a Tigger line that makes him laugh)
- M** (I join in...and we arrive at PT in a hopeful mood.)

In our next few columns we will continue this topic, and begin to amass some principles to guide our support of kids who struggle to find the words to self-regulate, and to find the words that will help. However, even now the first few are clear:

- If a child can find some words, any words, that communicate what he needs, honor them! Hear the intention of the words, not the words themselves. Don't take the words literally; and don't take offense, even if you're told to "Shut up." This is not about us; it's about our children's survival. Their words are a cry for help, and now is not the time to worry about social politeness. After the crisis, we can work on language form, but right now it's

about pain and fear. As we said last time, if Bevin tells me to shut up, I know I should have minutes (or years) ago.

- Remember what a child has told you; you might not hear it again. To have to say something twice is sure to make it worse. Like Bevin, our kids want to feel better, so moving into laughter, self-talk, distraction is a God-send.
- When kids need to find the words the most, they probably can't. It takes some real self-awareness, and some experience with one's own body, to head off a melt-down long enough to warn people it's coming. Afterwards, kids like Bevin feel incredibly sorry to have pinched or bitten someone they love, and often say so, profusely. To avoid the same situation next time, he might just be able to pinch himself instead. As disturbing as this looks, it may well be a step towards being able to announce it before it happens.

Yes, there's plenty more to learn from the brave ASD children around us. As this series continues, we will address what we can do to support our kids' endeavors to make their world safe, to help them modulate their sensitivities, to help them become well-regulated, and to help them "find the words" to advocate for themselves! As Bevin often reminds me, "That's what friends are for!" ■

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Finding the Words...to Self Regulate!

(Part 3)

“Me hurt everywhere!” In the voice of Petrie, the friendly little Pterodactyl from *Land Before Time*, it sounds kind of cute. Spoken by a child on the spectrum, it might be erroneously dismissed as “verbal stim.” But, said by an ASD child whose language we know well, it is a cry for help! Slightly veiled and clever, perhaps, and softened because it conjures up an animated character and several friends who come to the rescue, it is still a cry for our help.

In our last column, it was Bevin who spoke these words and alerted me that the world’s sounds had become absolutely noxious to him, and that his headphones were there to stay...until we could do something about his worsening sensory defensiveness. Like the unfortunate plight of so many of our kids, by the time Bevin “found” those words of desperation, his situation was already nearly unbearable...and time for Petrie’s friends to listen!

Before we go on, let’s review the first two principles from our previous column:

1. If a child can find some words, any words, that communicate his sensory plight and regulation needs, honor them! This rewards your child’s bravery, and helps strengthen your relationship.

2. Remember what a child has told you! Although the situation continues or reoccurs, you may never hear about it again. It hurts too much already, and continuing to talk about it adds “insult to injury.”

Our third principle is almost universal with our kids, but most poignant with those who have almost no words to access under stress:

3. When kids need to find the words the most, they probably can’t!

Another ASD child, Ernie, provides a case-in-point. A happy 6-year-old boy, bright and hopeful, Ernie is, however, without access to words to communicate unless everything is going especially well. When he is dysregulated, and needs them the most, he absolutely cannot get to them. He can put his hands over his ears, though, and this one-size-fits-all gesture says the world is too loud...or bright...or scary...or unpredictable. In other words, his dysregulation is announced with this gesture about 50% of the time, while the other 50% of the time, he moves straight to withdrawal, or meltdown.

Ernie has low muscle tone and doesn’t feel tactile or proprioceptive input very well. He struggles with “under-registration” of much of the world’s input. He has an extremely difficult time knowing how his body fits together, and how to move his arms, legs, and torso to turn around on a slide, climb onto a play structure, or even to create facial expression. He appears placid, even “uncaring”, and rarely initiates action (including speech) in his own behalf. Ernie is dyspraxic, but more fundamentally, he lacks muscle tone, strength, or even awareness, to support motor planning of any kind.

But there’s an exception to Ernie’s under-responsiveness to the world, and it is acutely felt by Ernie, and his family. When he is sick

or tired, Ernie experiences sound and light as physical pain, and “goes ballistic” out of desperation. Ernie has trouble acting purposefully under the best of conditions; when he is in pain, he has no hope.

What can we do to help Ernie? Needless to say, we cannot wait until he is dysregulated to step in! Ernie has to “find his body” first, learn to gauge the input coming in and try reacting to it, before he can “find the words” to talk about it.

This is a perfect segue to the next two principles:

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4. Kids' dysregulation needs to be addressed during time of regulation. While this might seem patently obvious, it is not patently recognized in real life. "Why fix something that isn't broken", we think...there is so much else to do. So we tend to ignore helping kids respond to dysregulation until they are dysregulated. But it's too late then, because the whole idea of being regulated is that you have your wits about you enough to act. When your wits aren't about you, you can't act.

The workable alternative, then, is to help kids become aware of their body's "engine" while it is humming along, alert but calm, and notice what makes it chug...so they can catch it revving up uninvited, or becoming sluggish without their permission. We will come back to this issue next time.

But what about kids like Ernie, who are mostly unaware of their bodies in the first place? That's where we need to focus our attention. It's the foundation layer that supports the regulation layer of our cake, and it needs to be firmly on the plate before we can expect the regulation layer to stay in place. As the layers get used to each other, the synergy between them strengthens both. And then we can actually shift our attention to the icing: the words to describe them! This takes us to our next principle:

5. Kids can't find the words to describe their dysregulation until they're comfortable saying them when it's safe!

For Bevin, watching Petrie get through a harrowing experience is invaluable. That Petrie dares to talk about pain is also a great comfort to Bevin. He began to mimic Petrie's voice when he was feeling good, and this bolstered his confidence, preparing him for the worst: when he really did hurt all over. And that's part of the trick: talking like Petrie doesn't make anything worse when we feel just fine. Later, when we truly don't feel fine, daring to utter the same words isn't as scary.

And this brings us to our next principle:

6. The words that work for a child are ones he chooses himself. They resonate with him, conveying the feeling and mood he needs, and are regulating in and of themselves!

Yes, we often teach generic phrases to our children, and they are good language targets for the long-term. But until a child has some experience with his own words, the ones he chooses, ours just don't work as well. I am reminded of Mickey, who might "greet" me 10 times an hour with, "Hi Marge." And I never fail to reply with an authentic, warm, "Hi Mickey." This is Mickey's language of regulation, and he uses it whenever he needs reassurance.

I have an important role in Mickey's "script" and it strikes me as similar to the role I play in another friend's reassurance script. "How do I look?" she asks, and I invariably answer, "You look great!" Yes, I am honored to be a part of both of these "drills" because I know I am restoring calm in my friends who choose their own, idiosyncratic words for self-regulation.

This brings us, then, to our final principle:

7. The answers we give our children help with regulation too! In our next column we will delve deeper into individual profiles of self-regulation, and what answers, and strategies, we can provide our children. For Bevin, knowing that I understood, even if the solution was months away, helped him relax, and, like Petrie, ride out the storm with his friends.

Until next time then, dear reader, know that hearing your child's plea for help with regulation is invaluable, even if you don't know the answer...yet! ■

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Finding the Words...to Self Regulate!

(Part 4)

Welcome, readers, to our continuing topic of self-regulation, this time focusing on how to respond when our kids ask for help...and how our answers matter! Let's begin with a comment I heard recently: "My son can stay pretty regulated for much of the school day now. But it's guaranteed he'll jump on the trampoline for an hour once he gets home!"

We know how hard it is for our kids to achieve self-regulation, and how they need appropriate sensory-motor therapies, and a schedule of the right activities to get them there. So how can kids learn to put their sensory-motor needs "on hold," to postpone their "breaks"? I've learned that it's when they can see the light at the end of the tunnel!

"Me hurt everywhere!" you might recall my friend Bevin saying. He could find the words to ask for help, but then it was up to me to respond! I had to tell him I could only *try* to help, that I couldn't fix it, at least not right away. My heart went out to him: the pain was still there...but he didn't fall apart!

Bevin knew that I heard him...and he knew that I would try hard to find a solution. In other words, he had hope! And with hope, our children can get through some pretty hard times, and some pretty long school days.

Hope is hardly a permanent solution, of course, but it is the promise of trying. With hope, Bevin could face his days at school, earphones in place. And on a therapy day, Bevin would announce, "Hellooooo, Mama, I go to Marge's. Oh happy day today! It's OK, Mom. I can do it. I will take care of you, of Bevin, happy big tall boy." That was the voice of hope!

So, what do we say when our kids come to us in pain and dysregulation?

First we answer our children in the spirit of understanding and partnership, and with our golden rule liberally doused with perspective-taking. When we have both to offer, but we prefer chocolate, we don't automatically give chocolate to someone who wants vanilla. We give vanilla!

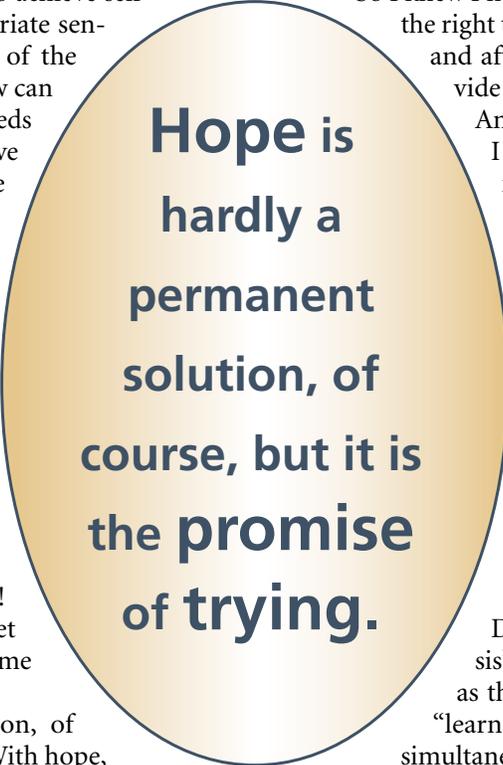
The same rule applies to what we give our children. Bevin experiences pain daily, but doesn't like to talk about it much.

So I knew I needed to hold my tongue as much as say the right thing. Bevin was brave to voice his angst, and after I acknowledged it, I needed to provide a dose of laughter to balance the scale. And, of course, I needed to let him know I would help find a real solution, even if it took time.

Bevin is 14 years old, we should note, so he has a sense of time. And hope requires knowing that the future will come! If he were younger, my answer would have been preceded by some deep pressure activity. Words would have taken second billing to helping him feel better immediately: squishes, then hope, in that order!

Because self-regulation is so elusive to our children, we can't help but be amazed at how natural it is for most children. Well-respected OT, Georgia DeGangi, writes about the "homeostasis" underlying regulation, and describes it as the developmental stage when an infant "learns to take interest in the world while simultaneously regulating arousal and responses to sensory stimulation..."

Sound awesome? Yes! So how do we help our own dysregulated children find that natural, but fragile, place of self-regulation? In our clinic, we find a useful beginning point to be a sensory-motor questionnaire like the one by DeGangi and Lynn Balzer-Martin. The Sensorimotor History Questionnaire for Preschoolers looks at five areas:



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activity level and attention, processing of touch, processing of movement, emotional maturity, and motor planning and coordination. We reflect on such questions as, “Does your child enjoy getting into an upside-down position?” “Is your child fearful of heights and climbing?” “Does your child seem ‘loose’ and ‘floppy?’” You, too, will find the information you record about your child’s regulation immensely useful!

Then try this exercise: reflect on a time your child was happy and comfortable: smiling, laughing, maybe looking at you. Code that moment as “optimal regulation”, and look at it through sensory-motor lenses. From your child’s perspective, what was going on and how did he feel? Why?

Now think of a time your child was dysregulated. Recall a short scenario: your child played with you for three minutes, screamed, ran away, stopped screaming, and sat down. What do you think happened, from his perspective? How did he feel just before he ran? How did he feel as he was running? Then how did he feel?

You won’t be able to reflect on all of this in one sitting, of course, or even by yourself. But, getting started will help you have a conversation about regulation, and know what questions to ask! In the process, you will be looking at your child’s sensory day, and ideas for a “sensory diet”: the undulations of regulation in his day, and ways to help even them out. What you recorded about the incident above might be coded as: one minute of sitting and playing (optimal regulation), one minute he probably needed more or less of something (adequate regulation), one minute of increasing restlessness (marginal regulation), 30 seconds of screaming and running (dysregulated), until a more regulated state returned.

Now, armed with a little data, and lots of questions, how do you approach “finding the words” to respond to your child’s plea, whether it’s an overt appeal for help, or an act like screaming or running? Here are some things that will help:

1. Don’t take dysregulated behavior personally. It’s not about you, so resist the natural urge to be hurt. Instead, say or do something that reflects your conviction that you are in partnership with your child! He’s not running away

from you; he’s just running! It’s perfectly fine to join him, and stay together while he is regaining regulation.

2. Think from your child’s perspective. Unless safety is an issue, resist verbalizing from your own perspective. It’s time to think from his perspective and imagine what about running made him feel better. It did, so honor his strategy as the best he had available at the moment!

3. Log away “data” from this incident; you are amassing questions for the OT consult you have in your future!

4. Remember that your response to your child comes in three parts, only one of which is “word”. The core is “thought,” from which your words (part two) emanate. The third part is “deed,” and it’s just as important to smile and breathe as it is to say the right words. If you know that running is a perfectly good regulation strategy, your voice and your relaxed smile will reflect it! Your dysregulated child will feel it too!

In our next column, we will walk you through some of the regulation options you have available as you continue this journey with your child! Until then, we hope your child can feel your hopefulness, and gain a measure of regulation because of it!

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Finding the Words...to Self Regulate!

(Part 5)

It was 10 years ago that the *Autism Asperger's Digest* came into being, and those of us who were around back then remember that sensory-motor interventions were at a fledgling stage for our kids! Sensory Integration (SI), defined as the inability to accurately process information coming to the brain from the senses, was often considered “experimental” when applied to ASD, even though the principles had found their way into the bag of tricks of many OTs. Now, 10 years later, SI is regularly used with spectrum kids, and many OTs and SLPs consider a good “sensory diet” to be the essential first step of any treatment.

The autism community has come of age in its embrace of sensory-motor interventions and environmental supports for our kids. In my area of the country, almost every school has a “sensory room” or something similar, and teachers support the sensory breaks so vital to our kids’ self-regulation. In the course of the school day, a good sensory-motor diet mixes physical supports with academic work, to keep our kids’ “engines” humming along, and their days productive. Kids

have fidget toys to hold during circle time, movable seats at their desks, heavy work breaks throughout the day, and plenty of time to chill out on the playground. SI is even part of recreational activities for ASD kids in our community, with our Autism Society chapter sponsoring quarterly parties at an inflated playground, and monthly sensory-friendly movies at a local theater.

In our last column, we talked about the varieties of sensory-motor supports available to keep our kids’ engines (self-regulation) purring along, and, in this 10th anniversary edition of the *Digest*, it is appropriate to recall an early article that introduced the engine concept to this readership. That author, almost 10 years ago, invoked readers to consider what it was like to have an infant “who woke every 10 minutes for hour after hour.” Well, we know only too well about these

sleep/wake disturbances now, and we know they are part of our kids’ dysregulated systems.

We have learned a lot about regulation since that time, and have taken the principles introduced to us by pioneers like Jean Ayres, and vanguards like DeGangi, and made them household words. To paraphrase DeGangi, whom we quoted in the last column: the foundations of self-regulation lie in “homeostasis,” which allows a child to take an interest in the world by simultaneously regulating arousal and responses to sensory stimulation. DeGangi noted that homeostasis

“is important in the modulation of physiological states, including sleep-wake cycles and hunger and satiety. It is needed for mastery of sensory functions and for learning self-calming and emotional responsivity.”

While we are astounded at the seeming complexity of the task, we simultaneously commit ourselves to helping our kids for all the years it takes to achieve this miracle! Over the years, as I have applied these principles in our clinic, I regularly “find the words” to reassure kids, and to help them become

advocates for their own sensory-motor needs.

To follow are some of the words I have used, with a take home lesson following each. Of course, every child doesn’t need every item; consider those you know will connect with your child!

1. “Let’s run! I’ll go with you... Race you to the top! I’ve got something for us to play with when we get there!”

It’s called “heavy work” when our joints and muscles get deep input. Our kids run on flat surfaces if that’s all they have available. If we offer them what they need, like higher hills to climb, they will regulate faster, and it will stick longer.

2. “Want a squish? Here, I’ll push my whole weight against you... There! I see you smiling! That must feel good!”

“Prop(rioception) is your friend” as the OTs say. When your

**“Prop(rioception)
is your friend”
as the OTs say.**



child needs to get grounded, a good squish will help. And when she needs to get revved up, a good squish will help do that too!

3. “Come on...let’s jump! I’ll hold you right here... See? Now, you can get the max from your jumping!”

Prop is (still) your friend! As children grow bigger and more coordinated, they also “graduate” to bigger jumping surfaces. (Think outside trampolines with screens around them, and then gymnastics lessons!)

4. “Ouch! It’s too loud (or bright or busy) in here! I’ll get you outside right this minute!”

Over-sensitivity really does hurt! Get outside, and, then talk to your OT tomorrow.

5. “Sorry, buddy. I meant to give you a big ol’ bear hug... But I gave you a yucky little touch instead!”

Touch deeply, not lightly, on kids whose systems can accommodate touch from other people. Ask your OT for a program to address sensory defensiveness.

6. “I know you feel yucky today. I promise I’ll try to figure out what’s wrong! Right now, let’s go find a nice, quiet place to chill out, and then we’ll figure out what to do next.”

It’s not the autism that makes our kids sick – it’s often the other way around! The chemicals in the new carpet, for instance, are truly sickening, and it would be better for all of us if we didn’t use them. Our kids are the “canaries” who react to the toxins and the “mono-diets” of our culture, and we need to pay attention to their wise, sensitive systems.

7. “Hey, you were so brave to tell me how awful it was.” or “That was awful, wasn’t it. It’s okay you didn’t talk about it that time. I could see it in your face!”

Kids simply can’t “use their words” all the time, especially when it makes it worse for them to talk about it! I often remind myself that “I’m the adult here,” which sometimes means trying to find the words when our kids simply can’t!

8. “Hey, sleepy-head, let’s mix it up a little!”

Too much of a good thing is, well, too much. If a child continues with one activity seemingly forever, it’s no longer working for regulation. The OTs say that to work well, a sensory-motor activity needs to have the right intensity, frequency, rhythmicity, or a better set-up to begin with. Talk to your OT.

9. “Wow, buddy, what balance! You like it ‘on the edge,’ don’t you?”

Living “on the edge” isn’t just about extreme sports! The OTs have a phrase for it, the “just right challenge.” It has to be difficult to be alerting (enough) to set kids up for the task at hand. For example, our younger dyspraxic kids need to be moving, or balancing to the max, to get their voices going!

10. “You make me so happy!” or “You are so smart!” or “Your smile is the best. It lights up my day!”

It seems like our kids often perceive themselves as a bundle of pains and problems, who only get to see the pained expression on *our* faces as we try to make things better. Our kids need to know, deeply, that they are also bundles of happiness, and can create smiles of joy on our faces! This might be the best “sensory input” of all! ■

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