



## **Entrainment With a Parent as a Key to Sensory Processing Stability**

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The question has arisen for me: “Why do we see an ever-increasing diagnosis rate of sensory processing disorder, which is sometimes subsumed under the very non-descriptive label of “spectrum disorder.”

I would like to offer a potential prevention strategy, based on 35 years of experience in the field of NeuroDevelopmental Movement®.

The newborn baby does not have a sense of a separate self since its experience of life has already been mediated through the mother’s body for nine months. The fact of live birth changes everything, but the process of becoming accustomed to being in the world outside of the womb is one that takes time and a gentle introduction to a separate life.

The newborn instinctively orients towards her mother’s body, crawling up her torso soon after birth to find a source of food. Hormones are surging powerfully; instincts dominate; and neither infant nor mother can tolerate, without some stress, separation. The baby is designed to be attached to, or close to, and to learn from the mother.

I have observed that this entrainment, extended over the early months of life, can (in the absence of fetal exposure to various toxins and violence) promote a level of sensory processing stability that will allow our children to live comfortably in the world and cope with a wide range of environments.

Here is the story of my buddy Christopher who taught me about sensory processing.

I offered to take nine-month-old Christopher for a walk in the just emerging spring sunshine on a rare mild day. His mom and I discussed taking the stroller but he hated getting into it and I find it awkward. I wanted to get him on the ground looking at the flowers just emerging, the grass that smelled so sweet, the earth that smelled so pungent. So, I held him in arms -- all 20 pounds. Right away he found a place where his little hand could touch my skin. He is so new to the world, so everything is new for him. Winter was just ending and being outside was almost a new experience.

As we walked down our quiet street a car went by and I felt his hand tighten on my skin. He leaned into my neck, as he visually traced the car from the moment he could see it approaching until it disappeared in the distance. When the car receded, the grip of his little fingers softened and he moved 1/4 of an inch away from my neck. As another car went by, I again felt the feather light pressure of his hand seeking assurance, coupled with curiosity, and eyes as wide as saucers.



Lowering him to the ground to lean over a patch of crocuses, he was silenced by the newness. No longer in total charge of his environment as he feels in his living room, where he is vocal and constantly moving, he expressed his tentative approach with a solid grip on me, but quiet attention to this new world. After handling (and crushing) a couple of flowers in his fingers, he turned and launched himself against me for reassurance and a big hug.

Now we see a group of children at the playground -- aha! Lots of noise and run-around, run-around behavior. Christopher again used my body and presence as his touchstone and with each encounter relaxed more. At no time did his curiosity cease, but at no time did he not need physical touch to help him integrate his own responses. Children running and bouncing a ball caused him again to lean into me, pressing his cheek against mine. By the third pass of a very energetic and noisy six-year-old, Christopher no longer needed direct cheek contact, but sat quietly on my lap in apparent amazement.

Over 20 minutes' time I witnessed him growing in his social awareness and sensory stability. When he was evaluating the activities of the noisy beings around him he watched silently, but as his comfort level was elevated he did little baby shouts of joy when the children were shouting. He watched with curiosity as balls were tossed into the air or rolled across the grass, and could barely take his eyes off of the girls bouncing up and down, up and down as they played jump-rope.

I was amazed at the dance between us, the subtle pressures and releases, no heavier than the weight of a bird's wing. But contained within all of that physical exchange were the unspoken reassurances about the safety of the world and his ability to interact with it. I began to understand that the physical presence and reassurance of trusted parents and safe adults is key to supporting the curiosity of the infant - from curiosity comes exploration, from curiosity and exploration come learning.

I then think of the many children who see the world outside their home from a stroller where the child cannot see their caretaker because that person is behind them. Given their limits of understanding, the baby would have little reason not to feel they are alone. I then wonder how all of their little tensions about being in a new world are resolved. How are their fears accommodated if they cannot lean into and literally hold on to a responsive, loving adult? Where/when do those fears get resolved? Do they accumulate to create a general palate of anxiety? If anxiety is dominant, how can anyone, child or adult, generate the curiosity and openness necessary for learning?

I have come to believe that is it entrainment with a parent that provides the basis for Sensory Processing Stability (the healthy side of our sensory experience.). While in contact with an adult, the infant can process the wide range of sensory information coming into their brain, and it is through reading the pulse rate, the metabolism, the sweat, and the mood shifts of the parent that a child can be taught -- taught through entrainment --- how to interpret the sometimes jarring information that comes from the world through their eyes, ears, and skin.



I believe that sensory stability can be achieved in most children through a longer period of physical entrainment with their loving caregivers, and that equipment that creates any kind of barrier between the child and the parent may be setting them up for poor sensory processing in the future.

We are born as miracles with infinite potential to love and learn, and the means to reach that potential. Without our knowledge of how to actualize that potential, the world loses out every day.

I am inviting each parent with whom I work to toss the baby strollers, etc. into the garage and take their baby on a 'curiosity walk' to feel with their own bodies and see with their own eyes the beautiful dance that happens as the baby experiences the world. I invite parents to experience firsthand how much security and parental facilitation must be at the root of both sensory stability and true learning.

**Bette Lamont© 2023**