



CREATING A RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Greetings:

The theme of this newsletter is *the responsive environment*. You might ask, "What does that mean and why is it important to my child?" Take a minute to think about the environments that make you most comfortable. Is it one where you can hear the sounds of nature? Perhaps it is a place that is warm and cozy with no one else around. Is it a place where you can move about, be loud, and share your excitement? Now, think about the environments that make you least comfortable. Perhaps you are a person that does not like to be alone. Maybe the mall or super store with all the people, sounds, and activity lead to a stress headache. As an adult we can work to avoid those environments that make us uncomfortable, stressed, or unhappy and we can create environments that make us comfortable and happy. Children respond to their environment in both positive and negative ways. The next time your child responds to his or her environment in a negative way (crying, withdrawn, tantrum, etc.) take a minute to look at the surroundings. Is there something about this environment that your child is reacting to? What can you change? Sometimes these can be hard decisions, like going to the store without your child, which means finding a babysitter. A responsive environment is one that is predictable and can meet the needs of the child and the family. When the environment meets the needs of both you and your child you can both anticipate positive interactions and the continued development of happy and healthy relationships. This newsletter is packed with ideas on how to help you structure environments that support the social and emotional development of young children. Enjoy!

Susan A. Radway, EdD
Project Director

What does a resilient young child look like?

In short, resiliency is the ability to "bounce back" from the demands of life. Many factors can contribute to a child's resiliency including biological (i.e. health), environmental (i.e. safety), and psychosocial (i.e. healthy parent-child attachment). Less resilient children are at risk for being vulnerable to negative developmental outcomes, which can have a damaging impact throughout their lives.¹ Research has found that children as young as preschool age can build their resiliency skills to better cope with life stressors. Self-confidence, emotional regulation, problem solving, and empathy are all considered to be important factors in helping young children become more resilient.²

¹ Poulsen, M.K. (1993). Strategies for building resilience in infants and young children at risk. *Infants and Young Children*, 6(2): 29-40.

² www.newswire.ca Retrieved September 2009

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Ages and Stages of a Young Child's Environment

by Shoshanna Weiss, MSW



As your child moves from the curious toddler to the self-reliant kindergarten, the home environment will need to change to support and challenge their social and emotional development. The following suggestions use age-appropriate simple toys/materials to challenge thinking and promote development.

Age one-two years old: Safety is the biggest concern. Large lightweight pots and pans, and plastic bowls and containers and wooden spoons can help toddlers make music. Experiment with gravity by climbing up on a soft pillow and roll off.

Age two-three years old: These toddlers can do lots of things with their energy and physical skills. Beware of hard toys and wooden blocks since they can be thrown. When you are sure that your toddler won't put inedible items into their mouths, you can bring out large plastic, low tubs with bubbles, sand, rice for a sensory table. Add small toys to create a treasure hunt in a sand or rice table. The cardboard box was invented for these kids, and the bigger the better. Refrigerator and stove boxes can make caves, puppet theaters, book nooks, and tunnels.

Age three-four years old: Imagination starts to blossom with better language skills to communicate feelings and desires. A quiet space for exploring books, magazines,

puppets and puzzles in any safe corner of any room with pillows, backrests, bean bag chairs and a little scatter rug for warm behinds. A book crate or rack can formalize the area. Try using colored masking tape to create a world of roadways for cars and animals to delight the youngster's creative mind.

Age 4-5 years old: Some people call this age "all about me". They need lots of room to explore. Most preschoolers can cut and organize photos and fabric for use in scrapbooks, collages for refrigerator and wall decoration. Painting wooden birdhouses, birdfeeders, pet rocks, anything to paint will do. Look for washable paint!

Age 5-6 years old: The big kid emerges! Even though they may appear insecure going on the school bus, they come home to being bossy and somehow appear sophisticated beyond their years. A small table with art supplies is always a good idea for this age. Train sets with room to add figurines and plastic trees and miniature buildings can get you many hours of quiet watching. Start saving shoeboxes, foam balls and collecting small plastic animals and action figures. A child's tent or sheets with clothespins can convert your porch or fence into a fort, castle or cave. Add a pillow or sleeping bag and you have adventure waiting to happen.

For more ideas visit these websites www.preschoolrainbow.org/preschoolers , www.naeyc.org/families/earlyyears

Decreasing Tantrums by Creating a Responsive Environment by Karen Viggiani, LPC, ATR, NCC

Tantrums! Parents hate them and all children have them! *Positive Behavioral Supports* provides suggestions that help parents decrease the intensity, work to reduce and eliminate them. What factors contribute to a child having a complete meltdown? The environment has a huge impact on mood and behavior and can, in fact, lead to pleasant moods or challenging tantrums. If tantrums are a child's way of communicating displeasure, then let us look at how to create a positive, responsive environment that will not only create happier children, but will also minimize these challenging tantrums.

- ~ Make sure your home is not too hot or too cold (many children behave and sleep better if the room is on the cool side)
- ~ Pay attention to background noise such as the radio, TV, hamster wheel, outside traffic, and loud furnace that could be soothing to some but overwhelming or too much for others. Even small ears need a rest once in a while.
- ~ Make sure there is a "cozy place" or other area available where your child may go to calm down, re-group, or refuel when feeling frustrated, upset, scared, or overwhelmed. This can be a beanbag or other child-sized chair with pillows and stuffed animals, a pop-up tent, or just an area in the living room dedicated for a calm, safe environment, etc.
- ~ Balance the activities in the day to also include quiet, down times (TV/radio off, for example, will set a nice environment for quiet play, reading, or talking with your kids)
- ~ Make sure toys/ activities are age appropriate. Children WILL tantrum if the toys/ activities offered are either too easy or too advanced for them.

For More information: www.birth23.org, www.Zerothree.org, www.LSUAgCenter.com, www.teachingstrategies.com

SPEAK OUT: *Physical Home Environments* *for Young Children with Sensory Challenges*

By Rachel Smolenski

When thinking of young children, it is important to remember that the first environment they come in contact with and where they spend a great deal of time is their home. A calming, relaxing and thought-provoking environment supports a child's healthy development. When a child is experiencing sensorial challenges, the physical environment is essential in helping the child, and the parent, to cope at home. Children are different and different settings, learning environments, and physical surroundings work well for different children. Creating the ideal home for a child with sensory needs may require some specific strategies such as:

- ~ A child's room should be set up to meet his/her needs. Some children like heavy blankets or firm pillows while others may like a fluffy pillow. Mattresses are important as well, some are firm while others are soft. **Lighting** is important and some children may find a night light helpful while others may need complete darkness. **Sound** is also important since some children like white noise, such as a fan running, wind chimes, nature sounds or soft music playing. Others prefer silence while sleeping and/or playing.
- ~ During play time create an environment that meets the needs of the child and will encourage positive development. Bean bag chairs, hammocks, gliders, or swings can be more comfortable for a child and help to ease some uncomfortable feelings inside a child. Weighted vests or blankets, floor pillows, or therapy balls all help the child stay tuned to their body and space. Younger children like bouncy seats and jumping toys. Slides, balance boards, tubes to roll in and rocking or bouncing horses, scooter boards, moon shoes, trampolines, tunnels, hoppy balls are all examples of items that are helpful for both an active child and one that responds best to sensory activities.
- ~ Children can be affected by **smells**. Aromatherapy can be calming for some. Lavender scented items have a calming effect. If your child is calmed by smells then consider using scented play dough, scented markers, and scented toys. Stuffed animals or neck wraps are also options.
- ~ **Taste** is also a way of soothing a child that may be uncomfortable. When children are able to use their oral motor skills, like sucking, chewing, tasting or licking, they are able to gain a sense of control over their cravings. Some children may prefer sweet, salty, spicy or sour flavors. Others may prefer crunchy, crispy, soft or hard. Some children may avoid these types of activities altogether.
- ~ During play time provide the child with some items that have different **textures** like play dough, foam, "gak", textured balls, books or puzzles, koosh balls, different types of cloth, and finger paints. Also, vibrating toothbrushes or toys may be soothing to some children.

Every child is different. Knowing your child's temperament (mood), personality, activity level, and routine is key to setting up a home environment that supports positive social and emotional growth.

For more information go to <http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com>.

What is "Sensory Integration"?

Sensory experiences include touch, movement, body awareness, sight, sound and the pull of gravity. The process of the brain organizing and interpreting this information is called sensory integration. Sensory integration provides a crucial foundation for later, more complex learning and behavior. Dr. A. Jean Ayres developed this concept of sensory integration in a body of work that studied the way in which sensory processing and motor planning disorders interfere with daily life function and learning. Sensory integration is the ability to take in information through our senses (touch, movement, smell, taste, vision, and hearing), to put it together with prior information, memories, and knowledge stored in the brain and to make a meaningful response. Learning is based upon our ability to pay attention to appropriate events, give meaning to these events, and retain and use them as building blocks for learning. For most people, this process is automatic but some children cannot appropriately process one or more types of sensory input and have difficulty learning complex movement patterns, communicating appropriately, and/or benefiting from traditional education. For more information about sensory integration, please feel free to contact Building Blocks at 860-434-4275.

Building Blocks Evaluation Highlights: Building Resilience

By Amy Griffin and Joy Kaufman, Yale Consultation Center

During the outcome study interviews, parents and caregivers are asked questions about their child's self control and emotional regulation both of which can impact their resiliency.

Using a questionnaire called the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), caregivers are asked questions about their child's self control which include how often the child; *listens to or respects others, controls his/her anger, handles frustration well, shows patience, cooperates with others, and calms him/herself down when upset.* After six months of Building Blocks services, caregivers report that their children are exhibiting higher levels of self control than they were before they received services. These improvements in self control continue at the twelve month interview (Figure 1), which is after most families have stopped receiving Building Blocks services indicating that children are able to continue to improve their self control over time. This is a significant finding that implies that Building Blocks children are learning how to use self control, which may help them function better in a variety of settings such as the classroom and other public places.

Figure 1: Self Control Scores from Intake to 12 month Interview

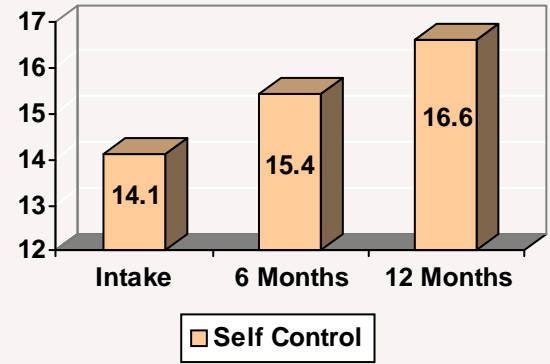
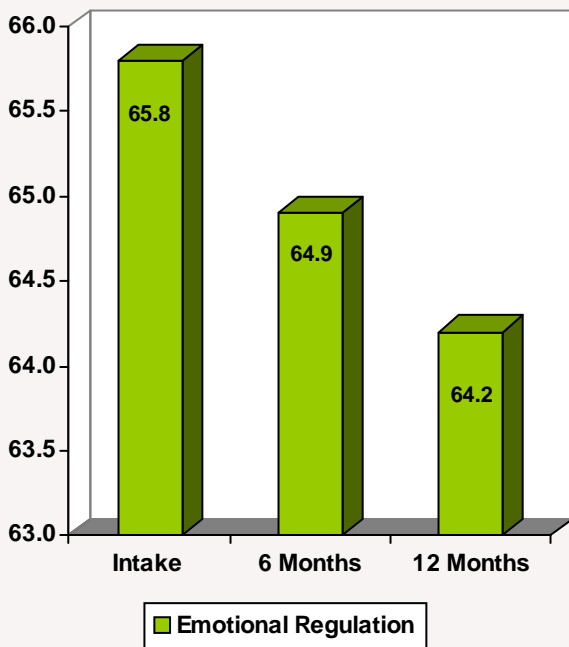


Figure 2: Emotional Regulation Scores from Intake to 12 Month Interview



Caregivers are also asked questions about their child's emotional regulation during the outcome study interviews. Using questions from the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), caregivers were asked if their child was: *disturbed by changes in any routine, shows panic for no reason, experiences rapid shifts between sadness and excitement, exhibits sudden changes in mood or feelings, and worries excessively.* At intake, almost half (44%) of the children were in the clinical range of emotional reactivity, indicating that they were having significant difficulties managing their emotions. After six months of Building Blocks services, caregivers report that their children are less emotionally reactive than they were before they started services. There are continued improvements in emotional regulation at the twelve month interview (Figure 2) which is after most families have stopped receiving Building Blocks services. This is a significant finding and indicates that Building Blocks children are learning how to become less reactive to their environment which helps them to function better at home and in other settings.

By building their self control and emotional regulation, Building Blocks children are building their resiliency skills to help them develop in healthy ways. Resilient children are better able to react positively when things go poorly and to cope with the changes that occur throughout life.

Fostering Resiliency ~ by Gigi Rhodes

Children who are resilient know that there is an adult there to protect them, and babies know this by the way caregivers respond to them. When an infant is upset, frustrated and crying they learn to calm themselves down with the help of a responsive adult - a hug, a nap, food or a distraction, perhaps with a toy. One way to foster resiliency is by creating a predictable environment for a child or an infant. Such environment includes a daily schedule that meets the child's needs, age and unique temperament. A responsive environment includes caregivers who watch and learn from the child. A crying 9-month old may be distracted by the attention of an adult who tries to play with the child with a noisy toy. An attempt to play that distracts or calms a child may be exactly what stimulates and excites another child. Caregivers who learn from the child in order to create a responsive environment are teaching and helping the child figure out how to use their own ability to bounce back (resilience).

Adults play a vital role in a child's development of resiliency. By providing a safe and supportive environment, adults can promote the development of resiliency in children by addressing the child's personality and the child's future.