

AUTISM TODAY
PRESENTS

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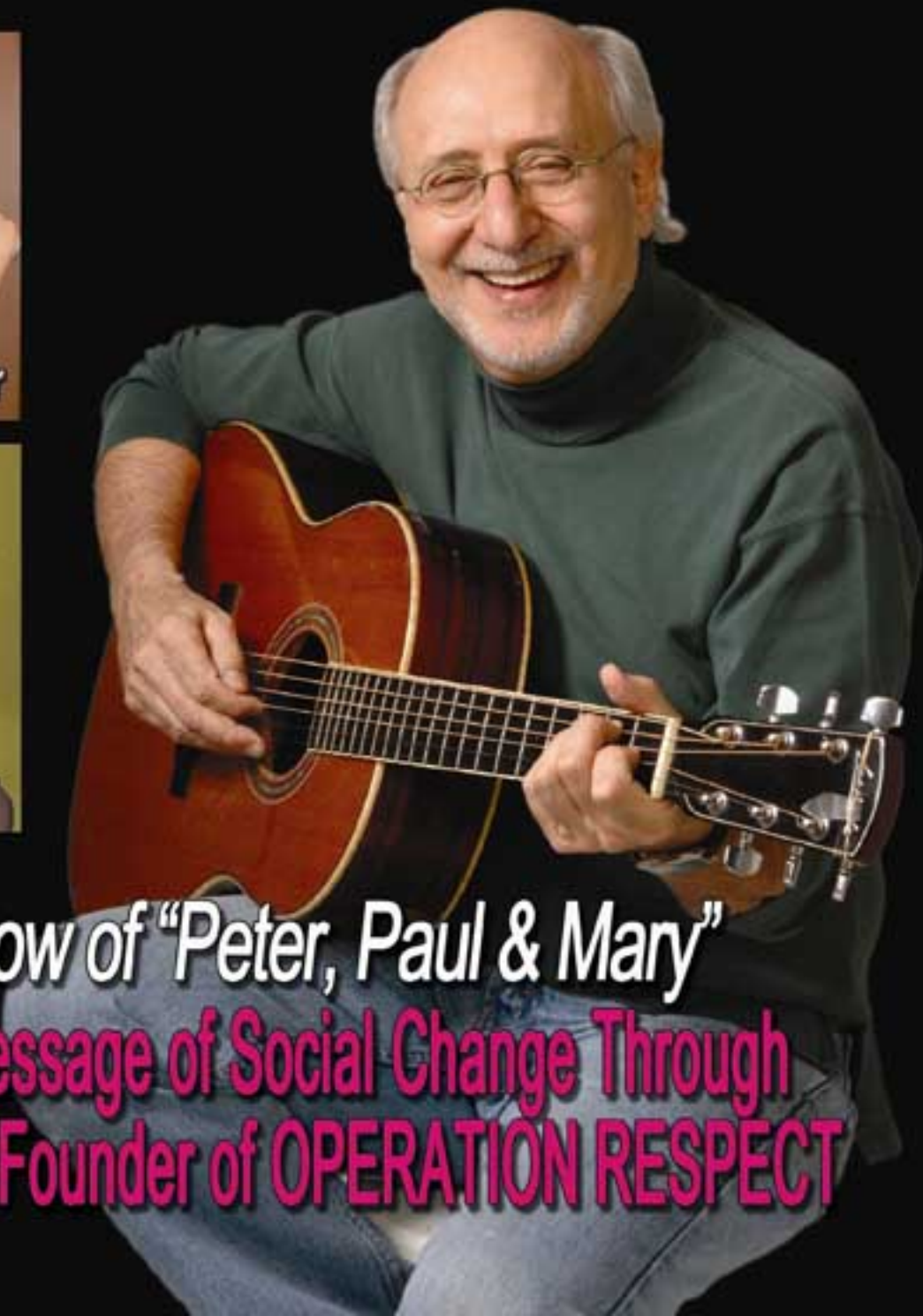
The **AUTISM** magazine
TAP INTO IT.
perspective



From Autism to All-Star



The Birthday Party



Peter Yarrow of "Peter, Paul & Mary"
Sings a New Message of Social Change Through
His Music as the Founder of OPERATION RESPECT

SENSORY TIPS

By
Cris Rowan,
Pediatric
Occupational
Therapist



Lesson One

Getting to Know Your Child's Sensory System

Sensory Tips is designed to help parents and teachers understand how to use a sensory processing approach to “see” children and interpret their actions. Understanding a child’s sensory processing system can help parents and teachers create homes and classrooms that offer children safe and respectful environments, which are necessary for optimal learning and behavior.

This is the first article of a six-part series on sensory systems of children with autism. The articles will cover the following topics: Getting to Know Your Child’s Sensory System, The Vestibular Sensory System, The Tactile Sensory System, The Proprioceptive Sensory System, Sensory Integration Theory, and Application of Sensory Motor Tools and Techniques.

Children require sensation to grow and develop into healthy and happy individuals. The advent of technology has resulted in a sensory deprived world for many children, a world where children don’t need to move anymore to survive. Lack of movement is having a negative impact on normal sensory system development, and is creating huge problems at homes and in schools.

A little bit of neurology education will help parents and teachers better understand these concepts, so they can eventually apply effective sensory tools and techniques with their children. For sensory systems to

develop normally, children need stimulation and integration of the vestibular, tactile and proprioceptive sensory channels. Integration of sensory channels in Level 1 (see diagram) is a precursor to being able to learn through the more advanced auditory and visual sensory channels in Level 2. Only when Level 1 becomes integrated can a child process through their vision and hearing channels, which are necessary for academic learning (Level 3).

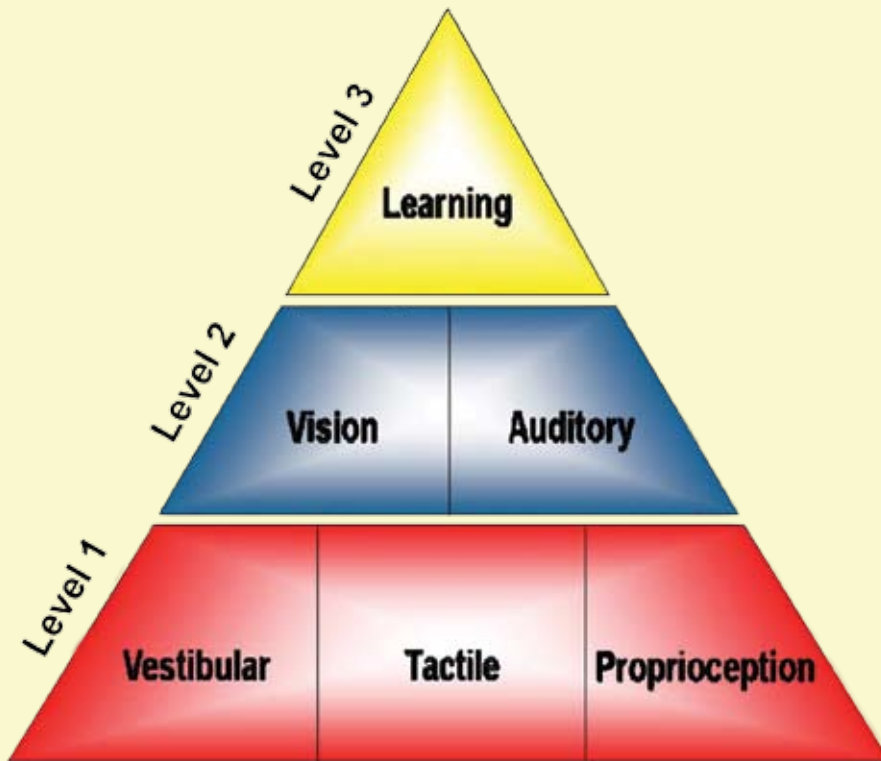
The vestibular system is involved in a child achieving posture and balance against gravity, as well as coordination of the muscles in the body and eyes. Poor development of the vestibular system can result in a child appearing to either move constantly or fear movement, as the child’s sensory system attempts to compensate. The tactile system determines a child’s ability to plan purposeful movements. A child with tactile sensory dysfunction often will touch everything or have an aversive response to touch. The pro-

prioceptive system promotes optimal muscle tone and strength, allowing a child to have a sense of their position in space. Accurate proprioception is necessary for performance in fine and gross motor tasks.

Think of babies and how they learn. They move constantly by crawling around to explore their world, putting everything in their mouth. These actions stimulate the vestibular, tactile and proprioceptive sensory channels, promoting optimal development. Children (and adults!) continue to require Level 1 sensory stimulation throughout life in order to adequately process information through their Level 2 vision and hearing channels, allowing them to ultimately attend and focus on tasks, and feel healthy and happy in everyday life.

Think about what you like to do on a weekend or an evening that makes you really productive at work the next day. Digging in the garden, playing sports, taking the dog for a long walk, and working out in

Sensory Development Diagram



the gym are some examples. Alternatively, think about how productive you are at work or how you feel when you just sit around all evening or on the weekend, watching TV or movies, or spending long periods at the computer? You may feel rested, but do you feel as energetic or productive? Technology has virtually eliminated our need to move and touch, and our adult society is actually showing signs of sensory deprivation with stress-related illnesses and subsequent absenteeism. Anti-depressant and stress medication use is at an all-time high for adults and children, as they strive to adapt to our fast-paced, technology-loaded world.

Concerns regarding technology's effects on children have caused the American Pediatric Society to issue warnings about TV, videogame and cell phone use in children, saying that if children under the age of 4 watch TV, they may become neurodevelopmentally delayed. These neurological delays will not only impact learning, but behavior as well, as the child will struggle with friend-

ships, academics and self-esteem.

What about children with autism? When a child has autism, their sensory system development is subsequently impaired, causing actions and behaviors that are often difficult

Children with autism often have an accompanying diagnosis of apraxia, or difficulty planning movement patterns. They may also exhibit ideational apraxia, where they are unable to connect "ideas" to movement, and appear to run aimlessly about a room, without any idea of what to do once they get there.

to interpret or manage. Children with autism often have an accompanying diagnosis of apraxia, or difficulty planning movement

patterns. They may also exhibit ideational apraxia, where they are unable to connect "ideas" to movement, and appear to run aimlessly about a room, without any idea of what to do once they get there. The basis for motor planning is found in the tactile sensory channel. When children have difficulty integrating tactile information, they don't feel comfortable in their bodies, or seem to know where their bodies are in space. The sensation of deep pressure often is very effective in helping children get "back into their bodies," as they can begin to create a boundary for their energy. Deep pressure can be as simple as encouraging the child to lay on his/her stomach either on the floor, cushion or bean bag chair. The parent or teacher can help ground a child's energy by asking the child if they would like a shoulder hug, and then give the child a gentle, but firm, shoulder squeeze in an "in and down" direction. Children with autism also calm well with gentle sustained pressure to their forehead.

"The skin is the largest organ of the body, and tactile experience or its lack affects the development of behavior; hence The Mind of the Skin." Dr. Ashley Montagu.

Tune in next month for more in-depth information about the vestibular sensory system, and how to help children with autism toward optimal neurological development for improved learning and behavior. **TAP**

Cris Rowan has been an Occupational Therapist for twenty years, working in schools for the past eight years. Cris has recently developed two new educational programs, Zone'in and Move'in, for use in schools and at home. Zone'in is derived from Sensory Integration theory, and helps children get their energy "Zone'in to Learn." Move'in is based on Fine Motor Development theory and is designed to help children print and read by taking them on a "Printing Adventure." You can learn more about these programs at www.zonein.ca, or email Cris at info@zonein.ca.

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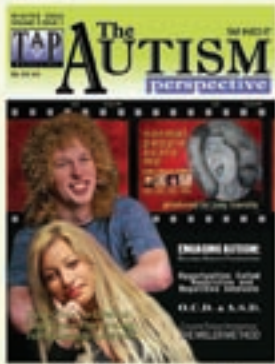
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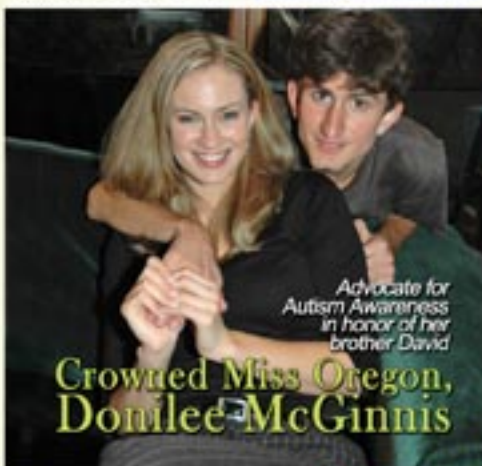
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