

FOCUS

on
Early Childhood
Mental Health



*Pennsylvania Key
Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation
Project
717-213-2063
micwal@berksiu.org*

Factsheet #31, 10/11

Sensory Issues: Body Movement and Balance

We're probably all familiar with the five senses that help us experience our world: sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing. People with expertise in how our senses work and what happens when they're "out-of-sync" often include two more senses: proprioceptive and vestibular. These "big words" can be explained like this:

- **Proprioceptive:** refers to our awareness of body movement (where a certain body part is and how it is moving); helps us do things like automatically remember how to go up and down steps
- **Vestibular:** refers to our sense of balance and how our bodies move in space; helps prevent dizziness

As many as 1 in 20 children have difficulties processing the information received through their senses. How do you know if a child has a problem with their proprioceptive or vestibular sense, and what can you do to help?

Symptoms of sensory problems:

Proprioception: bumps into people, furniture, walls; accidentally spills when pouring or drinking; has poor body awareness and can't figure out what to do to make his/her body complete a task

Vestibular sense: seems clumsy and moves awkwardly; is excessively cautious on stairs; has trouble tracking a moving object; fidgets constantly; gets dizzy easily or never seems to get dizzy; avoids changes in head position; avoids or craves moving playground equipment

Potential activities and equipment for children with body movement and balance problems:

Vestibular system (depending on whether the sense is over- or under-active): tumbling; slow repetitive rhythmic movements such as swaying in a rocking chair; firm pressure on the body from hugs; outdoor and indoor swings; rocking toys, balancing boards, spinning toys

Proprioceptive system: stress balls and modeling clay; weighted vests or hats; "heavy work" activities such as whole body actions (pushing, pulling, lifting); oral actions like chewing and blowing; using hands for squeezing or pinching (objects, not other children!)

Two important reminders:

- 1) Make sure physical activity is part of the routine every day. These children need it!
- 2) Don't hesitate to get advice from a qualified occupational therapist about effective proven strategies and treatments.

Resources

- Related FOCUS on ECMH *factsheet*, "Sensory Processing Disorder," <http://tinyurl.com/3t5nuot>
- *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, by Carol Stock Kranowitz; Perigree Trade, 2003
- "Do You Know Me? I'm a Sensational Kid?" <http://tinyurl.com/3nw8wjg>
- Websites: www.sensory-processing-disorder.com and www.sensorysmarts.com