

...

Seeking Assistance

Let me offer you some very straightforward advice: If you have a nagging doubt about your child's development—either now or in the future—seek help. Parents who have children with emerging sensory processing issues often face particular challenges in socializing their kids. Listen to your “gut.” Ask yourself, is this behavior “typical” compared to other children his age?

As your youngster's foremost advocate, it's vital for you to be a realist about the situation you and your child face—being in denial about what's going on is *never* helpful. If you think something might be wrong, start by talking to your child's pediatrician, teachers, babysitters, and other caregivers about how they think your child is doing compared to other kids they observe.

I'm not suggesting that you go looking for trouble, but do seek input from others who perhaps can observe things that you find hard

to see. Most often, parents will be the first to wonder if something is “not quite right.” Listen to your internal questioning and seek some answers. It’s always invaluable to learn how your child relates to others in environments where he’s away from you. Kids behave differently when their parents aren’t with them—it’s a fact that every pediatric therapist is very attuned to—and the more information you have about the range of your child’s behaviors in novel environments, the better.

Normally, the logical first step in looking for assistance is to raise an issue with your child’s pediatrician. If you have a pediatrician who is attuned to child development issues and the benefits of therapy, she can help you sort out whether your child can be helped with early intervention. Yet, remember that many pediatricians have no background or experience with the specifics of modalities used in physical and occupational therapy practices, like sensory integration or CranioSacral Therapy; they simply may not be aware that there are lots of physical and occupational therapists who can offer your child remarkable kinds of help. I also advise that, if your child’s doctor suggests that you simply wait six months to see if an issue resolves itself, you should do a little research on your own.

The danger of waiting is that it just puts you six months, or more, behind the time when your child can benefit most. Remember how quickly a child develops early on; it is best to jump on that developmental train and get things moving in the right direction before bigger problems occur. As I’ve said, listen to your gut. You already think the potential for a problem is significant enough that you’ve thought about raising your concerns with your pediatrician, after all. And six months is a long time. One of the true constants in my thirty-five years as a therapist is the reality that the earlier kids get help, the faster they are able to get on the right track and avoid rough patches down the road.

By the time a child is *four, five, or six years of age*, she should be

learning quite well how to get along with other kids. She should be excited to have other children be part of her environment, learning how to give and take, and developing friendships and a real desire to spend time interacting with her peers.

As I described in the last chapter, some children who walk into or push others over aren't being "mean," they're trying to receive sensory stimulation that they otherwise lack. These children don't perceive touch in the way their peers do, and for many of them it's hard to understand that biting or kicking hurts, because to them it doesn't. I'll never forget a little boy who was almost four who was on the verge of being kicked out of preschool. The first thing he would do when he came into school in the morning was to give his teacher a big hug. This initial deep pressure allowed him to feel secure enough to not be bothered by others for the first twenty minutes of class, but as soon as the pace picked up, he started hitting his friends. Adding some intermittent "pressure breaks" with a mini trampoline in the class solved the problem in class, while he could work on developing more appropriate neural pathways in his therapy.

If early behavioral issues that are clearly sensory related don't get addressed appropriately, they will almost inevitably lead to significantly bigger problems down the line. Fortunately, for this little boy they did not. But what should you do if things don't appear to be progressing as they should for your child?

Inevitably, a parent's relationship with her child is different from that of a teacher, therapist, or even friend, and sometimes the more distanced perspective of a trusted friend or adviser can be very helpful. For the same reasons, in therapy, a child needs someone outside of the family circle who will push him beyond what he would necessarily undertake on his own and help him build on his every success. When I finally acknowledged that my son, Alex, needed therapy as a young boy, I knew I couldn't be both his mom *and* his therapist.

We parents tend to be overly protective of our kids, even when we know better, because we are our children's champions—it's part of our nature and would be a fundamental part of our job description if we had one. We want to make the world a safe place for our kids, and we try to be the best parents we possibly can be. Having someone else take a fresh look at your child and support and encourage her—allowing her to start really believing in herself and her capabilities—can make a huge difference in her life.

In the same way, checking in with other people about how your child is progressing can give you some excellent insight—particularly if you can avoid becoming upset if they tell you something you don't like. Some will insist that the sky is falling all around your child and that you're blind to the crisis, but you don't have to *believe* what others say; simply register the input and look for patterns that may begin to emerge when you hear comments from a number of people. Be aware, too, that lots of folks will try to calm your fears by brushing off your concerns. Again, add this opinion to your list, but don't carve it in stone.

An overly-involved grandparent who insists that she has all the answers and that you're parenting “all wrong” is just as obstructive as the other grandparent who always reminds you, “Oh, Johnny was just like that when he was Jason's age. It's nothing to worry about. Trust me, I know. The boy will be fine.”

Your best friend may make light of a situation and try to brush off your concerns, often because she wants *you* to feel good (and, perhaps, because *her* child is showing similar patterns). Remember: nobody *wants* to tell a friend that they think something is wrong with their child. Most people's natural tendency is to protect and attempt to make everything okay by not bringing problems to another person's attention. It's far easier for me, a trained therapist, to say, “Your child has a problem,” than it is for a friend or relative. Therapists are valuable precisely because they are *not* friends or family—as well as because of

their extensive training and professional expertise.

Early intervention does not mean that your child will never have future problems, however. We *all* have issues that come and go in our lives. Although they can be hard to sort out at times, by being proactive and addressing red flags early, you have the potential to save yourself—and especially your child—a lot of anguish and therapy time in the long run.

...