Supporting Sensory Needs at a Children’s Home in Mexico

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Abstract
Children living at in institutional settings frequently demonstrate behavioral and emotional challenges related to disrupted attachment, as well as abnormal sensory processing patterns. For her doctoral capstone project, an occupational therapy student travelled to a children’s home in Mexico to evaluate and offer supports for the sensory needs of the children. Many of the children demonstrated sensory seeking or avoiding behaviors which affected their emotions and behaviors. Using a culturally sensitive approach, the student met with house parents and children to help them plan relevant activities and strategies to meet their sensory needs. The house families were left with greater knowledge of sensory strategies, as well as resources to enable self-regulation and function during daily routines.

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Abstract

Children living at in institutional settings frequently demonstrate behavioral and emotional challenges related to disrupted attachment, as well as abnormal sensory processing patterns. For her doctoral capstone project, an occupational therapy student travelled to a children’s home in Mexico to evaluate and offer supports for the sensory needs of the children. Many of the children demonstrated sensory seeking or avoiding behaviors which affected their emotions and behaviors. Using a culturally sensitive approach, the student met with house parents and children to help them plan relevant activities and strategies to meet their sensory needs. The house families were left with greater knowledge of sensory strategies, as well as resources to enable self-regulation and function during daily routines.
Sensory stimulation is an integral part of the attachment-forming process between caregiver and child during early developmental years and research supports a significant correlation between sensory processing and attachment development (Whitcomb, Carrasco, Neuman, & Kloos, 2015). As a mother holds, cuddles, talks and nurses her infant, her child receives tactile, vestibular, proprioceptive, auditory, visual, gustatory, and olfactory input (Purvis, McKenzie, Cross, & Razuri, 2013). Consistent responsiveness, and caring involvement with an adult provides a secure attachment and base from which a child can explore the environment. Inconsistent or unresponsive caregiving causes a disruption in a child’s autonomic nervous system, which may cause a “fight, flight, or freeze” response to normal sensory input (Champagne, 2011).

Children growing up in institutions frequently move from caregiver to caregiver, may be placed in environments with a low adult-to-child caregiver ratio, and experience a variety of traumatic events. All these factors may contribute to difficulty forming healthy attachments and accurately processing sensory information. Fortunately, it is possible to partially reverse the effects resulting from poor or absent caregiver relations. Haradon, Bascom, Dragomir, and Scripcaru (1994) measured significant improvement in sensory processing abilities in Romanian orphans after six months of higher-quality caregiving. Their study suggests that sensory and relationally rich interventions for children who have experienced deprivation can improve sensory processing.

Setting

Rancho Santa Marta (RSM) is a home and school for children with special needs in Baja, Mexico. The ranch is situated in the middle of majestic desert foothills, about five miles from a small town. The children live in four “family-style” houses. Many of
these children have experienced abuse, neglect, and other types of trauma. Many lived at other orphanages before settling at RSM, and the majority of the children demonstrate emotional and behavioral issues associated with disrupted attachment and/or trauma.

**Occupational Therapy Services**

Kirsten Fertig, a Pacific University occupational therapy clinical doctorate student, travelled to RSM for her experiential internship and final capstone project. Kirsten partnered with the occupational therapy practitioner on staff, Denise Lee, to provide supervision and mentorship for the experience. Denise is originally from Oregon, but has lived at RSM for the past 20 years. She is fluent in both English and Spanish, and is adept at adjusting her approach to meet cultural needs of the clients and families she works with. For example, in Mexico, families often assume responsibility for caring for children with disabilities. Denise acknowledges this cultural importance of family and highlights what the children with disabilities are able to do, and how to support their child’s functional independence.

The occupational therapy program at the school was quite extensive, however Denise was unable to dedicate the time necessary to educate house parents in RSM homes about the importance of sensory input to enable emotional and behavioral regulation. Perceiving this “gap,” Kirsten chose to focus on the house families rather than the school for her doctoral capstone project.

**Evaluation of Sensory Processing**

Kirsten lived in one of the houses and participated in daily routines with the children. She worked with children and house parents to facilitate greater understanding
of sensory behaviors and the use of sensory strategies to build self regulation skills, improve social bonding, and increase relational attachments.

To find out more about the sensory needs of the children living at RSM, Kirsten administered the Sensory Profile 2, Spanish edition, (Dunn, 2014). The use of a Spanish assessment and written reports in Spanish ensured culturally sensitive and relevant information was appropriately shared. The Sensory Profile includes a questionnaire that provides information how sensory processing may be contributing or interfering with daily participation. The responses are scored to identify a pattern of sensory processing behaviors in response to different stimuli such as sensory seeking, avoiding, high sensitivity, or bystander.

The Sensory Profiles of the children living at RSM were varied, but most scored higher than others in at least one category. Half of the children had sensory needs in the categories of touch, movement, or both. Over a third of the children had sensory seeking preferences.

Based on observations and responses given on the Sensory Profiles, some of the children demonstrated sensory avoiding behaviors. It is possible children who have attachment challenges due to trauma or neglect might develop sensory avoiding patterns. For example, the activities and noise of other people may trigger a stress response in a child based on past trauma. A child may have an inability to differentiate which sensations are safe and which are not, thereby causing him to respond negatively or avoid the activity. Some of the avoiding behaviors and emotions exhibited by the children were tantrums, needing extra support when faced with challenges, frustration, fear, and difficulty maintaining friendships. Each child demonstrated a unique set of sensory needs.
and behavioral challenges that may also be related to both attachment and sensory processing.

**Sensory Interventions**

As she planned her trip to Mexico, Kirsten was reluctant to impose sensory strategies on the already well-established routines and structure of the house families, which were tied to the culture of both RSM and Mexico. “The idea of cultural safety is pertinent to occupational therapists when taking their ideas and processes into new cultural domains” (Iwama, Thomson, & Macdonald, 2011, p. 88). As a student from USA working in Mexico, it was important for Kirsten to consider unique Mexican cultural values, particularly family togetherness. The children of RSM spend time with their house families, celebrating birthdays, going on outings, doing devotions together, and eating meals together. Iwama, Thomson, & Macdonald (2011) suggest that involving families in the therapeutic process, including planning, assessing, treating, and evaluating is one solution to ensure a culturally safer approach in occupational therapy service delivery. To ensure cultural values were honored when Kirsten developed the sensory interventions, she wanted to incorporate the specific needs of each house family, as well as facilitate best practice approaches. Individual and family oriented approaches were integrated into the interventions.

**Individuals**

Kirsten worked individually with some of the children discussed their sensory processing patterns, and brainstormed strategies to address their sensory needs. Some teens wanted help managing their behaviors or paying more attention at school. Other teens wanted to focus on ways to lower stress and avoid overstimulation at home.
Carmen, a 13-year-old girl, showed sensory needs in nearly all categories of her Sensory Profile. Carmen recognized that the bothersome sensations she was experiencing were affecting her behaviors. She reflected, “When one of my classmates touches me, I feel like hitting him” (Carmen, personal communication). Carmen agreed to try different ways to obtain deep pressure, such as chair pushups, filling a small balloon with flour to use as a “fidget,” and going outside to do a burpee. At a follow-up meeting, Carmen stated that she felt her behavior was better, and that she had been using chair pushups effectively to control her emotions and behavior.

**House Families**

Kirsten helped the children and house parents plan sensory days. The sensory days fit well with the Mexican value of family time, and involving the children in the planning and implementation process ensured that the activities would be culturally relevant. Allowing the children to choose their own activities, while guiding them to include self-regulatory sensory input, develops higher-level skills such as planning and problem-solving. According to the occupational adaptation model, therapy is considered a success when individuals become more internally adaptive (Schultz & Schkade, 1992). Giving the children choices such as those selected for the sensory day activities helped them to gain mastery over their emotional and behavioral responses as they learned to select the best tools.

Throughout the process, Kirsten met with house parents to discuss the sensory processing needs of their children. One couple, Luis and Gabriela, serving as house parents for the younger boys, were overwhelmed with behavioral challenges such as theft, disobedience, and fighting. They were concerned about Antonio, a six-year-old boy
who had frequent angry outbursts, including hitting and biting. To calm him down, the house parents would hold his arms across his chest in a “hug.” Kirsten recognized that Antonio needed deep pressure in order to calm down. She suggested making a large “squish box” full of cushions that Antonio could use to obtain proprioceptive input. After only a few days with the box, it was evident that Antonio was using it effectively to manage his own behavior.

Luis and Gabriela’s boys were also excited to plan their sensory day. Kirsten used the boys’ suggestions and modified them to include organizing sensory input: soccer became crab walk soccer to increase proprioceptive input, and corn hole was preceded by wadding up paper to use in the game, which provided tactile and proprioceptive input. When the big day came, the boys all participated with enthusiasm. The final activity, an apple-eating contest, was primarily proprioceptive in nature. Immediately after this, the boys all put on weighted blankets to discuss what they enjoyed about the day. The boys were calmer during the discussion, after having received the tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive input they needed.

When the girls’ house families were asked which activities they might use to help them relax and lower their level of stress, the girls recalled the “pizza” massage, a routine involving a variety of tactile and proprioceptive stimuli. The girls continued to use sensory activities in different situations with some of the girls spontaneously doing pizza massages on each other at the end of the day.

It was beneficial for the house parents to also begin to come up with their own ideas that fit with their culture and routines. When Raquel, a house mother, heard about the idea of having a sensory activity day, she had another idea of her own: “I think we
should have a candlelight prayer” (Raquel, personal communication). Guided by Kirsten, the candlelight prayer was preceded by the girls applying lavender hand cream and using heavy blankets to facilitate a calm atmosphere. Directed by Raquel, the girls actively participated in the prayer for close to an hour, which was much longer than previous prayer times. It is possible that the calming sensory interventions may have enabled them to achieve a calm, organized state of mind. To ensure continued resources, Kirsten provided educational handouts and written reports for the house parents with individualized suggestions for each of the children, and compiled pictures of various sensory activities from the activity days organized into a binder to leave with each of the house parents.

Conclusion

The opportunity to work at RSM in Mexico challenged Kirsten to be culturally sensitive and offer culturally appropriate interventions. By educating house parents about the sensory needs of their children and then involving both the parents and the children in planning sensory activities that were part of their cultural routines, Kirsten was able to share her client centered expertise as an emerging occupational therapist. This client centered and client directed approach ensured that the residents of RSM had the knowledge and resources to implement sensory strategies in the future, independent of the presence of an occupational therapy practitioner, and ensured the sustainability of her time there.
References:


