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What's Inside?

- Metro Friendship Foundation **pg 2**
- Just Wanting to Fit In **pg 2**
- Mason's Perspective **pg 3**
- Rolling Like Thunder **pg 3**
- Update: Satellite Group **pg 4**

WMLC Perspectives is published and paid for by West Metro Learning Connections, Inc. as a service to our clients, their families and the professionals who serve them in the Twin Cities and surrounding areas.

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Sensory Diets for Teens | Part 1: The Teen Brain

By Debra Schipper, M. Ed., AS

Sensory strategies have always been integral to our work at West Metro Learning Connections. We provide a setting for individuals to discover and fulfill their sensory preferences and needs through our centers' environmental design, sensory rooms, sensory starts and breaks, and other strategies and supports, so they can make optimal progress in their social, emotional, and behavioral development.

While these strategies and supports work for all ages, we have found that teens have some unique sensory issues that they need to discover in order to develop deeper insights into their sensory preferences and implement "sensory diets" that work for them. Sensory diet is a term coined by Patricia Wilbarger to describe the input we need into our seven sensory systems to stay focused and organized throughout the day. The goal is for each individual to live with the right sensory diet for him/her. An individual's optimal sensory diet consists of the proper amounts of each type of sensation to allow for appropriate responses to a variety of settings.

The Teen Brain

In her book, Sensory Integration Tools for Teens: Strategies to Promote Sensory Processing, Diana Henry explains how the teen brain, which is still growing, is different from the adult brain. The pre-frontal cortex is still developing executive functions of impulse inhibition, emotional regulation, decision-making, attending, and behavior planning and organization. The cerebellum, which helps coordinate muscles, is also still changing, as is the corpus callosum, the thick cable of nerves connecting the two halves of the brain. This means creativity and problem-solving are not yet what they will be.



The thinking part of the brain, the gray matter, continues to thicken until age 11 or 12 and then starts to thin out. After this point, the cells and connections that are used, continue to grow and the ones that are not used cease to grow.

Obviously, it's important for teens to use all those areas of their brains where their hopes and dreams lie, as well as those that allow them to function successfully socially, emotionally, and behaviorally, so they can reach their maximum potential!



The Sensory Systems

There are seven sensory systems. Movement is what we refer to at West Metro Learning Connections as vestibular input (any movement that impacts the inner ear, as in when our head changes position). Muscles is what we call proprioceptive input or proprioception (pushing or pulling on muscles, joints, tendons, and ligaments). The last five senses, touch (tactile), taste (oral), hearing (auditory), seeing (visual), and smelling (olfactory), are well known. Sensory tools in all seven

sensory areas can be classified as: (1) Alerting — movements that alert include those that are fast and irregular (2) Calming — slow, rhythmic movements tend to calm. Body extensions alert, while body flexion (curling up) is soothing and calming. (3) Organizing — muscle tools that require the muscles, tendons, and joints to work hard organize and calm the sensory system, yet can also alert the brain if it's feeling sluggish.

Henry provides strategies to address some "typical" teen issues, such as risk-taking, disorganization, impulsivity, inattentiveness, forgetfulness, and more. She advises teens to determine their own unique sensory needs and preferences to promote the sensory integration that allows brain and body to work most effectively together.

(Continued on page 3)

Metro Friendship Foundation (MFF) provides scholarships for individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism to access therapeutic education and recreation services that build social skills and social understanding.

How to Donate to MFF

If you would like to help a qualified child receive a scholarship for social skills therapy or therapeutic recreation at West Metro Learning Connections, please write a check made out to the Autism Society of Minnesota and put "West Metro Learning Connections" on the memo line. The Autism Society of Minnesota is the fiscal agent for the MFF Scholarship Fund.

100% of all donations are applied toward tuition scholarships for individuals who would not otherwise be able to receive the benefit of this vital therapy. Send your check to WMLC for tracking purposes, then we will forward it to the Autism Society of Minnesota, so you will be able to receive a tax deduction for this charitable contribution.

Contact Janet Gressman at 952-474-0227, x206 with any questions regarding donations.



WMLC and TonerForAutism.com Team Up

The WMLC Scholarship Fund will receive 5% of all your toner or ink purchases now and into the future. This program allows WMLC to generate continuous contributions to the scholarship fund through your ongoing purchases.

Buy your toner and ink jet supplies for your home or business printers by visiting their website TonerForAutism.com to start supporting scholarships to WMLC today!

1st Annual Scholarship Garage Sale

A garage sale was held at the beginning of September during Excelsior's Apple Days and it was a huge success! We raised enough money to offer at least one scholarship. Many thanks to everyone who donated merchandise, the time to set up, sell, and clean up, and to the shoppers who made this possible!

Facebook: Become an MFF Fan!

Metro Friendship Foundation now has an account on Facebook. Go to Facebook and search for Metro Friendship Foundation in "Pages" to learn more about our Non-Profit organization.

Our account has notes about upcoming Fundraisers and Events, and we hope to use it as a forum for increasing awareness for autism and the need for supports and therapies.

Add yourself as a fan to show support! You can also send us a message or write on our wall.



Teens: Just Wanting to Fit In

By Bill Martin, WMLC Teen/Young Adult Teacher

The teen years from twelve to eighteen can be a tough time for anyone. This can be especially true for teens who have Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism (AS/HFA). Consider the obstacles teenagers face: school becomes more demanding, the need for acceptance by their peer groups increases, their bodies are changing, their hormones are raging, and they struggle to establish their own identity. Now consider this same time for an adolescent with AS/HFA. They also face heightened social stresses at a time when friendships and inclusion become even more important to any teenager. Unfortunately, teens with AS/HFA often face rejection, isolation and bullying when all they really want is to *just fit in*.

I reminisced about my mother and the stories she told me about immigrating to America as a young Filipino nurse in the early 1950s. She clearly faced obstacles in trying to blend into the local scene — she was unfamiliar with the culture and clueless about the social expectations of her new home. It occurred to me that her struggles to *just fit in* were very much the same as they are for a teen with AS/HFA.



Teens Rockin' the Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul after enjoying an afternoon at the Festival of Nations.

Mom behaved differently than everyone else, and she had difficulty communicating. Even a casual conversation required so much effort that it was hard for her to make friends. She became passive and withdrawn and drew her comfort from a structured daily routine. Mom had difficulty coping with change and would become anxious if her routine was altered — after all, structure was one of the few things she could

understand and count on. Mom had odd mannerisms and habits, she was indifferent about the fads and clothing styles, and she often pretended not to care what others thought about her. Naïve and clueless about sex, she also had no understanding of flirtation and non-verbal sexual cues. And even with an above average IQ, my mother struggled in a world where she didn't fit. This is all too often also the case for teens with AS/HFA.

In many ways the AS/HFA teenager is like an immigrant in a new world. He does not quite understand the language and is unaware of some of the cultural information implicit in daily communication. But, unlike an immigrant, the person with an autism spectrum disorder may not know that he does not understand or may not realize the extent to which he is missing common information. The immigrant may ask questions or develop hypotheses about what he thinks people are talking about. He may check his hunches with a familiar communication partner. In many cases, however, the teen with AS/HFA does not engage in these potentially very helpful self-advocacy activities.

So what can we tell people to help them understand a teen with AS/HFA and to help them be more successful in daily interactions with him? We can simply advise them to treat teenagers with AS/HFA with patience and kindness as we would do with any newcomer:

- >> Be understanding and sensitive to their situation, but not patronizing
- >> Be respectful of their individuality and their differences, recognizing the great gifts as well as the needs
- >> Speak clearly and deliberately
- >> When possible and necessary, use pictures or objects to add clarification to a verbal message
- >> Watch for body language and conversational content that may suggest difficulty with processing a message (that may indicate difficulty in understanding)
- >> Allow the individual sufficient time to process the message and respond
- >> Be encouraging. Enjoy and appreciate him/her!

Most importantly...be a friend. After all, everyone wants to *just fit in!*

Mason's Perspective

When I was much younger, I had my share of struggles. For years I had to spend most of my time in the special education room at school because I couldn't stand being in mainstream classes. In my early high school years, I spent most of my time in mainstream classes, but I still had a hard time making friends, and I was generally a social outcast. This was because I had an extreme phobia of any kind of social interaction. In my junior and senior years, however, I came out of my shell, largely due to increased self-confidence that I had obtained at WMLC and from various relationships.

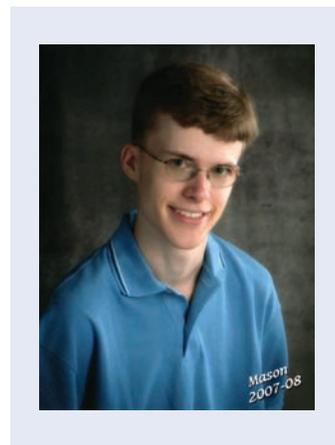
For many years, I took classes at WMLC and they helped me learn how to interact with my peers and not be afraid to do so. Sometimes I didn't get along with the other WMLC students, but that was a learning experience, because it helped me learn how to tolerate even people with opinions, behaviors, and habits that I can't stand.

My first major success was in eighth grade, when I was in the National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC and came in sixteenth place. Prior to this, I generally had very low self-

esteem and this was my first glimpse of the "new" Mason. This accomplishment gave me a huge self-esteem boost, which was further cemented when I appeared in the 2006 movie *Akeelah and the Bee* as one of the spellers.

In tenth grade, I began participating in Knowledge Bowl at school, since I was too old to compete in the spelling bee any longer. Our team took sixth place in the state in 2007 and second place in 2008. Around this time, I began making more friends and acquaintances. Finally, in 2008, I was crowned King of the Snowball Dance! I also received the "Most Friendly" award, which was voted on by my fellow seniors. This was a far cry from the way I had been just five years before!

Now I am studying nanotechnology at Dakota County Technical College and it's challenging, although very interesting—I've become convinced that it is my destiny to be a scientist. One of my major interests is safety. Since many of the existing nanomaterials on the market right now are hazardous, I want to find ways to modify them to make them safe. Who knows what I will invent or discover?



Mason went from struggling in mainstream classes to receiving the "Most Friendly" award, which was voted on by his peers, in his senior year at Prior Lake High School.

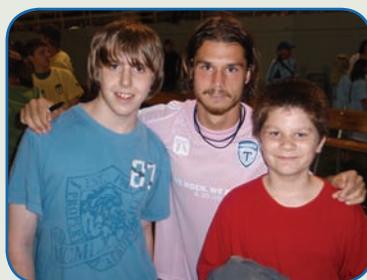
Mason is a 19-year-old student with Asperger Syndrome. If you have questions or topics that you would like Mason to address in future issues, please send them by email to jgressman@wmlc.biz with Mason's Perspective in the subject line.

>> Next issue:
Mason gives his perspective on dating.

Therapeutic Rec: Sleepover Outing Rolling Like Thunder

West Metro Sleepovers provide clients opportunities to practice and generalize their social skills in the community while making friends and having a good time. On September 20th, sleepover participants met the Minnesota Thunder! During the game, we practiced our sportsmanship skills by cheering our favorite soccer team to a 3-1 victory over Montreal, securing the Thunder a spot in the USL First Division Playoffs. This was a special day for the Thunder as well as for West Metro! Minnesota Thunder players wore pink to celebrate Breast Cancer Awareness month. After the game, West Metro's name was called over the loud speaker as a special guest, and more cheering ensued!

West Metro stayed after the game and practiced social skills by greeting Minnesota Thunder players, getting autographs, and having pictures taken. Many of our clients had been looking forward to meeting the players and used this event to overcome anxieties related to this unique social opportunity. What a delight, to see our clients using such crucial skills and introducing themselves confidently and appropriately to the players. **Go Thunder! Go West Metro!**



WMLC teens enjoy a photo opportunity with a MN Thunder star player.



WMLC Sleepovers provide a monthly reprieve for parents

Sign-up sheets posted on the Therapeutic Rec board at the Excelsior Center or you may call (952) 474-0227 to reserve a spot for your child.

(Continued from page 1)

In her "Teen Sensory Tools Survey," Henry provides a format for teens to begin determining their sensory preferences, as well as age-appropriate strategies for a variety of typical teen "conditions."

Look for Diana Henry's recommendations in the Winter issue of Perspectives newsletter as we continue with "Part 2: Strategies for Teen Conditions."

¹West Metro Learning Connections' focus on sensory system considerations was inspired by Debra Schipper's study with the late Bonnie Hanschu, an occupational therapist who developed the At Ready Approach and made widespread positive impacts on individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders through her work in the field of sensory processing.

²Patricia Wilbarger, MEd, OTR, FAOTA is an occupational therapist and a clinical psychologist who is known for coining the phrase "sensory diet." She developed the specific sensory modulation technique known as the Wilbarger Deep Pressure and Proprioceptive Technique (DPPT).

³Diana Henry, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA president of Henry Occupational Therapy Services, Inc., studied with Lorna Jean King beginning in 1975, and then together founded what is now called the Children's Center in Arizona. Diana opened her clinic specializing in sensory integration (SI) in 1984 and developed programs for various Arizona schools. Diana's accomplishments are numerous, including the 2008 American Occupational Therapy Recognition of Achievement Award.

WMLC Satellite Home Site Featured in Savage Pacer

Last issue, WMLC announced that it would be replacing its Bloomington center with “satellite social skills groups” beginning Fall Term 2008. We are pleased to report that this September a satellite location was established in a home on 150th Street in Savage.

The Savage home site was featured in the October 4 edition of the *Savage Pacer*. Staff writer Keighla Schmidt reported that the new location is helpful to families in the south metro area. Jennifer Oxborough, a WMLC parent residing in New Prague said, “It was hard to run that far, but this is closer. The location makes a 4:30 class possible for us...[my daughter] is really excited about the class and wants to come.”

A new set of classes focusing on social skills and building friendships in daily environments will begin in December for families interested in this satellite location.

For more information, families and groups of families may contact Janet Gressman at 952-474-0227, x206 to express their interest.



“Having the satellite site in a home is no accident; it’s meant to mimic a child’s home and be non-threatening.”
Waiting room for parents (top-L), sensory room (top-R), classroom (bottom-L), teen classroom (far upper-R)



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Showcase Minnesota



Debra shares Asperger Syndrome awareness on KARE 11's *Showcase Minnesota*

On August 5, 2008, Debra Schipper appeared on the Community Corner segment of *Showcase Minnesota*, a lifestyle show that airs live on KARE 11 weekdays from 10 to 11am. The show, hosted by Rob Hudson and Corbin Seitz, is also the place to learn about the area's best companies, the services and products they offer, and the people behind them.

Debra was accompanied by Laura Goldstein, a KARE 11 employee whose son is a client of West Metro Learning Connections. Debra provided valuable information about children with Asperger Syndrome and how WMLC teaches them how to make and keep friends and how to fit in and get along with others. Laura wrapped up the interview by telling how the social skills classes at WMLC have helped her son.

You can see this segment online at:
www.showcaseminnesota.com/show/client_article.aspx?storyid=521095



West Metro Learning Connections is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism by developing social understanding and social skills.

What the Parents are Saying About WMLC...

“My son is going to live independent of support when he is ready to do so. For this I thank WMLC for their positive attitudes when working with the social deficits my son has to face. His future is brighter as are his days now as he understands with increasing amounts of self-confidence.”
— Karla Stenson

“WMLC is the only resource we have found, outside of the school district that truly addresses our daughter’s most critical need: learning the art of social interactions.”
— Susan Kent

“It is comforting to know that there is a place that my son can attend that allows him to try new things and meet new people in an environment that will not ridicule him, but will help him grow and cope in social situations.”
— current WMLC parent

“West Metro was there for us, coaching us and his teachers onto victory...[they] provided me with that proverbial manual as to how to be the mother of a child with autism.”
— Lisa Robson

USEFUL LINKS

- Problems Teens With AS Often Face/Solutions —
<http://www.yourlittleprofessor.com/teen.html>
- Journeying Into Adolescence With AS —
<http://www.childresearch.net/RESOURCE/NEWS/2007/200703.HTM>
- Should A Teen With AS Try To Be “Normal?” —
<http://autism.about.com/od/aspergerssyndrome/f/KGmiddleschool.htm>
- AS Experiences From A Teenagers Perspective —
http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/teens_reflection.html