
Exploring Accommodations: Some Things to Consider When Supporting People with Learning, Sensory and Movement Differences

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A.M. Donnellan, M.R. Leary, Jayne D. Miller, Mary Lapos, Jodi Patterson, Carole Doran, Judy Marquette and the writings of Donna Williams. See also "Movement Differences and Diversity" (Donnellan & Leary, 1995)

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Accommodations

Accommodations are personalized strategies that assist in temporarily overcoming differences in learning style, sensory integration and/or movement. Accommodations include many things and we all use accommodations to temporarily compensate for difficulties we may have in starting, executing, stopping, combining and switching behavior, thoughts, perceptions, speech, language, memories and emotions. Some common accommodations include the use of gesture, touch, rhythm, behavior rituals, sequences, changing aspects of tasks, visualization, music and other strategies. These accommodations will be different for each person and the person's need for accommodations may vary from day to day or hour to hour. Accommodations may be effective for a time and then lose their effectiveness for a person. It is always a good idea to have a 'menu' of possible accommodations for a particular person, considering alternative accommodations when needed.

People devise their own accommodations too, without the assistance of others. For example, people who have difficulty passing through a doorway or making other transitions such as from wood flooring to carpet, report that taking a step backwards during the transition may ease their ability to move and avoid their getting 'stuck' in a doorway. Some of the accommodations that people have devised for themselves may appear to be unusual or bizarre to others. Supporters may recommend a change away from a particular self-chosen accommodation for a specific reason (e.g. limits person's access to public places, damages or hurts self or others). However, it is important to recognize the possible function that an accommodation may serve and to provide alternative accommodations to fulfill that function.

Some things to consider for teaching new tasks

When a person has difficulty attending to or perceiving details of a task

Choose tasks with clear beginnings and endings such as

- Stacking chairs
- Making popcorn
- Emptying waste baskets
- Washing very dirty dishes
- When the task does not have a clear beginning or end, create clear beginnings and ends in some other way, such as time markers (lunch time, when the bell rings).

Make the transformation or result more salient or obvious

- Use "Endust" for dusting, opaque foams and colored cleansers for scrubbing
- Use color cues - For example, use a piece of pink paper to end the stack
- Collate only two items at a time

Teach a motor pattern "RULE"

- Clean from this corner to this corner
- Wash each plate in this motion
- Take everything from counter top and put it on the table
- Clean from this corner to this corner
- Wash each plate in this motion
- Take everything from counter top and put it on the table

When a person has difficulty with sequencing, initiating or switching to next step

Present new information in an old format or style

- Reduce the number of things that are 'novel' in a task by using a familiar way of setting up a task or presenting information.

Consider a visual display

- Pictures of task sequence, turn over when finished
- Real or miniature objects in a sequence
- Lay out a visual display of the task, left to right
- Have a container with all materials available in order
- Have materials visible in the room - For example, vacuum cleaner, mop and pail together in kitchen means it is time for housecleaning.

Select appropriate prompts

- Avoid teaching physical skills with verbal prompts. Spoken prompts are difficult to fade and use of verbal prompts often results in 'prompt dependency'.
- Choose a type of prompt and use that prompt consistently. When you fade the prompt, avoid switching to another type of prompt. For example, do not fade from physical guidance to gesture prompts. Instead, fade the physical guidance prompt by using less physical guidance.

Use a consistent sequence for a task

- For many people, consistency of the sequence is very important in the first stages of learning a new skill. Use a sequence that does not vary until the person has learned the skill. Flexibility in adapting to changes in the materials, environment or sequence will come after the initial learning.

Build generalization into the learning - "Zero Inference" teaching

- Natural materials
- Natural environments
- Natural scope and sequence
- Natural cues and consequences

Some things to consider when flexible and consistent participation are challenging ...

Material Accommodations –

Things that may assist in sensory integration and body comfort thereby reducing stress levels for some individuals. Work with a sensory integration specialist, OT, PT or other professional for specific guidance.

Tumble form chairs

Chewy and crunchy things

“Feel Good Box”

Weighted Vest

Light Box

Earplugs or earphones

Bean Bag Chairs

Tube necklaces

Black Light

Foot/Hand Vibrators

Tinted Glasses

Heavy padded clothing

Environmental Accommodations – Ways of fine-tuning the environment to promote a person's optimum participation.

Background noise and sudden noises – Notice how competing noise, white noise and loud noises affect a person's ability to pay attention. Remember that sometimes the senses mix, for example, for some people a loud noise may affect that person's ability to see things clearly or to remain standing.

Reduce auditory reverberation by using:

- carpet
- cork flooring
- ceiling tiles
- large padded furniture

Reduce glare and visual refraction by:

- turning off unnecessary lighting, especially fluorescent
- using matte finishes on surfaces and walls
- using lamps instead of overhead lights
- using low wattage light bulbs
- soft colored light (cut down contrast and color contrast in a room)

Reduce visual clutter while keeping materials visible and accessible.

Choice of colors for walls, floors and furniture – Solid colors for the walls sometimes help people with depth perception differences to judge distances. Floors and walls should not be the same color. Some people report being able to move better when the floor pattern is compelling, such as the tile floors in the black and white pattern. In the bathroom, a floor that contrasts in color to the toilet and other fixtures is helpful to some. Too much sameness among colors of walls, floors, furniture and fixtures may make it difficult to see them as **separate**.

Position the furniture around the periphery of the room

- to move around the room more freely or "navigate" without barriers
- not necessary to keep visual account of where large obstacles are located

Furniture in plain color, distinctly different from the wall color

- easier to make sense of as a whole object
- easier to know everything in relation to everything else

Quiet spaces - Places to get away from the stimulation of daily activity

One plain wall in a room or classroom - A visually 'quiet' space

Interpersonal Accommodations

Aspects of support that focus on accommodating a person's differences within the relationship. The following are some issues to *consider when interactions are difficult for a person*.

Assume competence

When people do not use words to communicate and have difficulty using their bodies to express meaning, others sometimes assume the person does not understand what is being said. People who do not have a full range of facial expressions or cannot use their bodies or voices to express emotions are sometimes thought to not have feelings. People have told us again and again that this is one of the most devastating aspects of learning, sensory and movement differences. Speak to people directly. Although a person's disability may affect various aspects of interaction, it is most helpful to speak to people in a way that acknowledges their competencies. If comprehension appears to be a problem, use augmentation to add meaning to your words, explain yourself in several different ways or illustrate your meaning in some other way. People must feel that they are part of the communication world in order to find the motivation needed to participate. Provide people with information, friendship, humor and intellectual stimulation.

Combining input from different sensory channels may be difficult for some people.

Try stressing one modality at a time. For example, use fewer gestures when speaking; use touch sparingly; signal your intention to touch before doing so; don't expect eye contact while person listens. Consider that movement of

others in the area may compete for attention. Experiment to find the right combinations for a person.

The melody of your voice ...

- **may distract from your meaning** - Try speaking with less intonation in your voice, more monotone.
- **When giving praise, be careful not to overload the person with too much emotional enthusiasm.**

Touch - Some people have real difficulty with being touched. It is often easier when touch is predictable and rhythmical. For other people, touch is the preferred way to gain their attention - touch arm or hand and wait for attention before speaking. Firm touch is often reported to be more pleasant than light touch.

Rhythm may help - For many people rhythm is an important part of relationship. Try to match the rhythm of the person and then change it slightly. Plan schedule of activities on person's rhythm rather than other expectations.

Slow down - A slower pace is often helpful for anyone when the person, place or activities are unfamiliar. Pause after speaking (sometimes up to 20 seconds), wait and allow extra time for a person to respond.

Give "real" breaks - Think of a break as a chance to process information; a break is a real, clear space not a new conversation.

Consider personal space - Some people need extra space between them and their partner. Some people come too close and the supporter needs to back up to allow more space.

Discuss behavior difficulties outside of the situation where there may be a problem.

Many people report that when they are focused on self-control and a supporter brings up the topic of behaviors to avoid, the person is more likely rather than less likely to have a problem.

Naming a behavior to avoid sometimes causes that behavior to happen. People report that distraction from thinking about the behavior is more effective than direct reference to it.

If one must talk about behavior in a situation, the focus should be on the positive behavior, rather than the negative.

During difficult times, reduce the need to interpret

When a person needs assistance to maintain self-control: use clear language with clear references. Keep conversational 'banter' to a minimum; indicate topic switches clearly; and be clear in your intentions and message.

When a person is vulnerable, limit and monitor emotional load. Many people report:

- Unfiltered emotions" or difficulty identifying which emotion one is feeling may be more bombarding than sensory overload
- Loss of sense of control at transition times or shifts from the expected
- Performance anxiety – Exposure of self and being the center of attention may be too scary.
- Hyper-experienced sensations and emotions can build when triggered by intense situations. The experience is "too much" feeling and may lead to destruction of one's own work, objects in the environment or attacking one's own body.

Emotion can build, get mixed up or 'stuck'

- A little bit scared can turn into terror and may be expressed by laughing
- A little bit upset can turn into furious
- A little bit amused can turn into manic, hysterical laughing

Direct confrontations may be raw, exposing and emotionally provoking. When a person is vulnerable or losing control, a direct reference to the situation may be very Unhelpful. Often, distraction and indirect references work better.

Speak to "another" person or to the material

- Use objects to illustrate or explain interactions
- Teach people to leave or avoid sources of provocation
- Make a non-verbal offer, for example, push an object in person's direction rather than asking if person wants it.

Accommodations some people use

Below is a list of categories with some examples for thinking about other types of accommodations. The list is intended to provoke thought on what might be most relevant for exploring with a person based on their responses, preferences and interests. It may also be used to consider what accommodations a person may already use, having devised the accommodation herself.

- Rhythm or tempo - moving with another person; performing a task to a certain tune or rhythm.
- Emotional - expressions of confidence; eye to eye gaze or lack of it
- Sounds - bell or alarm; whistle, bird sounds
- Words - calling person's name; saying words silently to oneself
- Smells or scents - smell of coffee helps initiate getting out of bed; smelling hair helps to identify person
- Cognitive - visualization or visual imagery, redirection of attention
- Touch – touch on back to help initiate movement, deep pressure helps in calming
- Sights – cue by looking toward a destination, watching someone else move
- Movement – calming by repetitive movements like riding an exercise bike or pacing back and forth

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