

Exploring and Engaging Purposefully in Everyday Activities

Development during early childhood is driven towards exploring and engaging in everyday activities in order to learn about the world. Children explore the world through their sensory systems (touch, movement, body awareness, hearing, seeing, smelling, etc). Once a child gains interest in an activity or toy, children then are asked to manipulate and further explore the object in order to learn more about how to utilize the item, toy, or object. Once these steps have been mastered, children are able to engage purposefully with an object or toy. An example of this can be when a 1-year-old child picks up two rings. First the child will explore it and manipulate it by touching it, moving it, visually inspecting it, and figure out what they may be able to do with the rings. Then the child may manipulate it further by banging it on a tabletop or banging the rings together at midline. Lastly, a child can engage in play with the rings in a purposeful manner, like bringing the rings together to make noise when listening to music. The skills needed for this process are highly driven by motor planning skills.

Motor planning is a large skill that includes our body's ability to figure out what to do and how to do everyday activities. Difficulties with motor planning can lead to difficulties with learning and difficulties with mastering everyday activities.

Here are a few examples of motor planning tasks:

- Figuring out how to ride a bike
- Learning how to drive a car
- Learning how to walk, crawl, walk up/down stairs
- Learning how to use tools (i.e. scissors, crayons, etc) in a purposeful manner
- Learning how to kick a ball
- Figuring out how to use a spoon to feed oneself
- Learning how to write
- Learning how to organize day to day life

When a child has difficulty with motor planning, it can impact the child's ability to learn how to interact with objects and activities in their world. In addition, difficulties with learning how to explore and engage with toys in novel ways can impact the child's ability to learn in the school setting, play with peers, and function when changes or disruptions occur in their everyday activities. Here is an example of difficulties coming up with new ways to play with toys: If a child is having difficulty figuring out how to come up with new ways to play with their toys, they will prefer to play with their toys in the same way and have difficulty expanding on that. An example of this could be a child always pushing their cars or trains along a path on a table, and having difficulty taking that same toy and pushing it along a collection of pillows that create "hills".

Here are just a few examples of what you may see if your child is having difficulties with motor planning skills:

- Difficulty figuring out a new way to play with a toy.
- Difficulties figuring out what to do with tools like scissors, spoons, forks, pencils, etc.
- Difficulty expanding on a play routine
- Difficulty coordinating the two sides of the body together to complete tasks like holding paper while coloring, stringing beads, riding a bike, playing catch and throw, etc.
- Difficulty with multi-step activities – obstacle courses, dressing, self feeding, etc.
- Difficulty learning how to complete prewriting shapes (vertical line, horizontal line, circle, square, triangle, oblique lines, etc) or difficulty learning how to form letters.

Here are a few questions to consider when looking at motor planning skills and determining whether difficulties with these skills are contributing to your child's learning potential and development:

- Does your child have difficulty with expanding on their play routines?
- Does your child choose to play with the same toy in the same way?
- Does your child have difficulty dressing oneself?
- Does your child have difficulty feeding oneself without spilling a lot of the food?
- Can your child figure out how to assume simple yoga positions when you model it for them? (i.e. downward dog, child's pose)
- Does your child have difficulty coordinating the two sides of their body to manipulate fasteners on their clothing, string beads, hold paper while cutting or coloring, etc.?
- Does your child have difficulty following multi step directions or multi step activities?
- Does your child seem to get lost while completing a task, and require modeling and verbal cues to help them figure out how to complete the task?
- Does your child get upset when they are asked to come up with new ways of playing with a toy?
- Does your child have difficulty with prewriting or handwriting skills?

These are only a few questions related to possible motor planning difficulties. If difficulties with motor planning are impacting daily life and your child's ability to participate in age related activities to their fullest potential, an occupational therapy consultation or evaluation might be beneficial. Occupational therapy can assess a child's individual motor skills, motor planning skills, and overall sensory processing capacity to assist with increase in functional independence.

Here are a few examples that an occupational therapist could utilize to assist you and your child with their motor planning:

- Completing an evaluation using the Sensory Integration and Praxis Test (SIPT), the gold standard for evaluating praxis (motor planning) related difficulties. This battery of 17 tests provides specific information in regards to sensory processing that directly impacts praxis skills. The test can be completed on children ages 4 through 8 years, 11 months.
- Determining what areas of sensory processing are delayed and impacting motor planning skills and focus intervention and home programming to increase those skills.
- Determining adaptive techniques to assist with increased independence at home during motor tasks that are typically challenging for the child. An example could be to create a visual schedule or visual chart breaking a task down into simple steps with visual cues.