

How sensory integration nurtures skills to support independence

Introduction

Molly is a student at Sunfield. She has been diagnosed with autism and has severe learning disabilities and complex needs. This case study follows her journey to greater independence through occupational therapy, with particular focus on sensory integration.

Background

Molly joined Sunfield at the age of 11, with learning disabilities and complex needs associated with autism. She had some sensory processing issues, which also interacted with her other difficulties.

Following completion of Molly's comprehensive sensory integration assessment, a full sensory profile was shared with her parents and key staff, providing information on her sensory processing issues and the interaction of other difficulties. An individual sensory diet was formulated, with recommendations for environmental considerations, as well as appropriate sensory and movement activities, which were to be provided across Molly's waking day, to promote enhanced body awareness and optimal arousal levels.

The Journey

The purpose of Molly's occupational therapy was to increase her independence and her ability to participate in all facets of her daily life. Sunfield aimed to achieve this within the sensory integration framework, by focusing on the unconscious processes in Molly's brain, that organise the information detected by her senses (taste, sight, hearing, touch, smell, movement, gravity, and position). The processing of this information, in everyone, gives meaning to what is being experienced and forms the underlying foundation for academic learning and social behaviour. Through the therapeutic sessions, the aim was to help Molly to better interpret and respond to situations in a purposeful manner.

In order to measure and monitor Molly's progress within the occupational therapy and sensory integration sessions, goals were established at the beginning of the term. These included increasing Molly's degree of independence in completing fine motor activities; her length of engagement in OT/SI therapy sessions; and her independence in putting her coat or cardigan on.

Molly received weekly sensory integration therapy sessions to improve her processing of incoming sensory information. The therapy sessions utilised intensive sensory input from different sensory systems, including tactile, vestibular and proprioception. Alongside this, Molly undertook integrative activities to motivate her, increase her engagement and promote adaptive responses. She also received classroom based occupational therapy sessions, focusing on the development of fine motor and functional skills, and increasing tolerance to sensory input.

The Conclusion

Molly is making good progress on the established goals and, in addition, she has shown improvements in her initiation of activities; adaptive responses; reduction of self stimulation, self-injurious behaviour and aggressive behaviour within sessions. She also displays increased social initiation and eye contact; greater problem solving and persistence; improving self-regulation skills and increased calm-alert presentation, which presents greater opportunity for learning and skill development.