



Summary of the Information day held at the Isca Centre, Exeter, on 30th June 2009

The day was split into 2 parts with the morning session looking at Sensory Integration and what happens when people have Sensory Processing Difficulties. During the afternoon we looked at some practical tips for helping to cope with stress (and how to avoid getting over stressed in the first place) and then talked about the changes within the Joint Agency. We also looked at two play schemes that operate throughout the year and parents had the opportunity to ask the organisers of the schemes any questions.

Sensory Processing Difficulties – Chris West, Occupational Therapy Advanced Practitioner

Chris had previously come along to a meeting and had talked to some parents on this subject so the morning was the chance to look at the subject in greater detail and give parents the chance to ask any questions.

She began by explaining that all the information we received from our body and the environment comes to us through our sensory systems. This information is then collected in the brain, organised, and then used to help us move round, fulfil everyday tasks and behave normally. While these sensations flow in a well organised manner the brain can use those sensations to form perceptions, behaviours and learning. When the flow of sensations is disorganised life can be like a rush hour traffic jam.

Chris went on to explain that our senses can be seen as the building blocks that enable us to build strong foundations for playing, learning and growing. They are important to our physical and emotional development, and help us to use our bodies effectively in the world around us.

The Tactile System

Provides information about the texture, shape and size of objects around us, It tells us whether we are actively touching something or whether we are passively being touched. It helps us to distinguish between threatening and non-threatening touch sensations.

Tactile input helps us to have a good body map

If someone is hypersensitive to touch they tend to react negatively and emotionally to unexpected light touch sensations.

If a person is hyposensitive to touch they tend to under-react to tactile experiences. They may need the extra stimulation and be forever touching objects and people. They may also not react to touch unless the touch is very strong, which may mean they do not react quick enough to do a good job of self protection.

The Vestibular System (Balance)

This enables us to maintain a good upright position and to remain balanced. If we become unbalanced it allows our bodies to correct ourselves and regain our balance. It also prepares us for fight or flight in an emergency and gives us a physical and emotional sense of where we are in the world.

The vestibular system is activated by head movement such as vigorous nodding or shaking or being upside down, swinging, rocking and spinning.

If it is not working properly the body can have difficulty with balance, such as balancing on a beam or walking over uneven ground, standing still and closing eyes, or have problems with emotions, attention or behaviour.

The Proprioceptive system (Movement and joints)

Proprioception is the sense that tells us where our bodies are in space and determines the accuracy with which we are able to move through our environment, avoid obstacles and grade the amount of force and movement required to carry out activities. It gives us a sense of body awareness and control of movement.

Someone with poor proprioception has difficulty interpreting sensations about the position and movement of their head and limbs, lacking the instinctive knowledge of these ordinary subconscious sensations. They tend to have low muscle tone. They can often be clumsy, have stiff un-coordinated movements and need to look to see what they are doing. They can also find it difficult to use the correct amount of pressure to grip objects such as a pencil, tending to hold it either too weakly or too tight.

The Far Senses

These tell us what is coming from outside the body, and are smell, taste, touch, sight and sound.

Chris went on to talk about what happens when there is a problem in the ability to regulate, organise and prioritise the incoming sensory information. She gave numerous examples of how a child might react to either too much or too little sensory stimulation and talked about some of the difficulties it can cause, along with many suggestions of what might be done to help ease the problems. She likened this to a car engine and the need for just the right amount of sensory stimulation. Too much and the person is overwhelmed (too fast), too little and the person is underwhelmed (not enough power).

The goal is for the child to display the appropriate level of attention, arousal and effort for the task at hand, and to enable them to function more appropriately and effectively within their environment.

Many children have difficulties, but how does that impact on their everyday life? What can we do to help them?

Similarly, many children develop their own strategies for dealing with things. We need to be asking if the resulting behaviour is a problem for us or others and if it is not, let them continue. Also, we need to look at what the behaviour is telling us. Often it is showing us what they need, so how can this need be met in a more acceptable way?

We need to ensure that we set up the environment for the child in such a way that we are not adding to the problem, and if possible, are helping them. If a child is visually sensitive it

would not usually be a good idea to sit them by the window where they can become easily distracted.

Chris went on to recommend some books and websites that parents might find useful.

Books:

Heller, S. (2003). Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight. What to do if you are sensory defensive in an over stimulating world. Quill

Kronawitz, C. (2008). The Goodenoughs Get in Sync. Sensory Resources.

Miller, L. J & Fuller, D.A. (2006) Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder. Perigree Books.

Websites:

- www.sensory-processing-disorder.com
- www.spdfoundation.net
- www.sensorysmarts.com
- www.Rompa.com

Chris is happy to be contacted by parents and can be emailed at chris.west@devon.gov.uk or alternatively she can be contacted by phone on 01392 383760 (although she is often out of the office so email is probably better).

Dealing with stress – Tina Norman

After lunch Tina talked about some practical tips to help prevent the build up of stress.

We all spend a lot of time running around making sure that the needs of everyone else in the family have been met but how much time do we devote to ensuring that our own needs are met? It is important that we look after ourselves as if we don't who will look after us and everyone else?

Some suggestions made were:

- Put yourself first
- Talk about your feelings and your problems with someone
- Relax – whatever suits you need
- Keep up with your hobbies or interests
- Make time for something; enjoy a relaxing hot bath.

Remember, we can't always do everything, but we need to look after ourselves so we can do most things!

Tina then explained a couple of techniques that may help parents to deal with stress.

The first was diaphragmatic breathing (belly breathing) which simply consisted of taking long slow breaths in through the nose and out through your mouth until you started to relax. As you breathe in you can feel your tummy go in and as you breathe out your tummy should go out.

After that Tina guided everyone in an imaginary walk through the countryside during which all your worries were placed in a box for later.

Steve West – Joint Agency update

Steve joined us shortly before lunch to answer questions from parents and to introduce himself to those who have not met him before.

From September Steve will be the Further Response Manager for Exeter, the role that is currently being undertaken by Hil Rundle. Hil will be taking over the equivalent role in East and Mid Devon.

The Integrated Assessment Team is now based at Capital Court on the Sowton Trading Estate in Exeter. This will be the new Early Response Team. Referrals will come through this team initially.

If enduring or complex needs are identified the file will go to the new further Response Team which was previously the complex cases team.

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) will become part of the Joint Agency Service.

Holiday Play schemes – CEDA and the East Devon Activity Scheme

Trish Oliver (CEDA) and Louise Edmonds (East Devon Activity Scheme) talked a little about how each of their schemes worked and the kind of activities that they provide for those attending them.

They both answered a range of questions from individual parents on how the schemes would deal with differing needs, what sort of trips out they did and how the children were organised.

Further details of the schemes can be obtained by contacting:

CEDA

Ceda operates from The Clare Milne Centre, Exeter Business Park, Exeter
01392 813028

East Devon Activity Scheme

The activity scheme operates from three different venues:
Millwater School, Honiton
Egremont Road Children's Centre, Exmouth
100 Club, Exeter.

Contact Louise Edmonds on 07967 754590 for more information