

The Swing

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By Elizabeth Healey

He lifted his head, and I spied lovely brown eyes. Then he dropped to his knees, and began pushing a toy truck with silent exuberation.

I had not received any paperwork with directives to evaluate this lively new boy. He soundlessly moved among the other children, and when I blocked his path, he stopped and smiled up at me, but did not answer when I asked his name.

With happy demeanor, he continued his pushing activity as I inquired about him from his teacher. She assured me that his problems were related to his lack of speech. There were no problems with his motor planning, and his fine-motor skills were very age appropriate. These were, of course, the areas of occupational therapy expertise.

I asked the teacher, "Does he vocalize?"

"He sometimes cries when he is sick or hurt, according to his mom," she said, "but otherwise he is silent. I haven't heard any sounds as yet, but he does seem to understand."

She shared with me the reports concerning various tests that were done to rule out hearing or physical reasons for the boy's mute behavior. Neither family nor birth history indicated any etiology to explain it. His older sister headed the seventh grade cheerleaders with her apt vocal ability.

But lights went off in my mind as I remembered the research and sensory integration practice that Dr. Jean A. Ayers had authored. I had just finished OT school the previous year, and those books, chapters and references were fresh in my mind. Vestibular stimulation prone swinging often triggered the brain chemistry involved in producing sound. Was this the missing ingredient in the child's development? Maybe a steady dose of this type of stimulation was the needed link. I proposed the idea to his teacher and got permission from his parents to begin a daily 10- to 15-minute swing session in the therapy room. The teacher's aide primarily implemented this, and within a few weeks, the boy started making sounds while on the swing. We were astounded, as was he. The sounds increased daily, and then teacher and parents reported vocalizations in the classroom and at home. This was the third week, and as he progressed daily, our excitement mounted. Over the next few weeks, he began repeating single-syllable words. His progress was slow but steady, and each day we witnessed more of this miracle unfurl. We gradually lessened the swing sessions and tapered off even more toward the end of the year. Speech therapists worked successfully with the child, and he made rapid gains over the next few years.

I had not seen the boy for more than 12 months when one day I spied him playing ball with some kids after school outside my room. My heart soared as I heard his boisterous yell to one of his friends.

And for a fleeting moment, I saw in my mind the image of the silent little boy with the big brown eyes I knew from before, swinging on that swing.

Elizabeth Healey, OTR, lives in Cartersville, VA. She has been a school-based therapist for 11 years.



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