

Learning Reloaded



By Lyn Moorehead

Discover the miracle Sensory Learning Program brought to one Valley family

How would you feel if your 8-year-old completed his homework without a fuss, helped you do laundry, was happy to learn how to change the oil in your car and when you pointed out that he wasn't using his "listening skills," he realized you were only telling him to help him, and he promised to listen better – and then followed through?

Great! That's how you and any parent of a normal 8-year-old would feel.

Now imagine an 8-year-old boy, who does all these wonderful things, except he was diagnosed with autism at age 2, and, despite years of speech therapy, physical therapy, music therapy, and multiple other therapies, he couldn't

meet a new face or go someplace new without having an emotional meltdown; he couldn't pay attention in school; he couldn't jump rope, follow instructions or even play with his peers – he wasn't capable of doing any of those things until a year ago when he participated in very a special program.

Most people would consider that a miracle.

Well, we aren't supposing here. That 8-year-old is the son of Sandy Keller, a Mesa mom of five, who had almost given up hope for her son until his speech therapist told her about a girl who showed drastic improvement in her speech after attending the Sensory Learning Program at SIRRI (Sensory Integration Research & Rehabilitation Institute) for only two weeks.

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Some of his words were unintelligible. He would say tootie for cookie," says Sharon Josepho, a San Diego, Calif. psychologist and mother of two. "We could see his frustration," she adds, "He's now 3-and-a-half, and has been taking speech therapy for six months."

Rena Barrios, of Baytown, Texas, has three children ages 3, 5 and 7. She's a firm believer that environment plays a huge role in speech disorders. "When my oldest son, Lane, was 3, I noticed he couldn't say 'f' words correctly. He would say 'soot' for 'foot,'" says Barrios. "Then, last year at 4-and-a-half my daughter Mallory developed the same problems saying 'f.'"

During testing, the therapist noticed she had a lisp. Now all three of my kids have a lisp," says Barrios, "I believe they picked it up from hearing each other."

Some of the other possible reasons for speech delays are hearing problems; malformation of lip(s), tongue and jaw; or tongue placement.

"We work on tongue placement and strengthening by using tongue exercises the kids can practice at home," says Johnson of Cole Therapy Center. "We have exercises the kids can do with bubbles, straws and horns to strengthen tongue muscles. It looks like fun and the kids can forget they are getting therapy."

If your child's speech is not clear or if his or her speech or language is different from that of

similarly aged children, it might be time to see a speech therapist.

Between the ages of 2 and 3, language is booming. It's typically around this time some parents may begin to note if their child's language skills are lagging. "Any drastic change in your child's functioning, personality or behavior is cause for concern," says Paige Powell, Ph.D., coordinator of the Neuro Developmental Disorders Program at the Learning Support Center for Child Psychology at Texas Children's Hospital. "When a child can't focus on words, gets fixated on a particular object, lacks eye contact and shows no interest in interacting," they may need to be tested for autism, says Powell.

If your child talks and acts normal at home but can't speak in at least one setting, such as school, for at least a month (s)he may be suffering from what's known as selective mutism. In some cases parents may think their child is just being shy, but if a teacher says they've never heard your child's voice there could be a problem. "Selective mutism," says Powell, "is not a language disorder it is an anxiety disorder."

Language is one of life's most important tools, and no child is too young to be helped. If you are in doubt, have your child's language and speech evaluated. Always err on the side of caution. •

Resources

Here are some helpful resources for speech and language screening or therapy.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
www.asha.org

Selective Mutism Support Group
480-940-4714
www.selectivemutism.org

Arizona Speech-Language-Hearing Association
602-354-8062
800-705-7510
www.arsha.org

Speech America
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www.speechamerica.com

Aspire Therapy
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"We never felt like he could be much more than he was," explains Keller, who said she and her husband spent many sleepless nights worrying about her son's future. "We would go to bed at night thinking what's going to happen when we die. What's he going to do? Who's going to take care of him?" But ever since Keller's son went through two intense programs (Sensory Learning and Interactive Metronome) over a three-month period, she says, "You can no longer put a limit on him."

He's responsible, he swims, he plays the piano, he goes bowling, and he's made friends. "It's phenomenal. It's unbelievable to me," says Keller with a heartfelt tear in her voice. "The calmness, the maturity, the processing, the ability, the talents that come from him are extraordinary. They've (SIRRI) opened up all sorts of new doors for us."

How It Works

The Keller family miracle began with a 2.5-hour assessment at SIRRI. "We do a battery of testing," explains Dan Williams, SIRRI's executive director. "We do auditory processing tests, visual field and processing tests, motor planning, balance and coordination tests, tracking of the eyes, reading fluency and comprehension testing to see where the strengths are and where

"Sensory Learning doesn't teach them how to do something; it teaches the brain how to process. So now when that child goes to do something, the ability to pick it up and learn is quicker. Sensory Learning builds that foundation."

the weaknesses are in their nervous system. Based on the testing, it's black and white which program or combination of programs (packages) will benefit them by filling their neurological and developmental voids."

Age 6 is the minimum age at which an assessment can be performed. The testing costs \$200, which is directly applied toward the cost of any programs taken at SIRRI. For children ages 2-and-a-half through 5, an evaluation is performed for the Sensory Learning Program, which is the only program at SIRRI children 6 and younger can qualify for.

In Keller's son's case, the assessment indicated he would benefit from Interactive Metronome and the Sensory Learning Program,

neither of which requires medication. SIRRI is the only clinic in Maricopa County to offer Sensory Learning.

"A lot of therapies on the market today teach a child how to do something," explains Williams. "Sensory Learning doesn't teach them how to do something; it teaches the brain how to process. So now when that child goes to do something, the ability to pick it up and learn is quicker. Sensory Learning builds that foundation."

The Sensory Learning Program is a 30-day program that requires the first 12 days to be consecutive days, during which a computerized light instrument, a custom designed motion table and modulated music are used to retrain the vision, balance and auditory systems of the client.

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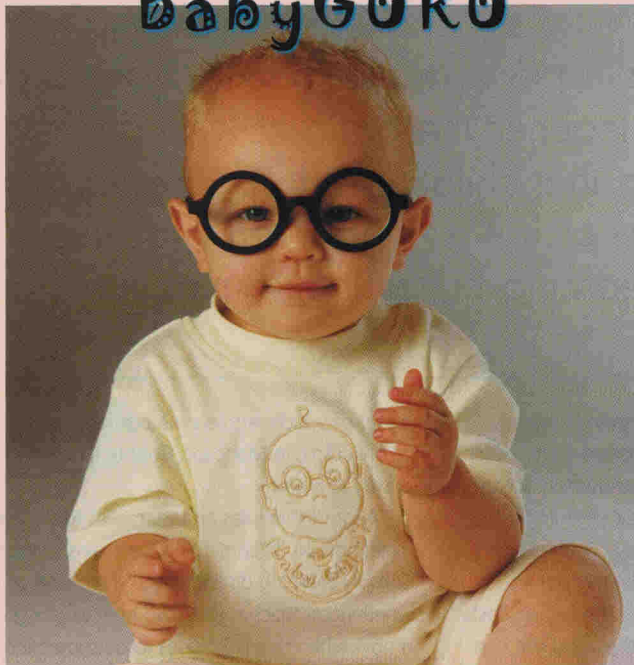
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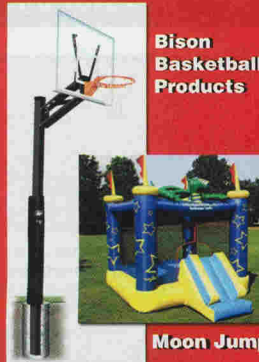
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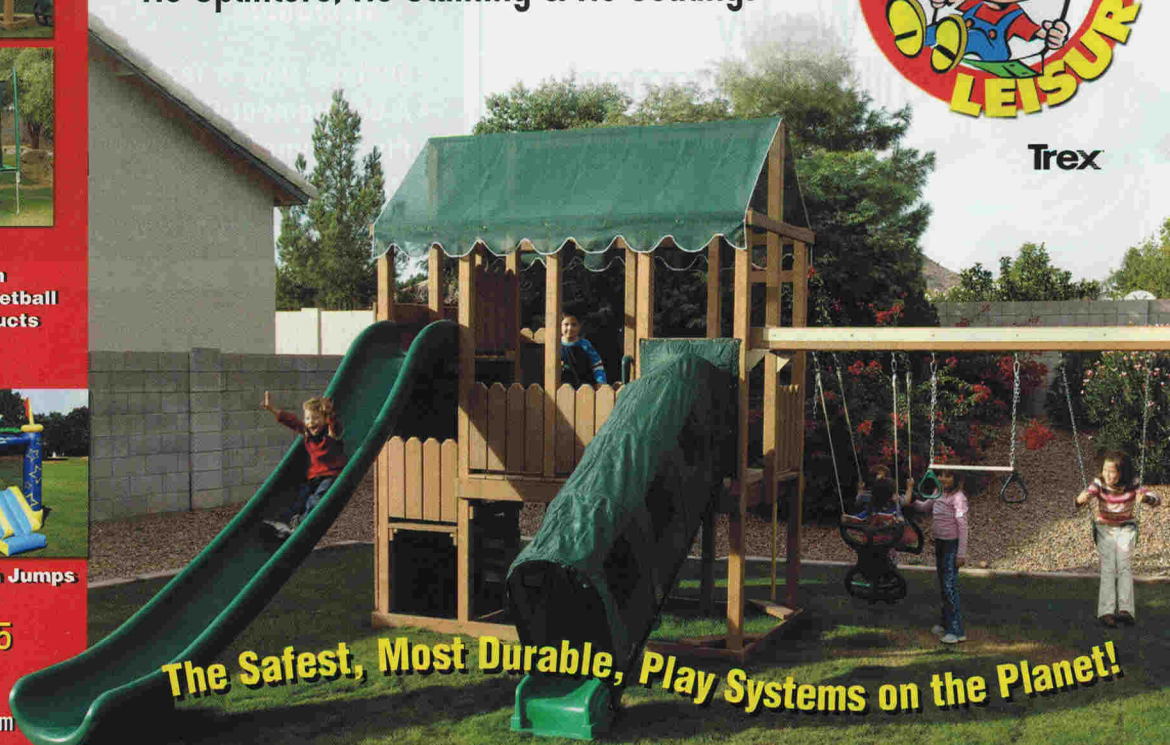
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"The Sensory Learning Program uses a movement table. The entire table moves," explains Williams. "They are laying on the table, it's moving, it's stimulating their vestibular system. They have headphones on that are hooked up to a computer, which is doing a computer-driven auditory retraining program. Then over top of them, is a light and they are doing vision and light therapy. It's all done simultaneously. The table is moving, the audio is playing and the vision is working. So they are stimulating their auditory system, their movement system and their visual system simultaneously through a multi-sensory approach."

According to Williams these three therapies are being used individually at other clinics, but SIRRI's Sensory Learning Program is the only one that uses all three at the same time.

"It only makes sense to combine the three, because that's the way the brain functions," says Williams.

When Keller first learned of the Sensory Learning Program table, she was certain it would not work. "I told them I didn't think it would go. My kid doesn't wear headphones. My kid doesn't like dark rooms. This was not going to

flow," she admits. However, "he got on the table, and I think the motion and the sounds somehow are so soothing to these kids that seek out that vestibular motion anyway. He never flinched, never fought, never even protested."

The boy's treatment required that he use the table 12 consecutive days in addition to doing an 18-day light program at home where he watched a colored light for 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes before bed. Once Keller's son had completed the Sensory Learning Program, he moved on to Interactive Metronome.

Interactive Metronome is the only researched-based technology program that uses fun, interactive exercises and a patented auditory guidance system to measure and improve one's rhythm and timing. By improving this fundamental ability, the individuals learn to plan, sequence and process information more effectively.

Motor planning and sequencing problems have been linked to various developmental, behavioral and learning challenges. A controlled, double-blind placebo study of 9- to 12-year-old boys diagnosed with ADHD found that those

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About SIRRI

In addition to the Sensory Learning Program and Interactive Metronome, SIRRI offers Reading Plus to improve reading skills; Brain Train, an interactive computerized mental exercise to help those with learning disabilities, brain injuries, ADHD and other cognitively impaired

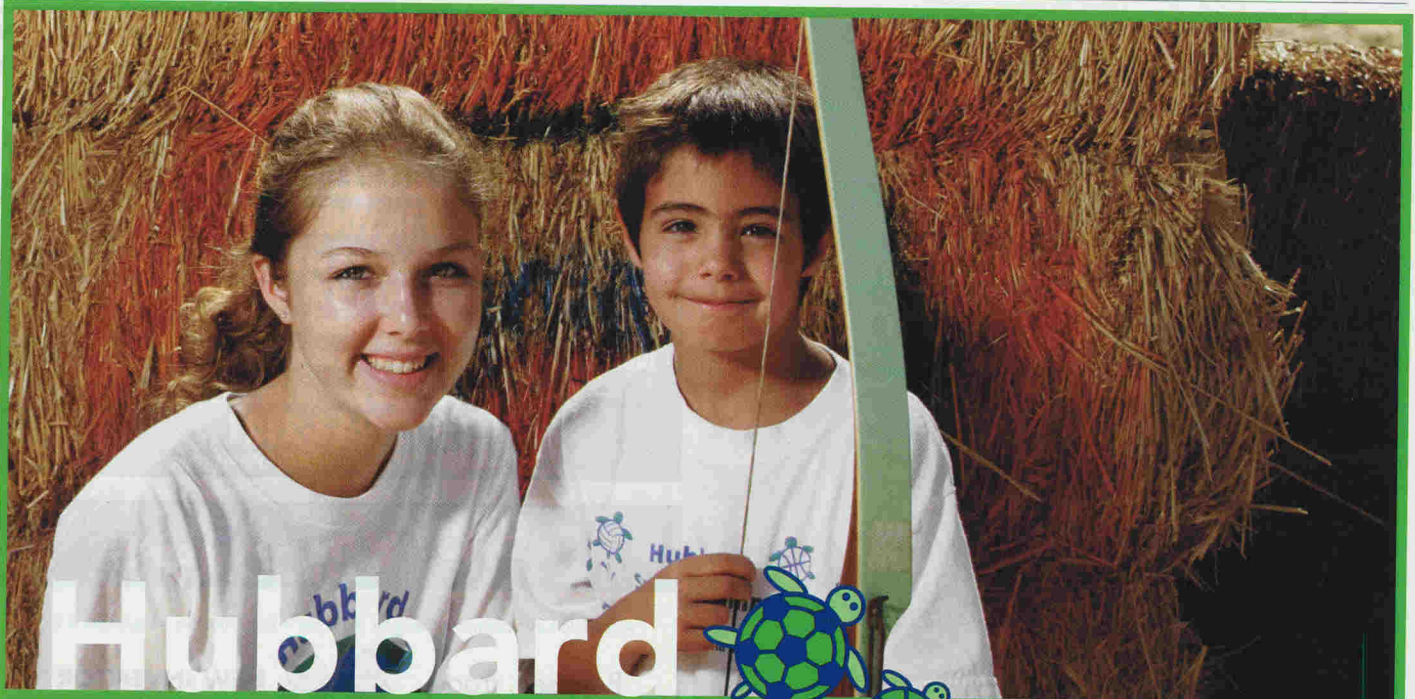
individuals regain functionality; and Play Attention, a computer-based system, also used by NASA and the US Air Force, that assists with overcoming concentration difficulties, attention issues and the ability to stay focused.



Play Attention, a computerized program at SIRRI, helps kids overcome concentration difficulties and stay focused.

Learn more about these programs by attending SIRRI's free Information Sessions 6:30-8:30 pm March 14 at 4515 S. McClintock Drive, Suite 208, Tempe. In addition to information on the program, hear testimonials from parents whose children have participated in the SIRRI program(s), case studies, tour the facility and network with other parents.

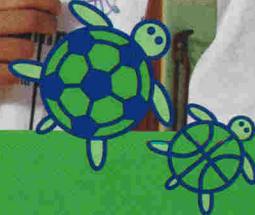
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With both the auditory and visual exercises, the computer records every tap, clap or step within a millisecond and then spits out a report to show the patient's progress.

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who underwent Interactive Metronome showed significant patterns of improvement in attention, coordination, control of aggression and impulsivity, reading and language processing. (March/April 2001 *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.)

Williams explains the Interactive Metronome procedure. "They are wearing headphones. They have hand sensors on, and there's a foot-pad or sensor. What they are doing is interactive exercises to a metronome in their ears. They have to clap every time they hear the beep. Auditorily in the headphones, there are guide sounds. If they are right on the beat, meaning they are within 15 milliseconds of the beep, they will hear a guide sound in both ears, which tells them they should keep going, it's a perfect beat. If they are early with their hands, they'll

hear a certain guide sound in the left ear saying they are early, they need to slow down. If they are late, they'll hear a different sound in their right ear telling them they are late and they need to speed up. So they learn to auditorily process and make a change with their speed."

This same type of test is also done visually using sensors, a headset and a computer screen. With both the auditory and visual exercises, the computer records every tap, clap or step within a millisecond and then spits out a report to show the patient's progress.


As clients advance with treatment, the clapping changes to something more difficult like hitting their right hand on their right hip and tapping their left toe to the floor. As you can imagine many first-time clients can't do this once, let alone do the 300 to 400 repetitions most will eventually accomplish.

"You're working on the endurance and stamina, the balance and coordination, and you're working on attention, concentration and focus," explains Williams. "To do 300 repetitions takes about 20 minutes, so you can imagine a 7-year-old doing the same exercise for 20 minutes. They are going to get bored and distracted. So this works on building their endurance for attention as well."

Keller's son's treatment required that he do Interactive Metronome 45 minutes at a time for 15 sessions.

"Interactive Metronome definitely helped," says Keller. It helped him concentrate in school and actually hear what the teacher was saying. He could suddenly focus better, complete tasks, and actually complete a set of consecutive instructions.

"He is the happiest autistic child that I know," she continues. "Now he has the confidence and the emotional desire to say, 'hey, I'd like a friend. Will you play?' There is a lot of maturity that he received out of this ... The whole family is affected by the emotions of one, and my son had the family on such a journey that I really felt guilty for the others. Now I can give the others everything that they need and he not only enjoys it, but he will become a part of it. I've done the best thing I could ever have done for my children, and now I can go to sleep and say it's okay. I've never slept so well in my life!"



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