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PUSHING EVOLUTION

For hundreds of thousands of years, human beings have engaged in heavy work, and sensory stimulation was nature-based and fairly benign. Chopping wood, hauling water, plowing fields...listening, looking and smelling nature. Recent advances in technology and transportation have resulted in a physically sedentary human body that is bombarded with chaotic and complex sensory stimulation.

Yet human evolution takes time, lots of time. Have we adapted as a species to accommodate to this sedentary yet frenzied existence? Are we pushing evolution? What will be the consequences for our children if we continue?

Although the answers to these questions are largely speculative, Cris Rowan, a paediatric occupational therapist, believes we are already seeing results of sedentary lives and high levels of sensory input levels in our children - and they aren't adapting as well as we would hope. Cris observes that 30% of primary classroom children have attention problems, with energy levels ranging from sleepy and lethargic to charged and wired, and 20% have printing delays, primarily in the areas of motor planning.

Changes to home and school settings have contributed to these delays. Continued budget cutbacks have resulted in overcrowded classrooms with subsequent "caged animal" symptoms in children (anger, anxiety, chewing, depression). Sedentary home lifestyles, as well as decreased school gym, supervised recess and organized sport, have contributed to observed delays in sensory and motor development. Consequently, these delays have an effect not only on children's ability to print and read, but also impacts children's energy states, creating either hypo- or hyperactive children with huge attention difficulties.

So how do we learn? We take information in through our sensory channels, we make "sense" of that information, and we produce an output - which could be how we behave, feel, move, and our ability to learn. The principles of Sensory Integration Theory, and Cris Rowan's Body Energy Model, posit that sensory input is energy, and can either charge, deplete or ground body energy. Movement, in the form of heavy work, is an energy outlet. In energy terms, "what goes in, must come out"...because energy is neither created nor destroyed, only transferred. When sensory input is balanced with movement output, the energy body is at it's optimal state for learning.

As a society of parents, teachers and professionals, we need to work together to address how we can assist children to balance sensory stimulation with heavy work, to increase attention and reduce sensory overload (fright, flight, fight). For example, at home, a parent might allow one hour of “box time” (TV, video game, computer) for one hour of heavy work (bike up hill, haul wood, dig in garden). Schools could work toward increasing classroom based resistive type movement through desk isometrics (hand push/pull), or through recess/gym activities (tug of war, climbing ropes).

Schools could also provide sensory stimulation reduction by decreasing classroom visual and auditory “clutter”, creating sensory hideouts, or could improve children’s ability to attend by utilizing sensory tools for optimizing energy states (squishies, chewies, smellies).

In order to help these children, Cris has developed two new revolutionary products called Zone’in and Move’in (www.zonein.ca).

Zone’in is an energy based program, derived from sensory integration theory, and is designed to improve students’ learning by maximizing their attention in a class setting. Zone’in teaches children how to use sensory motor techniques and tools to change their body energy, which enables them to get “Zone’in and Learn”! Children learn how they need to increase heavy work (push, pull, lift and carry) by using isometric classroom techniques, and are challenged to balance sensory stimuli (TV, video games) with heavy work.

Move’in is a printing assessment and intervention program, derived from fine motor skill development theory, and is designed to improve students’ printing and reading. Student’s play a fun game called Ready, Set, Move’in and improve motor planning using a computer program called Play’in the Lines. Children learn how to use their bodies to print, along with a variety of techniques and tools, so they can get “Move’in” toward easier printing and reading!

So while the pace of our society may not allow us to stop pushing evolution, we must start listening to our bodies if we want to successfully accommodate to recent advances in technology and transportation. We need to intersperse our daily lives with increased heavy work and need to moderate daily amounts of sensory stimulation, to get back on the natural evolutionary track.