

Video Transcription: Is it sensory or is it behavior

I want to talk to you all this week about a question that I often hear OTs asking — “Is it sensory or is it behavior?” As if there's this dichotomy and if we just figure out if the behavior is coming from a place of sensory dysregulation, or it's really a behavior, then that can guide our interventions.

And I think we're really asking the wrong question here. Because if we say, “Oh, it's sensory,” then that sets us up for sensory hypotheses — “Oh, he needs more or different sensory input,” “He is overwhelmed by the sensory environment.” It sets us up for sensory intervention, so we can provide accommodations. Some folks might do desensitization kinds of things. We can provide sensory input, whatever your sensory interventions are.

And that might be one piece of it, but if that's your whole intervention that's really very limited. So you say, “Oh it's behavior,” which really sets you up for behavioral interventions. That's where you come up with hypotheses like, “Oh, he's doing that to get out of working,” or “She's doing that to get attention.”

And then you have interventions like withholding what they want until they do what you want, which is a compliance-based intervention. Or ignoring the behavior because you don't want to give them attention. Or you can get into that power struggle, right, of, “If I see that you're doing this behavior to get out of this thing, so I have to make sure you do this thing.” And a lot of people, to make that power struggle go better, they add rewards and reinforcers and things like that.

So that's where the sensory versus behavioral lens leads us. And I've talked a lot on my blog about some of the problems that those behavioral type interventions present. So I won't go into this

video today all of the reasons why I don't recommend the behavioral approaches. The sensory interventions are important, but the problem is, these are just two little pieces of what's happening. Because what we know about autistic learners is that they really think differently than we do.

And again, a caveat if you're wondering why I say 'autistic', I have a blogpost on that and why I use identity first language, and I can link to that as well. But we know that our autistic kids have just a completely different way of thinking and learning and seeing the world. And that we're not good at shifting our perspectives so that we can understand them and see the situation from their perspective. So we say, "Oh, it's a behavior," or, "Oh, it's sensory dysregulation."

But what else could it be, right? Could it be that we can't see the social situation from an autistic perspective? Maybe the demands of the social situation are confusing or are aversive to that learner. Or maybe the perspective taking piece is hard because just like, it can often feel like autistic people are an anomaly to us. We can feel like an anomaly to them. They can be like, I don't know what is going on, or what is expected of me, or why we're doing this. Maybe they're just strong routines and maybe our activity or whatever is expected of them is violating what they expect it to happen, and maybe that routine is really important to them, and we're totally missing it. Maybe there's a receptive language difference and they're looking at the situation and seeing different instructions than we're intending, right? They're looking at the visual environment and figuring out what it's asking them to do. And we're saying, "But I told you you're supposed to do this," and maybe they missed those instructions. Maybe we didn't give them in a way that was meaningful. And that doesn't always mean just slapping pictures on something. There's a lot more to meaningful instructions than that, especially for concrete learners who don't even understand pictures yet, or sometimes at all.

And I'll give caveat there that we do presume competence. We do assume that even kids who aren't speaking do have a high level of verbal skills and do understand, while at the same time we give instructions in a way that we hope our kids can and will understand. So, what else could be going on?

Maybe there's an executive function difference. Maybe they can't see the steps of the activity so they don't want to do it. So we don't need a reward or reinforcer, we need to show the steps of the activity clearly in a way that's meaningful. Maybe central coherence is getting in the way. That's the ability to look at an activity and see the big picture, versus the details. So our kids who are shuffling materials, or who are, you know, picking at something, or asking a lot of questions about one detail of the assignment. We say, "Oh, they're sensory seeking," or, "They're trying to get out of work," but maybe they're actually not able to see what the point of the activity is, given how we set it up and how we explained it. So maybe we need to know how to present our activities differently to bypass that difference in central coherence, or seeing the details versus the big picture.

Maybe attentional set shifting is hard for this child. So the ability to move their attention from one activity to the next. And we're kind of trying to get them to the next activity before we've helped them find closure on whatever it was that they were doing and before we've got their attention.

I could keep going. There's so many different ways that we can miss what's happening for autistic learners if we don't use it as an autism lens in the process we use to interpret behaviors. So if we continue to just use like a random lens, which is what a lot of us do, and kind of go, "Um, maybe this is what's going on so I'm going to do these interventions because they're what I know how to do..." I've totally been there. That's what we do by default. Or if you have a specific lens, you say, "Oh, this is a sensory issue," or, "Oh, this is behavioral," and you use those interventions. We're

really doing a disservice to our autistic learners if we don't take the time to develop a deep understanding of autism so we can shift our perspective and say, "Wait, what might really be going on for them?"

Okay, maybe it's behavior, but behavior is communication. You know, a kid who I work with goes under the table and leaves, I say, "Oh, I just set up an activity that didn't make any sense to her. Thank you for teaching me that, let me try again." I don't say, "It's table time and you're not going to get this if you don't do this." That's compliance-based therapy. I am learning from my clients, and I'm able to say like, "Wow, what just happened? That didn't go like I expected. What just happened, what might have happened from your perspective and how can I change what I'm doing to make things more meaningful and more engaging for you?" And it feels really good to be able to make that shift, but it does take a lot of work and a lot of practice to be able to use an autism lens.

And then we've talked a lot about this a lot, when we come up with our hypotheses from our autism lens, okay, what are our interventions and how can we be sure that we're not writing deficit-based interventions? So deficit-based interventions meaning, "What are you bad at, and how can I spend all of our time remediating that," versus, "What are you good at and how can I build on that, and how can I start there and help you grow and learn and participate more fully in the things that bring you joy and in the ways that you're going to contribute to your family, and community, and the world." And even if I am remediating something — something's not going well, how can I help — how can I use your strengths in developing that intervention, not just give you rewards or consequences, or withhold things you want. But how can I think about, okay, what you're good at, what made sense to you, what is motivating for you, and how can I draw from that to help you participate in something, because that's what we do for ourselves and as we do for non-autistic learners so much of the time. So I think it's on us to step up and learn how to use an autism lens and a strengths-based lens, and it changes everything. It changes our intervention plans entirely.

I am teaching this process that I use in a live training, a lot of you guys have already registered. But if you haven't, I'll post a link to it, and it will be July 19th. And if you miss it live, I do give access to the recording replay for a month. But the course is called, "A strengths-based approach to autism and behavior," and I teach my process for using an autism lens to interpret a behavior and then using a strengths-based lens to come up with an intervention plan. And I have workbooks and worksheets, and it makes the process really easy to use and take and bring to your teams, and just bring to yourself to feel like, "I know what to do. I know what to turn to, and I know where to start."

A lot of folks want to take this and my full autism interventions course, and you get a coupon. So the live behavior training is \$49 and it's two hours, and you get a coupon for \$49 off of the full training. So if you already know you're going to register for the Learn, Play, Thrive Approach to Autism, you can totally do both and it's like the behaviour one is free. But it's participatory and we actually work through the process together so that you leave feeling really confident that you know what to do. So that's my take on the, "Is it sensory or is it behavior" question. I think it's so much more. And I'd like to know what you guys think and if you want to work through that together, I will post a link so you can join me!

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