

# Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

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## EPISODE 15

In this Episode, Laurie and Abbey chat with Betsy Williams, an Occupational Therapist with Top Pediatric Therapy. They discuss what occupational therapy is, how they can help with various learning disabilities, and improve someone's quality of life, motor skills, and capability to learn.

### **Occupational Therapy for Children (1 min)**

Occupational Therapy is therapy that helps to improve a person's functionality in their occupation. In children, their school occupation would be functions in the school setting such as handwriting, being able to sit and focus while listening, following directions and other learning related activities. At home, a child's occupation may include daily activities such as brushing hair, grooming tasks, getting dressed, etc. In this episode, Betsy talks about the practice in Frisco, TX where they take a holistic approach by looking at their basic sensory systems and decide what they need to focus on occupation wise.

### **Proprioceptive vs Vestibular Senses (4 min)**

Our proprioceptive sense is a consistent feedback of information to our brain about where our body is and what is going on around us. It is our proprioceptive sense that helps us be aware of our body, if we are comfortable, and allows us to have an appropriate physical reaction based off of that. For example, if a non-verbal child is biting, or hitting, or having some type of physical output because they cannot verbally communicate what they need or want, an occupational therapist may focus on their proprioceptive sense to improve their body awareness and how they are physically reacting to what is going on around them.

Our vestibular sense relates to receptors in our inner ear. It helps us know our relationship with gravity, and how our right side is moving versus our

left side. The basic difference is the proprioceptive sense deals with ‘where is my body’ and the vestibular sense deals with ‘how is my body moving?’

### **Therapy Activity to Improve Both Types of Senses (8 min)**

When focusing on the proprioceptive sense, the importance is getting enough input to those senses. Activities that may help are climbing, jumping, wheelbarrow walks and anything that engages the muscles and joints to improve strength. When focusing on vestibular processing, the ‘how’ piece, an occupational therapist may first give a lot of proprioceptive input first to get their senses regulated, and slowly introduce tasks that stimulate the vestibular sense.

### **Frequent Symptoms Addressed Through Pediatric Occupational Therapy (10 min)**

All ages and sensory processing abilities are different, which causes a multitude of possible symptoms that can show up for treatment by an occupational therapist. A child can be hypo- or hyper- active to an input which means one child may need lots and lots of interaction with an input, and one child may have a little bit of an input and be disrupted easily. For example, one child may be very distracted by the texture of a long sleeve shirt on their arms, and another may prefer having that sensation to the point of wearing long sleeves in the summertime.

Both extremes could be addressed and may show up like a child who can’t sit still, is constantly close to others or getting in trouble for hitting or touching and not having an appropriate sense of personal space. On the opposite end of that, a child who is hyporesponsive may not like a lot of movement or touching. This type of response is harder to notice because they are typically quiet and well-behaved.

### **The Importance of Handwriting (29 min)**

Handwriting can be improved through motor planning and teaching and reteaching. It is one of those motor skills that can even help an occupational therapist recognize what the true root issue is that is causing the illegible handwriting. Is it a postural control issue? Is it a fine motor strength

issue? Is it a visual spatial issue? Any of those could be causing the poor handwriting and once addressed and worked on through therapy, may improve other aspects of a student's life.

### **Where to Start (31 min)**

An Occupational Therapist can do an evaluation of gross motor and fine motor skills which can, along with information from parents or teachers, tell a lot about where a child may need some help. If you have noticed some of the red flags or symptoms described in this episode and are looking for an evaluation, consider an occupational therapist in your area who is licensed and has some knowledge in the areas your interested in focusing on. You can also find out a lot about the therapy they may provide by looking into a practice's website or calling for more information.

### **Resources**

Betsy William OTR: <http://www.toppediatrictherapy.com>

Handwriting Without Tears: <https://shopping.lwtears.com/category/HWT?m=Retail>

First Strokes Handwriting Program: <https://www.therapro.com/Browse-Category/First-Stroke-Multi-Sensory-Handwriting-Program/First-Stroke-Multi-Sensory-Handwriting-Program 2.html>

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