

# I have a New Active Learning Student...Now What?

A guide for teachers who are working with Sensorimotor/ Preoperational learners.

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## Step 1

**Read and Research** (If possible, this step is done before the student's first day of school.)

Learn all you can about the student. Read past and current IEP, FIE, formal and informal assessments. Research the student's medical background. Use the internet to learn all you can about specific syndromes and medical conditions. Talk with past teachers and especially the parents. Observe the student in his/her home environment. How are feedings performed? What are the parent's expectations for their child? How does the student spend his/her day at home? Are the student's receiving private therapy? What are the private therapists working/focusing on? Is there an activity that the student likes to do at home that could be incorporated at school? Are there routines that could be incorporated at home and school?

## Step 2

**What are the student's Appetites and Aversions?** (Likes/Dislikes)

*\*See attached form- Likes/Dislikes Information Sheet (Washington Sensory Disabilities Services)*

At this point the student may be at school. Hopefully, through step one, the teacher has begun to develop a running list of what the student likes and does not like. What foods, smells, movements, vibrations, sights, sounds, people, places, activities, toys etc. does the student like? How does the student like to be touched and what does he/she like to touch? What are his/her self-stimulatory behaviors? What are the student's muscle movement behaviors? When does the student exhibit anxiety? What objects and/or activities do not interest the student? A teacher must build (and write down) a repertoire of the student's appetites and aversions. This will not only assist in building a relationship of trust between the student and the teacher but it is also key to finding the best way for the student to learn and progress.

## Step 3

**What Sensorimotor/Preoperational Stage is the student at?** (In reference to Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development)

*\*See attached forms- Roots: Sensorimotor Stage Skill Sequences -Attention, Exploration, and Function (Millie Smith)*

Is the teacher constantly trying to bring the student from a state of asleep to a state of alertness? Can the student direct the partner's attention to an object to request it? Can the student execute the action associated with the use of an object for a specific purpose? Does the student recognize the voice of a familiar person? These are typical questions we may ask about our sensorimotor/preoperational learners. Millie Smith has broken down the sensorimotor stages of development into three zone skill sequences. These zones (or stages) are called Attention, Exploration, and Function. Within these zones, she has organized the developmental areas into- Cognition, Communication, Motor, and Social Development. As a teacher, it is

important to know what zone the student is in. Millie has developed this sequence of skills in a format using verbs to assist the teacher not only in writing IEP goals but also as a gauge the teacher may use to keep track of how the student is progressing. It is during these three zones (*Attention, Exploration and Function*), that the teacher should be using the Sensory Learning Kit (SLK) to teach the student through sensory routines. As the student emerges into the later stages of *Function*, the teacher may see opportunities to begin the use of the Symbols and Meaning Kit (SAM Games). Some students, unofficially termed as “cross-over students”, still show a need for development in the sensorimotor stages and yet have also made progress into the Preoperational stages of development. This can be seen as the teacher continues to use the Skill Sequence chart as a gauge to where the student is in the development of Cognition, Communication, Motor, and Social skills. A “cross-over student” will benefit from sensorimotor routines from the SLK that are based off of partial participation as well as routines/games from the SAM Kit. Through repetition and consistency, the student’s participation will become more and more independent, thus moving them even further towards or into the area of Pre-Operational learning.

## **Step 4**

### **Create Routines**

\* *See attached forms- Blank Routine Form: Embedded Skills (Millie Smith)*

\* *See attached forms- Sample Routines*

A routine is a step by step “recipe” of an activity. The document states what the learner will do and what the partner will do for every step of the activity. The first column of the routine will state the expectations of what the learner will do/say. The second column will state what the teacher will do/say. This is also the column that the teacher will document what supports and accommodations will be provided for the student. The third column is where the teacher will define the embedded skill/and or IEP goals. The fourth column is where the teacher will provide documentation (How the student performed on that particular day or skill check). The routine is to be performed exactly as the document states each and every time. Simplicity, repetition, frequency and consistency are imperative. This is where learning happens for the sensorimotor/preoperational learner.

Many times for a sensorimotor/preoperational learner it is hard to keep the attention of the student. It may also be difficult to find a reward the student is motivated enough for. The student may not even understand ‘means to an end’. Incorporating a sensory routine with embedded goals and skills will set the student up for success because it is based off of a sensory input the student enjoys.

How does the teacher know which routine to create? The teacher will refer back to step one. What did the student like? Was it vibrations, water, lotion, deep pressure massage, or wind? If the student enjoys a massage then a possible routine could be a hand massage with lotion. If the student enjoys water how about a footbath or hand washing. If wind in the face brings the student to the greatest state of alertness then incorporate a routine using a fan and an adaptive switch. Once the teacher has an idea of a possible routine, it is time to refer back to step 3.

What stage of development is the student at? Look at the verbs on Millie Smith's Sensorimotor Stage Skill Sequences of Attention, Exploration, and Function. Let's say the student, for example, is at the Functional level. One of the steps during a lotion routine would be to request that the student *executes* the action of opening the lotion bottle. The student's step would be to grip the lid after the teacher says "Open lotion". The accommodation being the student will *execute* by gripping lid to "open lotion". The support would be 1 physical prompt. If the skill for this particular step needs to be more complex, then the student could choose the lotion bottle from an array of two items or pictures. If the skill for this step is too complex then the teacher could add in more support by assisting hand under hand. So, the embedded motor skill in this step was to "Execute the action associated with the use of an object for a specific purpose". The embedded communication skill was to "reach for an object named by the partner". Either of these may have also been an IEP goal. Or maybe the IEP goal was to "choose the correct object out of an array of two objects". There are many directions a teacher could go within a sensory routine.

For more information, (and to see sample routines at different skill zones-attention, exploration, function) the teacher should refer to the Sensory Learning Kit/assessments and also to the Symbols and Meaning Kit/assessments created by Millie Smith.

If the teacher is using a different formal assessment (for example the Carolina Curriculum or Communication Matrix) the same basic steps can be applied. The key is to keep the daily schedule and routines simple, repetitive, frequent, and consistent. Remember, if a student has mastered the goal within a routine (and still really enjoys the routine) look for ways to incorporate higher functioning skills/goals within the same routine. For example, if the student has mastered the steps of washing his hands independently, then the teacher could embed matching, identifying, sequencing etc. within the routine. If the student has learned the cause and effect of pushing a switch to turn the fan on, then the teacher could add a foil switch to increase the level of difficulty. A sensory learner thrives through sensory routines/ games.

## **Step 5**

### **Add the Routine into the Student's Daily Schedule**

When incorporating a daily routine into the schedule allow time for adjustments. Do not give up on the routine too quickly. It may take a little bit of patience to find the best time of day, the correct position, the perfect lighting etc... The student may have an "off" day or week- allow for that. Evaluate the data that is being taken within the routine. Consult with your classroom specialist when needed. Take video of the routine. If possible, perform the routine at least two times a day for optimal learning.

#### Sources

Millie Smith: Symbols and Meaning Guidebook and Assessments; SLK Guidebook and Assessments

