

# Loosening the Ties

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When I first began treating Lisa, she needed restraints on both hands to keep her from hitting herself or pulling out her hair, a cushioned head band to keep her from banging her head, and a full-time aide to prevent self injurious behaviors from escalating. Lisa has been actively participating in school based occupational therapy twice a week for an hour for 4 months, and she seems like a different child to me now. Lisa can demonstrate diaphragmatic breathing as a self regulation tool. She can move her body using typical movement patterns that previously initiated panic and fear. She can now eat at the dinner table with her family and go for almost a full school day without requesting her “ties” as an external support to keep her body in control. More importantly, she smiles more.

As a school-based occupational therapist (OT) here at Villa, I collaborate with special education teachers, speech therapists, behavior therapists, and parents to help a burgeoning population of children with autism and other developmental disabilities to achieve school success. This team approach has been instrumental in helping Lisa, and many other Villa students, blossom with new found sensory processing, sensory motor, fine motor, gross motor and general independence skills.

Occupational Therapists have been using holistic and alternative treatment approaches to assist children with disabilities for decades. In OT sessions we use fun, functional activities to engage school children in their therapy. Lisa’s therapy sessions have primarily focused on sensory integration techniques. During OT, Lisa and I sit on a large bolster swing and perform oral motor and visual motor exercises in the form of games and songs. These types of exercises are important to enable students to use the full range of motion of their eyes, including proficiently visually moving to points from far right to far left, in the top middle and bottom of their visual field, as well as to encourage movement patterns such as diagonals and circles.

Lisa and I also use our swing time to engage in facilitated breathing techniques that she has now nearly



Lisa performing exercises to help her use both side of her body together.

mastered. She has been able to independently decrease her anxiety and heart rate by using this tool in class with little prompting. Lisa enjoys upper body exercises that improve her muscle tone, strength, and endurance but also promote interhemispheric integration of the brain. Trainings with Lisa’s teacher, classroom staff, and behavior therapist have ensured that Lisa can participate in these therapeutic activities throughout the day. If you ask Lisa, she will tell you that her favorite things in OT are “breathing” and “backbends.”

As an OT, I take pride in seeing the students I work with become more independent, require less equipment and external supports, and further participate in their academic environment. Once students begin to obtain sensory modulation techniques and self care skills they are filled with a sense of pride and self control. They are often able to access their true personality that may have been hidden

behind negative behaviors for quite some time. With the services that Villa Esperanza provides, our students can show us their sense of humor, communicate their needs, and, of course, smile more.

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Lisa stretching during OT.