



The Magic and Understanding of Sensory Needs!

Article By Dominic Balino, Villa Esperanza Services OT Doctoral Capstone Student

Meet Mikey, the energetic student from Room 4 who never lets sensory challenges hold him back! Thanks to a personalized sensory plan created by myself and occupational therapist Anna Valdez, Mikey now thrives in the classroom. "Mikey's whole team at Villa has done such a great job helping him learn to advocate for his sensory needs. We have seen improvement in Mikey's ability to know when his body needs sensory input to help himself feel calm and regulated," Rebekka Manzella, the Director of Occupational Therapy, shared.

My name is Dominic Balino, and I am a recent occupational therapy graduate student at West Coast University's Center for Graduate Studies. I completed my doctoral capstone project at Villa Esperanza Services Occupational Therapy Clinic. The project focused on educating and empowering instructional aides and teachers working with students with special needs at Villa Esperanza School.

Most students at Villa Esperanza School have sensory processing differences, which means that their brains have trouble making sense of the information they get from their eight senses: touch, taste, sight, sound, smell, proprioception (the sense of our joints pushing/pulling), vestibular (movement), and interoception (the sense of our internal organs). For example, things that might not bother most people, like a loud noise or scratchy fabric, may be really uncomfortable or overwhelming for someone with sensory processing disorder. This project addressed sensory processing disorders and how they affect students at Villa Esperanza School.

The doctoral capstone project consisted of three main parts: a full day of sensory training for all staff in January 2024, creating a curriculum for a new school-wide daily sensory program, and updating the individualized sensory



Mikey swinging outside during his Occupational Therapy session.

protocols that each classroom follows for each student.

The goal is to make complex sensory information easy for teachers and aides to follow, hoping to improve how they support students with sensory needs in the classroom. I wanted to highlight the importance of sensory processing for these students and equip teachers and aides



Mike and fieldwork student Dominic during his Occupational Therapy 1:1 session.

with practical knowledge and strategies. My hope was to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students so that they can access their academic curriculum without barriers.

Mikey frequently seeks movement (vestibular) and pressure to his joints (proprioception) throughout his day in order for his body to feel calm. Without proper sensory supports throughout his day, it is difficult for him to participate in classroom activities. I collaborated with Mikey's primary occupational therapist, Anna Valdez, to design a personalized sensory plan centered on the use of weighted equipment (a weight vest) and scheduling

heavy work tasks prior to classroom activities, which meets his sensory needs. "When dysregulated, Mikey has been able to use his communication device to request to use a weighted blanket in class. This improvement in his independence is so wonderful to see," explained Anna. By meeting his sensory needs through using these sensory strategies, Mikey is able to focus and pay attention to what he needs to learn in class.

Anna and I also educated Mikey's aide, Khamir Morgan, about proprioception — the sense of our joints pushing and pulling —and how it affects Mikey. By explaining the purpose of the weighted equipment and its role in self-regulation, they ensured everyone on Mikey's team understood how to support him effectively.

With time, Mikey showed improvement in his regulation, participation, and engagement at school. Khamir, now equipped with advanced knowledge about proprioception, helps Mikey use his sensory tools throughout the day. This project not only helped Mikey, but also improved the overall support system for all students like him at Villa Esperanza School.

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This project demonstrates how occupational therapy principles can benefit all students at Villa Esperanza School. By bridging theory and practice, it has empowered teachers and aides, improved all staff's sensory understanding, and enhanced support for students with sensory differences. Mikey's progress is just one example of the positive impact of this work, showing how it has transformed the educational experience for students at Villa Esperanza School.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES



We welcome and encourage individuals as well as groups of all kinds - from businesses to students to nonprofit organizations, to consider volunteering. We absolutely couldn't do it without our amazing volunteers! They are the backbone of Villa and we are so thankful for all the time and effort they generously give.

If you're interested in joining our Villa Social and Service (S.A.S) Club team as a volunteer, please visit **Volunteer.VillaES.org** for more details on how you can get involved.

The Social and Service Club Comeback!

Article By Jordan Paggett, Villa Esperanza Services Community Engagement Coordinator

Spring has arrived, and our Residential Services group kicked off the season with a festive gathering in the S. Mark Taper Foundation Multipurpose Room. We were able to bring back a classic event from years past - the Villa Spring Eggstravaganza! Reviving the festive spirit, the opportunity to unite a few Residential homes for a joyous gathering brought delight to the residents seeking engaging activities and social interactions. The festive occasion was a heartwarming moment that uplifted spirits and fostered a sense of community among the residents.

This event has provided a wonderful opportunity for our residents to connect with volunteer organizations such as National

Charity League San Marino and Kiwanis Pasadena. We believe that by partnering with external organizations such as National Charity League, a non-profit that provides community service and volunteering opportunities for mothers and their daughters, and Kiwanis Club, who devotes its cause to serving children and individuals in their local community, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with developmental differences.

We are pleased to share that with the event's success, along with the ongoing accomplishments from our Deck the Villa winter wreath decorating event, both organizations have agreed to collaborate and bring back our Social and Service (S.A.S) Club, along with interest from another organization, the Lions Club of Pasadena. This bi-monthly gathering is specifically designed for the adult individuals we serve within the Villa community. Attendees can look forward to engaging activities, a social hour, and uplifting art projects led by the volunteers from NCL, Kiwanis, and Lions Club of Pasadena. We are excited to see the positive impact this partnership will have on our community.

Kathryn, a resident from one of our homes was absolutely thrilled about the upcoming revival of the S.A.S Club. In a recent conversation with former members, she gushed about how eager she was to reunite with her friends and spend quality time together. "I just can't wait to see everyone more!" she exclaimed.

These collaborations allow us to share resources, knowledge, and best practices, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the individuals we serve. By working together, we can advocate for the rights and needs of individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, promote awareness and understanding in the community, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation in society. Our goal is to create a world where everyone, regardless of ability, is given the support and opportunities they need to thrive and lead fulfilling lives. Through these partnerships, we are one step closer to achieving that vision.



Residents Sandy, James, Zachary (left), and Debbie (far right) posing with Kiwanis member Laura and Kiwanis President Chris at the 2024 Spring Eggstravagnaza event.

"I just can't wait to see everyone more!"

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with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities*

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CAPITAL CAMPAIGN PROGRESS

Break out the confetti, Villa's new campus is going up! Take a look at the photo of the construction site. Look for more updates soon.

Villa's hope moves forward capital campaign was launched in 2012 to expand and modernize our campus to match the quality of services we provide. Phase 1 created the first 7 classrooms of the Villa School, which welcomed students in 2018.

SEE PHASE 2A PROGRESS: Capital.VillaES.org



Phase 2A will include:

- 3 Additional Classrooms
- Occupational Therapy Clinic
- Physical Education and Therapeutic Center

hope moves forward

Capital Campaign
Villa Esperanza Services