## Home, Sweet Home
## (and Other Friendly, Welcoming Environments)

# –Behavior Supports–

**Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, wwwdisabilityisnatural.com**

People who *don't* have disabilities modify their environments and use tools to make life better. People *with* disabilities may also need modifications in their environments and tools to make life better. This is one in a series of articles about ways to create accessible, friendly, and welcoming environments for all.

When we think of environmental modifications, many people think primarily about changes to accommodate wheelchairs or other mobility devices. But other types of environmental changes can ensure better lives for children and adults with autism and related conditions.

Rocking, arm flapping, and other body movements are often viewed as "self-stimulating (aberrant) behaviors," and parents and professionals may work feverishly to make a person stop doing these things. Some of us, however, recognize that "behavior is communication" (as detailed in other articles). If a person is unable to communicate orally, he may communicate in the only way he can: through physical activities (called "behaviors" by some).

On the other hand, a person may rock, flap his arms, or do some other "self-stimming" activity simply because *it feels good, makes him happy, calms him, or meets some other need.* Now consider this: people who *don't* have disabilities routinely perform all types of self-stimming behaviors, including: smoking, hair twirling, gum chewing, nose picking, whisker scratching, teeth picking, ear pulling, finger drumming, crotch rubbing, and a whole host of other activities! These are considered typical and/or socially acceptable (some more than others!). Unfortunately, rocking and arm flapping are not—as yet—considered typical or socially acceptable, so we try to eradicate them, even though they may meet a very important need for the person doing them!

> ***If a person likes to rock, buy him a rocking chair!***

If people *without* disabilities rocked or flapped their arms, these actions would *become* typical or socially acceptable. In turn, we would no longer judge a person with a disability who rocks or flaps his arm as having "unacceptable/inappropriate behavior"!

Until that day comes, we can modify the environment to enable a person the freedom to move his body how he wants (unless he's hurting himself or others) in ways that (1) respect his needs, and (2) make the activity more "socially acceptable" (which can result in others not trying to stop the behavior).

If a person likes to rock, buy him a rocking chair (or a rocking horse, for a child). Many people like to rock in rocking chairs—I do! Rocking is seen as aberrant behavior only when one is rocking *without the benefit of a rocking chair,* right? If Bill has a rocking chair at home, at school, or on the job, he might get all his rocking out there and may not feel the need to do it in other places. (But if he does, so what?)

If Margi likes to flap her arms, let's play music and she can flap in time to the beat. She's no longer "flapping," she's dancing! In the summertime, give her two flyswatters and let her swat the flies. What other ways can we support a person's need to flap?

If Bradley bites his hand, and no one can figure out the *purpose* of this activity, we could help him bite something more appropriate, like an apple or some other food. He might only take one bite or he may need to gnaw on it, without eating any of it. So be it. Better a wasted apple than an injured hand. Alternatively, we could encourage him to keep a rolled up washcloth handy to chomp on as needed.

If a child likes to run, set up a running course in a safe, fenced yard or even in the home or school. Buy some orange traffic cones and let Tommy help design the course. When the urge to run strikes, he can meet that need and be safe at the same time. Or maybe a family member or friend can run with him—down the street, across the yard, or wherever. Who couldn't use a little exercise? Alternatively, Tommy's parents or teachers can assure him he'll have a running buddy every day at a certain time. He may learn to delay gratification if he knows he can feel the wind in his face later on.

If Melissa needs movement to feel better, stay calm, or regain focus, a body-hugging rope swing can be installed *inside* her home or classroom. When this accommodation is provided, Melissa can learn to "go swing" when tension builds. Simultaneously, family members, teachers, and/or classmates can help. Melissa (like many children and adults who need behavior supports) usually telegraphs signals when she is about to lose control. When we learn to read these signals, we can gently step in and direct Melissa to the swing, which can *prevent* a "ballistic episode." Even Melissa's classmates can learn to pick up on her signals.

Bradley learns best through movement. In fact, his mother knows that Brad learns very little when he's sitting still. In his second-grade class, Mrs. M allows Brad to move around the room most of the day. The other children know that this is what's best for Brad and it's not a big deal to them. Mrs. M knows that even though Brad doesn't appear to be listening—because he's not sitting at his desk looking at her—she knows he *is* taking it all in; he does well on tests! She's worked out a schedule with Brad to ensure that he *does* get his work done at his desk during certain times of the school day; at other times, he's free to roam and learn at the same time.

When Rosie is on "overload," she seeks a place to hide, where she feels safe. Her teacher, Mrs. T, routinely attempted to drag Rosie out from under the table, alternately cajoling and scolding the frightened student. Things changed for the better when Mrs. T (with help from Rosie's mom) installed a curtain across one corner of the classroom, along with a beanbag chair. Rosie could feel safe there, and she was allowed to go there whenever she needed. The solution was good for everyone, including children *without* disabilities. Some accompanied Rosie and read to her; others simply liked visiting the "cozy room" when *they* needed a little quiet time.

These are certainly not scientific solutions to the complex issues that people with autism, sensory integration, and related conditions may face. They are, however, examples of commonsense strategies we can try—and try again—in our efforts to create friendly, welcoming environments. Imagine, for a moment, if someone tried to make you stop *your* habitual self-stimming routines. What if someone insisted you could no longer twirl your hair, pick your teeth, chew gum, or perform any other activities that met some need? And what if you were punished or humiliated for doing those self-comforting activities?

We may not *like to watch* someone rocking, flapping, picking teeth, etc. But, in general, these aren't harmful, so we'd do well to ignore them, learn to live with them (others have done the same for us!), or help the "doer" find the most acceptable time and place to "do the deed." One of my teenaged son's favorite activities is spinning his power chair in circles as fast as possible to get dizzy. At the mall, in parking lots, and other places, he can quickly find a spot to spin. Strangers walk by with funny looks or interesting comments. So what? I'm not going to make my son stop doing a pleasurable activity just because someone else thinks it's "weird." They don't have to look if they don't want to!

We need to respect people whose needs may be different from our own, and we need to trust that what they do to meet their needs is right for them! There are many ways to ensure all of us enjoy the safety, security, and warmth of welcoming environments. We're limited only by our imaginations!