Children's Occupational Therapy

Spatial Awareness

Spatial awareness is knowing where your body is in space in relation to objects or other people. To have good spatial awareness you also need to understand and respond to a change in position from these objects. This is a complex skill that children develop from an early age. For some children this skill is difficult to develop, although there are lots of activities parents can do to promote spatial awareness:

For young children:

The key to promoting spatial awareness in children is to allow them to explore their surroundings. As children become more mobile, they are able to crawl and later walk to objects and gain for themselves an understanding of how many steps it takes them to reach a given object or a given location. When children are able to move themselves they will also come to understand how their location to objects changes as they move. However, there are still a number of ways that parents can help promote spatial awareness in young children, including:

- **Discussing locations.** For example, leaving a toy on the bed and talking about where the toy is, where the bed is, where the bedroom is, etc.
- **Using comparative terms.** For example, mentioning which objects are closer and which objects are farther from a child's current location.
- **Talking about relationships.** For example, showing a child that a book is under a chair or that a video is on top of the shelf.
- **Measuring distances.** For example, making a game out of how many paces it takes to walk the length or width of the back garden.
- **Giving directions.** For example, asking a child to turn left at a tree or to open the door on the right. Young children could also be asked to raise their left arm or wiggle their right foot.

Bubbles: Blowing bubbles is a simple activity that demonstrates direction movements to a child. Blow bubbles and discuss how the bubbles float and land, such as on top of the table, in front of the fence or over your head.

Primary school age children:

Visit playgrounds to encourage your child to move around different pieces of equipment e.g. swings, roundabouts, slides, climbing frames.

Obstacle Course: An obstacle course is an activity that is ideal for many different settings, such as home, school or daycare. Obstacle courses are useful for encouraging children to move their bodies in many directions. Create a simple obstacle course for small children by placing several cushions on the floor, much like a series of stepping stones. Gradually increase the height, width and size of the cushions to encourage the child to walk and climb up the steps. Use obstacles where the child needs to climb under/over/through/behind/in front of.
Over, Under, In and Out: Use your home to demonstrate various spatial sense concepts to children. Ask the child to find three items that are under, on and in something. Use phrases that will help the child to visualize a concept. Emphasize walking in and out of different rooms and areas. Point out lights and ceilings that are over your head and the carpet or flooring that is under your feet. Demonstrate standing under an umbrella when the rain falls down.

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Sports: Once you have enough spatial awareness to walk around rooms and houses without problems, move on to ball games to help further the development of your spatial awareness skills. Even if it is just an informal pick-up game or simply throwing and catching, you will learn how to quickly determine the distance of a ball from you, how fast it is traveling, and when it will reach you.

Directions: Play different games with your child to encourage the child to move in several directions. Play a version of Simon Says by telling the child that "Simon says" walk two steps backwards, three steps forward, one step over the toy, and one step under the doorway. Give your child a series of commands and a small reward for completing the task.

Action songs: Using different parts of the body. E.g. Head, shoulders knees and toes.

Positions – Assume different positions to be as big, small, thin or wide as you can.

Doing roley poleys or rolling down a hill like a sausage.

Walking along a line: Look for lines to walk along when out and about e.g. cracks on the pavement. Ask your child to walk along the left side of the line, then the right side of the line.

Maps – following directions on a simple map to find 'treasure'.

Draw a person – you could try drawing around your child on a large piece of paper, and encourage them to colour in the details. Alternatively they could draw around themselves on a full length mirror using wipe clean crayons. Or you could use playdough to make a model of a body

Puzzle solving: Solving visual piece-based puzzles such as jigsaw puzzles can help improve spatial awareness because it demonstrations how different pieces need to be assembled to create a larger and more comprehensive image. The intense concentration required to complete a jigsaw puzzle will also help improve overall focusing skills, especially if the patient practices using different jigsaw puzzles each time he does the exercise.

Dot to dot activities

Lego activities – use the picture guide to build a model.

Craft activities – saving recycling to make a model

Musical statues – try with running, walking and making the children stop in different positions e.g. stop and touch the floor with different parts of the body – hand/bottom/ feet.

Tag: Tag is a useful game to teach children body awareness and control. Explain the rules of tag to the children; one person runs after the other and "tags" them, making the tagged participant out of the game. Start the game of tag. When all players are out, reset the game so each child has the chance to be the tagger as well as a runner.

Follow the leader – put the children into groups of about eight. Then appoint one child as the leader. The others have to follow the leader and copy their actions as they go. Change the leader after a couple of minutes.

Twister – a game in which children have to ensure that different parts of their body are touching spots on the Twister mat. This game helps to consolidate pupils' use of 'left' and 'right'.

Animal walks – Walk like a crab, jump like a kangaroo, stomp like an elephant

Crab football – Walk like a crab using hands or feet to move the football to the goal.

Pushing and pulling games – e.g. tug of war, attaching a piece of rope to something sturdy and pretend to use it to climb a mountain.