

# PlaySense

(A regular column with a playful sensory game embedded in the story)

**S**ophia could be a mother's nightmare. She had an unremitting need for attention from her mom. She was always tugging at her, pulling at her, and insisting that she be noticed. Her mother couldn't even go to the bathroom without Sophia there, in her face, wanting something. Being a gentle and agreeable person by nature, Sophia's mom heeded Sophia's desires. She listened to her, watched her, came to her, got things for her, and did whatever she could to meet Sophia's needs. She learned she'd better do it, actually, because if she didn't, Sophia threw fits you wouldn't believe—full-blown tantrums.

The tantrums might have started off as a way to let her mom know that she meant business, but her emotions soon overtook her, and Sophia dissolved into tears that were very real and lasted a very long time. Her mother's heart opened to her daughter's distress. She deeply loved her and wished she knew what to do.

## THE ATTENTION CURE

Sophia's mom sought help. She asked friends, relatives, and professionals what she could do to control her daughter's behavior. She tried out the advice she was given: ignoring Sophia, rewarding her, punishing her, and praying for her. Whatever she tried worked—for a while—and then the same old patterns would return.

Finally, Sophia's mom did find a method that worked, worked well, and kept working. She calls it "The Silent Treatment," but I call it "The Attention Cure." I know it, because I saw it in action. Here is how it began.

Sophia was enrolled in an early-intervention program, designed to help parents who have concerns about their child's development. Children with established conditions,

such as Down syndrome and autism, are in this program, as are children whose conditions have no diagnosis. But, diagnosis or no, they have a parent who believed that something wasn't quite right and that the child might be eligible to receive services from a teacher, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, and/or a speech pathologist.

If you are familiar with the therapy world, you'll know that when a child in an early-intervention program turns 3 years old, he or she gets transferred into an early-childhood program and has a whole new set of therapists and teachers. This transfer from one team to the next is conducted at a large "transition meeting," attended by both teams and the child's parents, where, traditionally, much jargon is spoken back and forth by the team members.

For Sophia, the "transition meeting" was held in a large room that had a lot of toys and play equipment and a big

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conference table. Sophia and her mom played on the toy slide as the team members gathered in the room. Ten strangers. One mom. One child. That's enough to get any child nervous! Sophia began her litany of "Mom, come here," "Mom, get me that," and "Mom, watch this," accompanied by tugging, pulling, and even hitting. Her mother tried to join the table to meet the team and discuss Sophia's case, but it seemed futile. As soon as her mother sat down, Sophia wanted something. It wasn't long before it became clear that Sophia was going to crank up her demands. It was then that her mom applied "The Silent Treatment," also known as "The Attention Cure."

Her mother placed Sophia directly in front of her and looked at her quietly. Her face was placid, and her eyes simply said, "I am here for you." No words were spoken. The attention was so full and so present and loving that everybody in the room could feel it—especially Sophia. One minute

passed, then two. Sophia sat and soaked up her mom's attention, which is all she really wanted. Then, feeling satisfied,



Sophia got up, made her way over to the toys, and began to play quietly—by herself.

Both teams were impressed. They talked over each other as they complimented Sophia's mother on this strategy and commented on its effectiveness.

"It works every time," Sophia's mom said, smiling.

Three months later, according to the rules of the early-

childhood program, Sophia was scheduled to undergo a complete evaluation to check her motor, social, self-help, communication, and cognitive skills and find out if she was eligible to receive special education.

Sophia did all the tasks presented and aced everything. Her behavior was exemplary, even when it was time to go home and leave all the toys behind. Sophia's mom credits her "Silent Treatment" strategy for the ease she's developed in getting along with Sophia, and she wishes other parents knew about it.

Now, they do. ♦

*Barbara Sher, MA, OTR, is an author of 10 books and believes in using children's natural love of play to enhance key skills and promote inclusion. Her books include early-intervention games, self-esteem games, attention games, and spirit games. To receive a free game designed for your child's needs, visit Barbara's Web site at [www.gameslady.com](http://www.gameslady.com).*