



Episode 19: Sensory 'Seekers': Vestibular Discrimination Part 1

Hosts: Tracy Stackhouse · Cory Dundon · Michelle Maunder



LISTENER NAME

DATE LISTENED

TOTAL LISTENING + REFLECTION TIME (MINS)

CPD HOURS CLAIMED



Episode Summary

After Tracy's movement-avoiding young woman in Episode 17, Michelle takes the other end of the spectrum: the busy kids, on the move, on the go, seeking movement, never sitting still. Tracy sets the foundation by framing the vestibular system as the grand integrator, the compass and North Star the touch, proprioceptive, visual and auditory systems all orient to, the source of our spatial functions (which underlie social, language, planning and sequencing), and the organiser of basic rhythmicity like the suck-swallow-breathe synchrony. There is rarely a child we see whose developmental stickiness does not touch vestibular function somewhere, which is why getting precise about it matters.

The conversation does important terminology work: we should retire under-responsive, because it is usually not a threshold problem. It is either modulation, the child tips into dorsal-vagal shutdown when movement overwhelms them and stops processing space, or it is a lack of response, weak vestibular discrimination, which is a discrimination problem, not a modulation one. They walk the clinical picture (reduced post-rotary nystagmus, off balance, weak bilateral coordination, poor ocular pursuits and saccades) as a cluster, and the treatment logic for the seeking child: anchor the movement into an adaptive function, do the math formula (vestibular plus proprioceptive should equate to body schema and spatial reasoning), and if nothing changes, check whether the input is actually adequate, because these kids often run one or two movement patterns and avoid whole parts of the system. The social and affective system is a partner too, not to force sociability but to help the experience make sense. Cory's contained-corner case and Michelle's week-five seeker bring it home, alongside the honest reality of reading fast-moving kids, the power of video and repeat clinical observations, going slow to go fast, and the inverse curve where learning a model briefly makes you worse before it integrates.



Resources & Mentions

- Jean Ayres on the centrality of vestibular processing, and the point that movement alone does not integrate the brain; the blue book, *Sensory Integration and Learning Disorders*.
- Post-rotary nystagmus testing and the vestibular cluster (balance, bilateral coordination, ocular pursuits and saccades, righting reactions); the SIPT and the newer EASI (Evaluation in Ayres Sensory Integration).
- Shelley Mulligan's follow-up research suggesting prolonged-duration nystagmus may predict less efficacy from this treatment.
- Polyvagal theory (dorsal-vagal shutdown versus sympathetic activation) as it interacts with vestibular processing.
- The Spirit model's partner systems (proprioceptive, visual, auditory, and the affective and social system) and the principle of going slow to go fast.
- Check out DFX's Learning Journeys to build your clinical reasoning skills: <https://dfxlearningjourneys.thinkific.com/>



Reflection Prompts

Take a few quiet minutes to consider each prompt and write freely. Add or remove a prompt block to suit the episode.

1

Tracy argues under-responsive is usually wrong, it is either dorsal-vagal shutdown or a lack of response from weak discrimination. For a busy, on-the-go child you know, which do you think it is, and how would you tell?

2

Michelle sits in, this working, at week five of a seeker. Where do you feel that same pressure, and could you reframe it to, is it working enough?

- 3** Run Tracy's math formula on a seeking child: vestibular plus proprioceptive should yield body schema and spatial reasoning. If you see no change, how would you check whether the input is actually adequate and full?

- 4** A child who crashes and bangs gets labelled a sensory seeker and given more proprioception. How would you explain that the seeking is recruiting a partner to sort out an underlying vestibular problem?

- 5** Try containment with one busy child: reduce the visual, spatial or auditory degrees of freedom and watch what higher-level skill they show you. What did lowering the load free up?
