

Starting in 2009, I began observing and working with children who are sensitive to touch at 3 different farms (Pease Farm, Cobb Hill Farm and New Village Farm). I wanted to gain firsthand knowledge to apply new treatment ideas about touch experienced naturally through animals at a farm setting to see how this might extend the benefit of Occupational Therapy Intervention.

Literature regarding touch describes “body maps” that not only include the body, but also include the peripersonal, elastic space around a person and the tools a person uses as extensions of their body. These "expand and contract" to include different amounts of space and objects, and "can be shaped by the culture you grow up in" (Blakeslee, S. 2007). Since body maps are profoundly plastic, they are capable of significant reorganization. Formed during the earliest stages of development, they continue to change throughout one's life in response to "damage, experience, or practice" (Blakeslee, S. 2007). Many of my clients need activities that allow them to develop their skills and connections further with their new awareness in their bodies that has awakened and allowed them to orient themselves in the world a new way. Animals and farms could allow this process to take place while engaged a natural rhythm that exists during animal care creating an interdependence that is a part of these experiences. Practicing wearing a riding helmet, becomes part of a self-care activity allowing a child to experience tactile input from the strap under her chin she otherwise resists unless she's ride a horse. Stimulation and the experience through the somatic senses is how we learn to map our bodies and the space we move and is necessary to supplement visual information "to make sense of all the meaningless blobs, colors, and shadows streaming in through the eyes." (Blakeslee, S. 2007). Without the somatic senses, one will "never learn what any of that visual information is supposed to mean." (Blakeslee, S. 2007). Special sensations, including sight, hearing, smell and taste, wouldn't make sense without the reference of the embodied self because "the sum total of your numerous, flexible, morph able body maps gives rise to the solid feeling of

'me-ness" and to your ability to comprehend and navigate the world around you. You can think of the maps as a mandala whose overall pattern creates your embodied, feeling one-ness. Developmentally, it would be impossible to become a thinking, self-aware person without them."

(Blakeslee, S. 2007).

I noticed positive changes and I contributed to program recommendations and provided input for a proposal to school administrators and farmers based on the needs and responses I observed in my client's use of their body to freely explore the world and interact in a focused adaptive manner as they interacted with the world at the farm. The animals provided somatic sense input of touch, thermoception, nociception, proprioception and balance, feeding information to the brain and body to help make sense of the relationship within the child and the animal within the setting of the farm and perhaps in relation to how they experience their own existence in the world. **Touch** sensations included gentle pressure from the soft, warm breathing of the horse's nose. Deep pressure, and sustained pressure was experienced when the child used a brush to groom the horse. Hair follicle bending, and vibration occurred when riding the horse from the movement of the horse and the breeze. There are both warm and cold **thermoreceptors** for sensing temperature. **Nociception** specializes in the perception of different kinds of pain: piercing, burning, chemical, joint, deep tissue, tickle and itch. The elements involved with pain receptor influences decreased with **Proprioception** added establishing an inherent sense of the body's position and motion (direction and speed) in space. While getting on and off the horse, carrying buckets of water and moving bales of hay; gages from within the muscles, tendons, and cartilage measured stretch or slippage. The motion sensors stimulated from riding different speeds and changing directions on the horse

stimulated organs in the inner ear called the *vestibular system* providing input for increasing **balance**

(Blakeslee, S. 2007).

While providing both group and individual therapy observations at several farm programs I realized how important it is to allow the routines of a farm to carry the goal acquisition process and “hold the whole” for my clients with special needs. While providing support for their individual OT goals and I also learned to give consideration to the time of year and the time of day to make the most of the natural daily rhythms at the farm. For example, At farm camp during the summer or after school, sessions at the farm started with chores and ended with feeding animals. In between times, there were many opportunities for social inclusion built into experiences with other children playing and interacting on the farm, especially when everyone painted themselves with mud after feeding pigs!

Blakeslee, S., & Blakeslee, M. (2007). *The body has a mind of its own: How body maps in your brain help you do (almost) everything better*. New York: Random House.