Spinal Galant Reflex and SPD

by KaraApril 8, 2023

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For my last blog we explored the Tonic Labyrinthine Reflex and its connection to sensory processing disorder (SPD). If you missed it you can check it out here. For the next few months I will continue to delve into the most commonly retained primitive reflexes, so keep watching if we haven't talked about the one you are looking to learn more about! Today's blog is about the Spinal Galant Reflex. Since sensory processing is what we are all about here at Sensory Sid, I also want to tie in to how these may be connected.

Okay, what is the Spinal Galant Reflex? Learn this, what to do when it is retained and why it matters for those with SPD (sensory processing

disorder). Let's get familiar with primitive reflexes first.

A quick recap of primitive reflexes is that they are automatic movement patterns that are prompted by a specific stimulus. They are useful during birth and in infancy. As babies grow and develop, these reflexes are "replaced" by tracks of higher level brain and body nervous system communication that result in more refined movement and body use. This is called integration. We call a reflex "retained" if it continues to show up past its expected timeframe. Check out this recent blog if you want to learn even more about primitive reflexes.

These short periods of primitive reflexes in use are important in a baby's development and in sensory processing. When reflexes are retained, the nervous system is losing out on opportunities for sensory processing development and other higher level skill development.

What is the Spinal Galant Reflex?

Spinal Galant Reflex is an automatic movement pattern that starts while still in utero, at approximately 20 weeks.

This reflex is prompted by touch to either or both sides of the lower spine. This prompts the hip on that side to open up. It can also frequently prompt urination.

The Spinal Galant is thought to be helpful in the birthing process as the lower back receives stimuli during labor, prompting the hip movement and improved passage through the birth canal. It also is deemed essential for the movements needed for crawling and walking.

As the baby is developing higher level motor skills for sitting and crawling, this reflex often integrates or 'disappears'. If this reflex is still present past 9 months it is considered retained.

What happens if the Spinal Galant Reflex is retained?

A child with a retained Spinal Galant Reflex may demonstrate the following:

- Difficulty sitting, rolling or crawling
- Poor posture
- Potential for scoliosis
- Unusual walking pattern
- Excessive fidgeting
- Hypersensitivity for tactile input, clothes on the body
- Bedwetting past 5 years old
- Difficulty with holding focus and attention
- ADHD like symptoms
- Dyslexia

How does this look in daily life? Someone with a retained Spinal Galant may be the infant who struggled to sit and crawl on normal timelines. They may have fussed more when touching unfamiliar textures and fabrics. Sometimes when you apply their diaper, they instantly pee in it!

As the child gets older, a retained Spinal Galant may show up in different ways. This child may struggle to sit in their seat in school. They may fidget back and forth, scoot forward in their seat or slouch over the desk top. “Ants in the pants” may be bandied about. They may struggle to pay attention to their teacher, walk and stand a little differently and have royal battles over certain clothes. Kids with a retained Spinal Galant Reflex may get mistakenly diagnosed with ADHD since they often have similar types of behavior.[1]

Spinal Galant Reflex and sensory processing disorder (SPD)

So how does a retained Spinal Galant relate to sensory processing disorder (SPD)? Or do they even relate at all? First, a retained Spinal Galant Reflex (or

any other primitive reflex) does not mean that someone has SPD or the other way around. The connection is much looser than that. It goes back to what happens in the developing brain.

Primitive reflexes are active while the baby is amassing a great amount of information about their world. Taking in sensory information is how that happens. They take in information from the world around them, react and respond to it and even take in sensory information from their own body from that reaction. It is a great loop of sensory and motor movements.

If sensory processing is a problem, the primitive reflex may remain active and will limit the motor skill development as well as additional sensory processing skills. Addressing the reflex will allow not only for higher motor functions but also improved sensory processing.

The Spinal Galant Reflex has clear impacts on several sensory systems: tactile, proprioceptive, vestibular, visual and auditory. Addressing the reflex and the sensory systems individually and together may help.

So what can you do to help someone with a retained Spinal Galant Reflex?

Integrating the Spinal Galant Reflex

When a reflex is retained past its useful time period there are some things that can be done to help. First off, I always recommend that you speak with your pediatrician and ask for an occupational or physical therapy referral to someone who specializes in primitive reflexes. They will be able to assess for retained reflexes and provide a plan to help these get integrated.

A professional in primitive reflexes is useful because when one reflex is retained, often others remain as well. Helping these reflexes integrate helps the brain and body function more optimally.

The activities that you do to help integrate the Spinal Galant Reflex often imitate parts of the reflex itself, but should not stimulate the actual reflex.

Start by doing lots of rolling. Encourage it for babies and then make it fun as they get older by having them roll across the floor to gather puzzle pieces and toys. Another easy way to address the Spinal Galant Reflex is by doing snow angels. These can be done on the floor or on a fuzzy blanket.

Doing activities like these every day to integrate the Spinal Galant can usually help integrate it in 4-6 weeks. Totally worth 5 minutes a day! You will likely be making really great changes for the Spinal Galant Reflex and their sensory processing at the same time.

Bonus: Sensory tips for a retained Spinal Galant Reflex

If your kiddo has a retained Spinal Galant Reflex and SPD, these tips are for you! Try having them wear snug clothing that doesn't move much. This can be a compression shirt as an under layer or just a tight fitting shirt. Give them backless chairs (so it doesn't stimulate the reflex) or simply turn their chair around.

When fidgeting and focus are the challenges, have them do some heavy work before as this can help get them in the zone. If bedwetting is a problem, try different (and possibly snug) bedtime clothing options to reduce input on their back. If hypersensitivity is an issue for them, give ample opportunities for tactile or messy play.