

ARE WEIGHTED VESTS

Worth Their Weight?

A growing number of school-based OT practitioners, teachers and parents are becoming believers



Cheri Blanchard and David, a preschooler with autism, work on cutting skills.

By Barbara E. Joe

Weighted vests are increasingly turning up in classrooms and other settings as a treatment for children with conditions—like autism—that affect sensory modulation and attention span. The phenomenon, spread largely by word of mouth, is rapidly gaining favor among school-based OT practitioners, parents and teachers who have witnessed firsthand the dramatic improvements the vests appear to bring about in certain children.

But these outcomes remain largely anecdotal and few parameters exist to guide OT practitioners in how and when the vests should be employed.

The concept—according to Lorry Liotta-Kleinfeld, MS, OTR/L, BCP, who has searched the literature—is an outgrowth of the SI-based technique of applying deep-pressure touch and sandwiching a child between mats. Liotta-Kleinfeld, an assistant professor in the OT program at Belmont University in Nashville, first began using weighted vests clinically in the mid-1980s. She found that school children with autism who were generally distractible, hyperactive, and lacking in concentration responded positively to the vests, which produced a calming effect.

Research led Liotta-Kleinfeld to several companies that produce the vests, including Achievement Products (a vinyl vest), Therapy Skill Builders (cloth and Velcro), and

Southpaw Products. Through networking, Liotta-Kleinfeld has found some therapists and students fashioning their own vests, often from regular multipocketed fishing vests. However, while not yet in wide circulation, the vests are being used with increasing frequency, sometimes on a trial-and-error basis and with numerous variations in application. Some OT practitioners believe they are breaking new ground, establishing a living laboratory and real world context for future outcomes studies and research on the subject.

Whatever their source, the vests have pockets both in front and back that can accommodate the addition of weights in the form of vinyl-covered metal balls. Liotta-Kleinfeld balances front and back weights, going from a total of 1 pound for preschoolers, to about 3 pounds for teens. The vests do not restrict movement and, she says, young children usually don them without protest, especially when doing so is integrated into dress-up games and other play activities. Adolescents, she adds, may resist for social reasons and, although encouraged, they are never required to wear the vest.

A Fruitful Area for Research

A few years ago, while pursuing a master's degree in neuroscience, Liotta-Kleinfeld looked into animal studies showing that the maintenance of steady pressure, while initially leading to increased arousal, eventually had a calming effect, producing reductions in heart rate,