



INTEGRATED
LISTENING SYSTEMS

SSP Delivery Manual

Implementing the SSP with
Children and Adolescents

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Introduction

The SSP is a powerful therapeutic tool that is most effective when delivered appropriately.

This manual will cover all the practical aspects of implementing the SSP with children and adolescents including how to prepare your space, what activities to do during SSP sessions, who should participate in the session, headphone tolerance, modifications based on need and troubleshooting.

The Environment

The most important aspect of delivering the SSP is that your client feels safe and relaxed. You are working with individuals who tend to have a heightened sympathetic nervous system. Creating an environment that promotes a sense of safety and normalcy will reduce the potential for stress during the session. When working with children, a normal, safe environment is typically made up of toys and activities that they find fun. For adolescents, age-appropriate activities including arts, crafts, and games are useful for normalizing as well as providing opportunities for positive coregulation.

The Space

Create a welcoming space that is play-friendly but not frenetic and age-appropriate. Young children frequently sit on the floor so include places to sit and play for you and the child, like a comfortable rug or mat on the floor. You may also want sensory-pleasing seating (e.g., pillows, bosu ball, wiggle pillow, swing, and weighted blankets). If you are using a table for arts/crafts/games, include age-appropriate seating so they can be comfortable and still reach everything. Finally, if you are able to choose your decor, use calming colors on the walls and simple, child-oriented artwork to make your space seem less office-like. If possible, eliminate low frequency sounds, bright fluorescent lighting, and clutter.

Activities

Activities need to be child-led, calm and safe. Sensory soothing activities such as a bean bin or Playdoh can be great. Trains, cars, marble towers, legos, puzzles, and play food are also appropriate. If you are planning table activities, select and modify arts, crafts, and games so that they are age appropriate and do not create frustration. For on-the-go children, gentle movement activities can be beneficial (e.g., slow swinging or rocking).

Older children may prefer card games, art, adult coloring books and crafts. Verbal games like “Would You Rather” can also generate conversation and coregulation but be sure to modify topics as needed. Be aware of the reading and cognitive abilities of your client and do not “put them on the spot” to read a game card or spell a word if that is an area of struggle. And take your cues from your client; they may prefer silence.

Avoid

It's best not to include electronic toys, loud activities such as instruments, competitive games, and over-stimulating activities that induce stress or over-arousal. With older children, avoid stressful topics.

Home

Some children find it harder to participate in the therapy at home due to established routines and family patterns. Parents will do well to set aside a special place and time as well as special activities that are only available during listening. Positive coregulation is critical to success.

Only those 13 and younger may do the SSP at home. Please see the SSP Delivery Manual for Adolescents and Adults for further advice on working with teenagers. Advise them that they cannot do screen-based activities or video games while listening to the SSP. Encourage art, writing, games or reading.

Cautions

1. Avoid over-explaining the therapy. Individuals who tend toward anxiety can become fearful that it may hurt them and begin to fixate on that rather than relaxing. Use simple explanations (e.g., this music is designed to help you feel calm), answer questions as they come and only answer what is asked.
2. When choosing an activity, avoid over-questioning, which may increase anxiety. Instead of saying, "What do you want to do?" or "Do you want to color? Do you want to draw?" have a few activities available and start playing. The individual will either join you or begin to look at/engage in something else.
3. Never force an activity or interaction. Follow the lead of the child. The activities are there to help increase relaxation and give you opportunities for coregulation. If the child would rather sit quietly or just swing, that is okay, too. You can normalize any situation by reading the cues of your client and then providing them with signals of safety and positive support through a melodic inflection in your voice, a welcoming and smiling expression in your eyes and face, and relaxed body language.

Summary of Environment

- **Safe**
 - Create an environment of normalcy
 - Younger Children: Sensory-rich environment, toys, art and games
 - Older Children: Art, games, relaxing quiet talk
- **Relaxed**
 - Individual choice of activities
 - Guide toward engagement
 - Too many choices or questions can be stressful
- **Positive**
 - Provide cues of safety and positive coregulation
 - Activities are tools to help you connect
 - Follow the lead of the child

Who Should Attend

Successful implementation of the SSP relies on helping the client feel as safe as possible. The primary facilitator of the therapy must therefore be someone the child trusts and who is able to conduct the session in a relaxed, positive, and engaged way. The clinician should use their Social Engagement System to send cues of safety: a relaxed posture, head gestures to show interest in engaging, a smile that extends to the eyes, and a prosodic voice.

Someone who is nervous or stressed about the session or the child or someone who is distracted will not effectively deliver the SSP. For example, if a child is in conflict with his/her parent or if the parent is overly stressed by or worried about the child, it may be better for the parent to not participate in the sessions. On the other hand, if the child experiences separation anxiety and has a positive attachment to the parent, having the parent in the session is a benefit.

Clinic

Sometimes it is helpful to have more than one person in a session by including a parent/caregiver or another staff member. If appropriate, siblings or well-matched peers who are also doing the SSP may be a benefit. This small group can help improve coregulation and create a sense of normalcy so the child doesn't feel isolated or different. For example, playing a board game can be fun and relaxing and often flows better with more than two people.

Home

As mentioned, positive family coregulation is crucial. Spend time with parents explaining the importance of positive coregulation and a supportive environment. This will be critical for all children, whether they are doing the therapy in clinic or at home. If you are overseeing a home program, help the family come up with the activities and approaches they will use at home to ensure relaxed, positive sessions. If there are significant stressors at home, **do not have the child do the SSP at home.**

Cautions

1. Be wary of household stressors. Keep in mind that the SSP is opening a child up to his or her environment and may also be removing some of their defense mechanisms. If the home environment has significant stressors, the child's anxiety may actually increase without those defenses.
2. If you are concerned about the home stressors, do not implement the SSP until the environment has improved.
3. Do not assume that two children with similar situations or the same diagnosis will automatically be a good match for therapy. Only deliver the SSP to more than one child at a time if you are sure it is a good match and will improve the sense of safety, normalcy and coregulation for both children.

Parent Information

Parent support during the process is a critical part of the success of the SSP. A child's primary barometer in life is his or her parent. Helping parents understand that their child is struggling due to something beyond the child's control and also providing them with tools and resources to handle their child in an open and supportive way can have a profound impact on the success of the therapy. Oftentimes, families can see improvement at home before beginning the SSP simply by having a better understanding of their child and using these new insights to handle situations differently. Here are some concepts you may want to explore with parents:

- Provide a simple explanation about the Polyvagal Theory.
- Use language that focuses on autonomic states versus behavior.
- Help them to understand that, when their child is in sympathetic arousal, their ability to reason or be reasoned with is effectively turned off.
- Explain how using the SSP will help the child heal physiologically, which in turn will support other interventions (such as counseling and social skills groups).
- Ask parents if there are any current situations that may be causing stress for their child (e.g., school or family situation, etc.) and if so, discuss ways to change or alleviate the stress before beginning the SSP.

Remember that while the SSP is improving a child's accessibility, it may also be removing a needed defense mechanism. Before beginning, be sure that the child's day-to-day environment will support this change.

Summary of Who Should Attend

- **Professional or Caregiver who is:**
 - Trusted
 - Positive
 - Relaxed
 - Engaged
- **May include a well-selected appropriate peer**
- **Avoid stressful people or situations**
- **Educate parents and caregivers**

Headphone Tolerance

Young clients, individuals with sensory sensitivities, and clients on the autism spectrum often struggle with wearing headphones. It is important that you gently build a tolerance to the headphones without force or stress.

To successfully help a sensitive child acclimate to headphones, have two professionals (or you and a caregiver) work with the child - one to play/coregulate and the other to manage the headphones. The coregulator sits in front of the client and engages him/her in a favorite activity. The other therapist then gently places the headphones on the client's head from behind (do *not* come at someone's face with headphones as that can feel very invasive). As you place the headphones on, you can use gentle words like "here's some music for you." If/when the client pushes the headphones off, let them. Wait a few moments until the client has resumed playing and co-regulating with the other therapist and then put

them on again. Always let them push the headphones away (do not use any force to make them keep them on) until they begin to acclimate. Do this as many times as needed without causing stress.

You may need several sessions to help a very sensitive person acclimate. Once you begin to make progress, create a shortened session so that the child is successfully wearing the headphones while playing. Gradually increase the length of the session until the child is fully acclimated. You may want to use sensory-rich classical music for headphone acclimation before moving into the SSP sessions. If you do not have the opportunity to have a second facilitator, you can still do this process by co-regulating with an activity while you manage the headphones (e.g., you are both looking at a book and laughing together while you sit slightly behind the client and place on the headphones).

Do *not* have a child attempt a home program until they are comfortable with headphones. On occasion, parents can help a child acclimate by having them watch a favorite show via headphones. They must also come from behind and not force the child to wear them. If you feel it will be difficult for a family to do this without stress, work with the client in your clinic first until they acclimate to the headphones.

For particularly sensitive clients, some clinicians have found that using Mini-O speakers have been tolerated and therapeutically effective.

Cautions

1. Do not force a child to wear the headphones. Forcing will increase anxiety and negate the work you are trying to do.
2. Children with sensitivities or spectrum challenges tend to imprint negative situations. If you push too hard in the beginning, they may stay leary of headphones indefinitely, making it impossible to do the therapy. Use patience and cues from the child when helping them acclimate.

Summary of Headphone Tolerance

- **Never Force**
- **Two Adults to Implement**
 - One sits in front and engages in play and positive coregulation
 - One sits behind and manages headphones
- **Patience and Respect**
- **As a last resort, consider Mini-O speakers**

Modifications and Alternative Program Options

The original SSP protocol is 5 consecutive 60-minute sessions. Oftentimes, children and adolescents cannot tolerate this level of intensity. In addition, the SSP has been found to be effective in a variety of iterations. As Dr. Porges describes, a helpful rule of thumb is: **Less is More**.

Reasons to Modify the Program

Sensitivity

Many potential SSP clients come with significant sensitivities and therefore can be vulnerable to this type of intense program. Don't be afraid to modify. There are several options for delivering the SSP successfully without incurring negative reactions. For example, you can slow down the frequency of the sessions (e.g., two sessions/week) or you can complete the SSP in 30-minute increments.

Schedule

In our current culture, it is often difficult for families to attend intensive therapy. An alternative approach is to have the child complete the 5-day SSP over a two-week period (typically three sessions the first week and two sessions the second week). Take your cues from your client and their family. The SSP be will be most effective when it is delivered within a schedule that is tolerable.

Individual Needs

Each child you work with will have his or her unique challenges, circumstances, and needs. It is imperative that you tailor the environment and the therapy to ensure each client's success. As you begin adding this therapy to your practice, do not hesitate to request a consultation from an experienced practitioner to help you design the best program for each individual. In addition, you can submit a Case Consultation Request.

Playlists

There are two playlists: the Child Playlist and the Adult Playlist. The filtration of the music is exactly the same for each playlist so deciding which playlist to use is really a matter of your client's preference. We know of many adults who like the playfulness of the Child music and many children who would rather not listen to music they consider is for kids much younger than them. Because the filtration is the same, you could even alternate between them: listen to the Child playlist for the first hour and the Adult playlist for the second hour. A listing of the songs on each playlist can be found in the File Repository of the SSP Training.

Preparatory Listening

Children who are reactionary or sensitive often benefit from doing preparatory listening prior to doing the SSP. Sensitive individuals also benefit from coupling calming music with the SSP throughout their program. For example, for a reactionary child, you may want to do 30-minute sessions of the SSP coupled with 30 minutes of sensory-supporting music.

Finally, using calming music for preparatory listening when building headphone tolerance is essential. Here are some suggestions for preparatory listening music:

- iLs Focus System Calming Program
- Solo cello music (e.g., YoYoMa or similar)
- Calm female vocal music

Summary of Modifications

- **Five consecutive 60-minute sessions is only one option**
- **Other iterations can also be effective***
 - *See the video “When and How to Adapt the SSP for Children” in the SSP Training
 - Five Sessions over a longer duration of time (2-3 per week)
 - 30-minute SSP sessions
 - Take your cues from your client
- **Reasons to Modify**
 - Intensity needs to be reduced
 - Accommodate family needs and schedule
 - Create the best program for the individual
- **Prepare Clients to improve their success**

Post-SSP Support (SSP Follow-up)

The SSP was not designed as a stand-alone program. Once someone has completed the SSP, it is important to follow up with continued support and input in order for benefits to solidify. After you complete the SSP with a client, continue to work with them to help them maintain gains. Many other therapies pair well with the SSP and may even be accelerated by the gains from the SSP. Because the SSP is utilizing the auditory system to strengthen vagal tone, one of the best supports you can use to help strengthen and augment improvements is the iLs Focus System.

Repeating the Program

Remember that the SSP can generate benefits long after the program has been completed. Clients often see benefits from the SSP for 6-8 weeks after they have completed the program. That said, many clients benefit from doing some or all of the SSP another time. Clients who tend to benefit from repeated use are individuals who benefitted the first time and show a need for more input, clients who are gaining language, and clients who are benefitting academically. Also, if you used a modified version of the program (e.g., 30-minute segments) and the client responded well, they may benefit from additional SSP. If you feel a client will benefit from repeated use, wait about 8-12 weeks and then repeat the program.

Another reason for repeating the SSP is if the client experiences a trauma or illness that causes the Social Engagement System to withdraw. Examples of trauma are a change in their school environment, a move, an illness in the family, or the death of a pet. Colds or flus that cause congestion may affect the function of the middle ear muscles and a repeat of the SSP can help to strengthen the neural network associated with listening.

Summary of Support

- **SSP was not designed as a stand-alone therapy**
 - Improvements may fade without follow-up and support
- **Couple the SSP with supportive therapies**
 - iLs Focus or Pro
 - Therapies that promote calm state and neurological support
- **Repeat the SSP if appropriate (after ~3 months)**
 - If client made gains and would benefit from more
 - For language gains
 - For learning and academic improvements
 - If a subsequent trauma or illness occurs

Troubleshooting

The potency of the SSP should not be underestimated. If you have doubts about whether the SSP is right for a client or if you have concerns about any of their environmental stressors, do not start the protocol. You can “test the waters” with the iLs Focus System or other options first to see how the client responds and to build tolerance. Submit a Case Consultation Request so that an experienced clinician can help you.

Summary of Troubleshooting

- **When in doubt, wait!**
- **Be careful when considering implementing the SSP with the following:**
 - Intense sound and sensory sensitivities
 - Traumatic past or present medical interventions
 - Developmental trauma
 - Reactive behaviors
 - High anxiety
- **Seek consultation for any concerns**