

The Sensory Diet



A child with sensory issues, such as sensory processing disorder, needs sensory activities throughout his/her day that will calm, alert and arouse him/her as needed, thus leading to a more focused, productive and stress-free environment. These activities should be chosen with the child's interests in mind and should be regularly scheduled for optimal stability. Carried out at home, the activities will create a sensory diet, a family-centered form of sensory integration.

As the primary caregiver, you will play a key role in the development and enactment of the sensory diet. Though your child's occupational and physical therapists will also play an important part—particularly in the formation of the sensory diet—you should understand the basis of a sensory diet and how varying activities can help your child.

BASIC GUIDELINES

Although every sensory diet will be different, just as every child is, there are several basic guidelines every parent should follow when forming a sensory diet for his/her child. These include:

- Work closely with your occupational and physical therapists. Not only will they have suggestions for general activities but your

child's OT and PT also know your child very well and will know activities that can specifically target your child's needs.

- Before beginning, observe your son/daughter throughout the day, noting difficult times of day and the problems he/she has at those times.
- Create and maintain a routine. When making your child's sensory diet, do so with a schedule in mind. Particularly for pre-school-age children, it is important to allot specific time regularly for sensory integration. As your child grows, the schedule will evolve to meet the changing needs of your son/daughter.
- Remember that your child may be spending a portion of his/her day in a school environment. Work with the teachers and additional education staff as well as the OT and PT to involve all integral participants in your child's sensory diet. And don't forget the weekends. In or out of school, your child needs consistency.
- Be sure to include all types of activities. Your child should have daily proprioceptive, vestibular, tactile, auditory, visual and taste input. Without all of the components, it's not a complete sensory diet.

More suggestions on general guidelines can be garnered from your OT and/or PT. It is also recommended that you speak with other parents to discern what has worked well for them and if their strategies may carry over into your own plan.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Just as important as the basic guidelines or foundation of a sensory diet are the specific activities that will take place throughout your child's day. Here are a few examples (but again, keep in mind that no child is identical in his/her needs. Find activities that work for your child, not someone else's):

- *The Sandwich* (proprioceptive input) – Press gently yet firmly with pillows against your child's legs and back, creating a pillow sandwich.
- *Swinging* (vestibular input) – There are many types of swings and many ways to swing. Find the one your child enjoys the most and

work some fun movement into his/her day.

- *Textured play* (tactile input) – Pick up some Play-Doh, Floam, or similarly squishy and strange feeling toys available for children today. Molding and building while squeezing the object can be a fun (and sometimes messy!) sensory activity.
- *Listen and name* (auditory input) – The world is full of noises. Encourage your child to listen carefully to what he/she hears and identify the sound. It may be a bird, a train, Mom or Dad coming home from work, or even the mail-truck.
- *Simple sights* (visual input) – For many children with visual sensory concerns, overstimulation can be a common problem. For visual input activities, look to minimize the stimulation, putting away and/or avoiding items or activities that involve an excess of colors and shapes.
- *Food play* (taste input) – It may go against your better judgment, but playing with your food may be one of the easier ways to encourage regular taste input. Make a forest of broccoli or funny shaped sandwiches. Turn your child's plate into a fun and goofy place, and you never know what might be tasted next.

These are just a few of the many activities you may include in your child's sensory diet. For more ideas and to construct a diet tailored to your child's needs, talk with your child's OT or PT. Then, make sensory integration an integral part of your child's everyday life. Enjoy the diet! ■

Information for this patient handout was obtained from:

- *Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation* (www.spd.foundation.net)
- *"Raising a Sensory Smart Child"* (<http://sensorysmarts.com>)
- *Sensory Processing Disorder* (www.sensory-processing-disorder.com)
- *Just Mommies* (www.justmommies.com)

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