

SENSORY DIET

A diet of sensory activities can do many things for a child over a period of time. It can: -

- calm an over-aroused or over-active child
- increase the activity of an under aroused/passive child
- prevent uncomfortable reactions to sensory input
- reduce sensory seeking (self-stim) behaviour
- increase productivity
- provide comfort for the child
- teach the child self-regulation strategies

This takes time and cannot be done in isolation by an Occupational Therapist (OT). It must be a combined effort between home, school, therapy, and all those involved in supporting the individual with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and sensory issues.

These may not be behavioural issues, but sensory processing challenges that can be addressed through sensory activities embedded throughout the day, and in regular Occupational Therapy (OT) sessions. A sensory diet provides the necessary combination of sensory input to 'feed or nourish' a child's nervous system. When a child's nervous system feels properly organised, the child is better able to achieve optimum attention to tasks and performance of activities. Some children's nervous systems are wired so that they do not efficiently process sensory input, and this can contribute to behavioural and emotional problems. A sensory diet can provide or modify sensory input to help meet the needs of these children. Many daily activities can provide sensory input, yet for some children – like children with an ASD – they need an individualised sensory diet infused into their day.

Paula Aquilla (2004) says that sensory diet can include:

- activities scheduled at certain times during the day
- sensory input provided through daily routines or activities
- sensory input created by the environment
- sensory input offered through recreational or leisure activities, or
- sensory input from interactions with others.

Here are some ideas in each area that can be used for a "sensory diet": -

Visual Input

- Stares at spinning objects.
- Spins their own body.
- Turns in the opposite direction from where teacher is lecturing.
- Demands to wear sunglasses indoors.
- Extremely organised (i.e. knows when an object has been slightly moved) or unorganised room.
- Loses their place when reading.
- Gives no eye contact, or looks beyond the other person's face
- Has trouble locating desired toy on a cluttered shelf.
- Turns or tilts their head when reading across a page.
- Misjudges spatial relationships, so bumps into people or things.

Visual Ideas

- Limit the amount of visual material hanging from ceiling or walls.
- Store manipulatives inside containers.
- Organise and label all materials to identify where they belong.
- Put pictures on containers for students with poor visual memory.
- Use picture templates of where items belong, and places where they belong (i.e. desk, room).
- Tape a number or letter line onto the student's desk.
- Provide primary lined paper or graph paper to help with spacing.
- Keep the amount of visual information on worksheets to a minimum.
- Use a lamp instead of overhead fluorescent lighting.
- Use a touch screen instead of a computer mouse.
- Use computer software to organise material.
- Allow the student to sit with their back to the teacher (i.e. look at a solid wall).
- Have the student write notes, and use a peer's notes as well.

Auditory Input

- Covers their ears for a fire drill or when class is noisy.
- Runs from noisy area.
- Complains of noises in the room or outside of a window (e.g. lawn mower, heat blower, insects on window, students writing on paper).
- Covers their ears in the cafeteria, or cannot go into the gym when there are lots of people in it.
- Demands that dad puts "Rain X" on the windows so they won't have to use the windscreen wipers when it rains.
- Does not respond to verbal prompts when putting on rustling clothes (e.g. sweat pants).
- Hums or sings to self.
- Demands that only one person talks at the dinner table.
- Talks louder than anyone else in the class.
- Prefers very loud music or none at all in the car.
- Runs out of the restroom as the toilet flushes.

Auditory Ideas

- Minimise verbal directions.
- Use ear plugs or headphones.
- Allow time for the student to listen to their favourite music (e.g. classical, Dixie)
- Use more visuals with pictures or words.
- Use social stories about what might happen, or sounds that can be heard in the room.
- Desensitise a student to an area by slowly integrating him or her on numerous visits.

Tactile Input

- Throws arms back when about to be picked up by an adult, or pulls away when someone is trying to hold their hand.
- Is always hanging onto an adult, or laying between his box spring and regular mattress.
- Avoids touching certain surfaces or textures (e.g. fabrics, carpets).
- Prefers to touch specific fabrics (e.g. ladies hose).
- Dislikes getting hands or feet messy (e.g. sand, creams, paint).
- Touches everything in sight.
- Avoids being touched on the face, hair or head (e.g. washing face, hair cut).
- Does not react to pain such as cuts, injections, bruises, or breakage of bones.
- Person may bite his or her own skin.
- Reacts negatively when approached from behind.
- Wears shorts even in extremely cold temperatures.

Tactile Ideas

- When a student says a touch “hurts” or pulls away, acknowledge their pain and stop touching them.
- Experiment with types of clothing that are comfortable (e.g. terry cloth, all cotton, several times washed, no labels).
- Provide easy access to small hand fidgets (e.g. squishy soft, textured).
- Allow the student to sit in a bean bag chair.
- Refer to occupational therapist for further ideas (e.g. weighted vest, utensils, “brushing”).

Taste and Smells

Taste

- Will not eat certain foods (e.g. does not like texture or taste), or eats extreme tasting foods (e.g. lemons, hot sauce).
- Gags when told to eat food he/she does not like.
- Licks or tastes playdough or toys.

Smells

- May say “you stink” to staff when they are wearing strong perfume or cologne, or if they can smell onions on a member of staff’s breath after lunch.
- In the opposite extreme, the student may smell everything they touch in order to become orientated and comfortable with the object or thing.
- Breathes through their mouth instead of their nose.
- Will not visit certain environments (e.g. farms, zoos, fish stores).
- Does not mind the smell of their own bowel movement or having a dirty nappy.
- Will not use the restroom at school.

Taste and Smells Ideas

Taste

- When rewarding a student with food or cooking time, use food they already like.
- Keep all poisonous substances locked up safely.
- Talk with a nutritionist about diet.

Smells

- Have a scented lamp, candle, lotions, liquid soap, scented markers or stickers available to smell, to calm the student.
- Be aware that if you have a scented object, the student may react adversely to that particular smell.
- Keep Kleenex tissue readily available.
- Use minimal amounts of perfume or cologne.
- Be aware of soap or detergent use – use scent-free laundry products.

Proprioceptive Input

(Difficulty interpreting sensations from the muscles, joints, ligaments, and tendons)

- Pulls, twists, or chews on things (e.g. shirt, gum, pencil).
- Frequently breaks toys, or hurts classmates when they did not mean to.
- Leans, bumps, trips or crashes into objects.
- Walks along touching walls.
- Applies too much pressure when writing (e.g. writes a letter over and over again until there is a hole in the paper).
- Deliberately falls or crashes into things.
- Constantly seems to “physically tackle” everything.
- Stands too close when talking to others.
- Walks stiffly and is uncoordinated.
- Pulls on fingers or cracks knuckles.

Proprioceptive Ideas

- Engage the student in up and down movements (e.g. jumping rope, bouncing a ball, trampoline) to ‘wake up’ the student.
- Back and forth movements (e.g. swinging, sitting in a rocking chair) may help calm the student.
- Use stress balls, Theraputty, and fidget toys.
- Allowing them to chew on crunchy, chewy items (e.g. bubble gum from the freezer, licorice sticks, pretzels, carrots).
- Designate an area in the room where they can stomp their feet or pace.
- Never take physical education or recess away from a student (they need deep pressure activities like running, jogging).

Vestibular Input

(Over or under sensitive to balance and movement sensations)

- May seem to be a ‘thrill seeker’ (e.g. jumping from high places, driving fast).
- May be sedentary, cautious or hesitant to take risks.
- Has difficulty coordinating movements of the eyes.
- Has trouble staying seated.
- Constantly leans head on hand or arm.
- Prefers to lie down rather than sit upright.
- Feels seasick, or feels sick when riding in a car, train, airplane, escalator or elevator.
- Has an extremely loose or tense grip on a pencil or scissors.
- Enjoys being upside down.
- Easily loses balance when riding a bike or climbing stairs.

Vestibular Ideas

- Create heavy work activities (e.g. take chairs off desks in classroom, take rubbish out, take a pile of books to the library).
- Slowly move from extreme positions (e.g. sitting on the floor to standing).
- Slow down our own movements.
- Use bands across the front of the legs on the desk.
- Have the student sit on a wobble cushion or a ball.
- Allow frequent breaks throughout the day.
- Have the student jump on a trampoline.
- Use stickers or stamps to identify left/right.
- Play games using repetitive, alternating and rhythmic movement.
- Reinforce dominant hand use.
- Play on a merry-go-round, ride roller coasters, hang upside down, play team sports, swim, twist and untwist chains of a swing, go sledding, slide down water slides.