

A Sensory Diet Happens 24/7

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always hyper or
always lethargic.



A child who struggles with sensory processing challenges is a child in need, indeed. And, there is so much we can do to help! There are practical proven strategies for reducing oversensitivities and undersensitivities, and modifying tasks and environments to support success while we build underlying sensory processing skills.

Foremost among these strategies is what's called a "sensory diet," a term coined by Patricia Wilbarger, an occupational therapist, a clinical psychologist and a leading expert in the area of sensory defensiveness. OTs use the term on an everyday basis to describe scheduled activities that give a person the input he or she needs to function in a "just right" state (neither *overstimulated* or *understimulated*). Diet's a funny word because it makes you think of eating, but it's an appropriate reference here too. Just as we need food on a daily basis, some children need daily sensory activities to survive and thrive in the world. Diet is also defined as "a manner of living" and "habitual nourishment." For a child with sensory processing issues, a sensory diet meets all of these definitions: it's 24/7 nourishment, it requires an adjustment in everyday life until it becomes a habit, and it's just as essential as eating breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Adults engage in sensory diet activities all the time to maintain an optimal level of arousal and alertness for a given task. To rev up for a busy day with the kids or for a long day at work, you might take a brisk shower, drink some coffee, and listen to music while getting dressed. You might chew gum, sip water, or jiggle your foot to stay focused. At the end of the day, you might go to the gym, do some yoga stretches, take a warm bath or drink some herbal tea or a glass of wine to unwind. As an adult, you have developed the self-awareness to anticipate daily

demands, and find tools that allow you to stay more or less on an even physical and emotional keel. My strategies may differ from yours, but that's OK as long as they fulfill our needs.

Your child doesn't necessarily know how to do this – or, as is often the case, is not *allowed* to do this. A child who *needs* to get up and move around for a few moments during circle time may be reprimanded to sit down and stop fidgeting. A child who self comforts orally may not be allowed to chew gum, drink water, or have a crunchy snack when *her* body needs it. And a child who struggles with body awareness, low muscle tone, or a poorly functioning vestibular system may end up flopping on the floor or bumping into desks, walls, and other kids because his nervous system requires this input.

Kids whose bodies need particular types of sensory input tend to do exactly what they need to obtain that input, sometimes in ways you may not particularly like. Your child may love to hang upside down, jump on the bed, spin in circles, crash into furniture and other kids, chew on nonfood objects. Some, but not all, "self-stimulatory" behaviors can be an attempt to obtain much-needed sensory input that either revs up or slows down a poorly functioning nervous system. At other times self-stims act as a coping mechanism until the child figures out to ward off or deal with sensory overload.

A sensory diet, created jointly with a knowledgeable occupational therapist, can help meet sensory needs in safe, predictable, effective ways. The goal is to give your child – or yourself, for that matter – the right type of sensory input in regular, controlled doses so there's no need to resort to unwanted behaviors. Instead of bulldozing into you or other children to get deep pressure input, your child can leap into a safely arranged "crash pad" or pound a punching bag.

Instead of chewing on a pencil or a chair leg or a hand, your child can chomp on a safe, age appropriate “chewy.” Instead of bouncing off the walls at dinner time, he can bounce for a specified number of minutes on a mini-trampoline *before* it’s time to sit down at the table.

Making a Sensory Diet Work for Your Child

Because each child is unique, there is no cookbook recipe for creating a sensory diet. The starting point is to look at your child’s behaviors, especially those you find a little quirky. Generally speaking, a child whose nervous system is on “high trigger/too wired” needs more calming input, while the child who is more “sluggish/too tired” needs more arousing input. Interestingly, many of the same activities can meet both sets of needs. “Heavy work” that uses the larger muscles and joints of the body – such as climbing, pounding, pushing and pulling – makes us feel grounded within our bodies, which is especially beneficial for the child who needs help to self-regulate.

While each person’s likes and dislikes are obviously different, activities that are slow, rhythmic, and repetitive tend to be more soothing, while those that are more rapid and less predictable tend to be more alerting. Finding the perfect activity to achieve that optimal state – not too tired and not too wired – takes some detective work, creativity, and empathy. Remember that what might soothe you could over-stimulate your child. And, that a child may need both types of input as part of his sensory diet. Few children are *always*

hyper or *always* lethargic. The right combination of sensory input is something you will need to figure out *together*, hopefully with the help of a qualified occupational therapist.

20 Easy-To-Do Sensory Diet Activities

1. Jump on a mini-trampoline, bouncy pad, or mattress placed on the floor
2. Spin on a Sit N’ Spin, Dizzy Disc Jr., or office chair
3. Rock in a rocking chair, glider, or on a hobby horse
4. Go to the playground; use slides and swings
5. Do jumping jacks, floor pushups or wall pushups
6. Ride a tricycle or bicycle
7. Go swimming
8. Climb up and down stairs
9. Do wheelbarrow walking, with ankles held (or with upper thighs supported for very young children and those with decreased upper body strength)
10. Squish between sofa cushions (“sandwich”) or roll up in a blanket (“make a burrito”)
11. Take a warm bath or shower
12. Play in a sandbox or use a sensory bin filled with uncooked rice and beans or other materials
13. Inhale favored essential oils or other fragrances
14. Use a weighted blanket, vest, lap pad, or other weighted item
15. Eat chewy or crunchy foods or chew gum (Glee brand gum is gluten-free.)
16. Drink thick liquids through a straw
17. Play a musical instrument or bang on pots and pans
18. Listen to preferred music over speakers or with headphones
19. Use a vibrating item such as a Squiggle Wiggle Writer, vibrating pillow, or oral vibrator
20. Sit in a quiet “safe space” with soft lighting

Coming up in the next issue: easy ways to build sensory activities into everyday life. Meanwhile, find many more sensory diet activities, practical solutions, monthly tips, and signs of SPD on the sensorysmarts.com website. While there, check out Lindsey’s book, *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*. 📖