

Meeting Sensory Needs During the Pandemic

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With the COVID-19 pandemic now stretching on through the winter, meeting your child's sensory needs is more important than ever. Even if your child is fortunate enough to regularly receive mandated services such as occupational therapy, some of the typical opportunities to obtain sensory input are limited in order to keep our kids healthy. This means it's time to double down on what is often called a "sensory diet." Just as children need food throughout the day, they also need to feed their senses so they feel and function at their best.

Typically, a child whose nervous system is *overaroused* needs more calming input, while one whose system is *underaroused* needs more stimulating input. The best way to develop an individualized plan for your child is to work with an occupational therapist with advanced training and evaluation skills.

Tap Into Multiple Sensory Systems

The best sensory programs provide input that *simultaneously* and *repeatedly* engages more than one sensory system at a time, and require your child to be an active participant. While there is no cookbook for creating and implementing a sensory diet, the following are some "ingredients" that can help your family.

Vestibular and Proprioceptive Input: The Primary Organizers



The vestibular sense, with sensory receptors in the inner ear, tells your child about movement and gravity. The proprioceptive sense, with sensory receptors in muscles, joints and connective tissue, provides your child with body awareness. These two key sensory systems work together like a GPS so your children have a secure sense of where their bodies are and what they are doing. Some good vestibular-proprioceptive activities include:

- jumping on a mini-trampoline, mattress placed on the floor, on a pad, or even on a square made of masking tape on the floor
- swinging on a playground or indoor swing, on a hammock, or in a blanket held at each corner by adults
- bouncing on a therapy ball, Hop-It ball or on someone's lap
- rocking on a rocking chair, glider chair or rocking toy
- climbing stairs or up and down a mountain of sofa cushions, hiking, using an elliptical climber
- running on a treadmill, around a track, or on a route you create in your home
- dancing together to your favorite music or trying a dance app like Just Dance Now or Steezy
- playing movement games like Simon Says or Zoomball, creating an obstacle course, engaging in fun online games you'll find at gonoodle.com, or creating exercises or movements and using an online spinner such as wheelofnames.com.

Tactile Input



Get your kids into nature as much as possible. When they can't get their hands on grass, sand, leaves or snow, you can create an at-home sensory bin filled with items such as uncooked rice and beans, packing noodles and so on. Have kids use vibrating toys and a vibrating toothbrush, touch various textures, pop bubble wrap, pull wet laundry out of the washer, and engage in arts and crafts projects you can easily find online, for example, by searching for "penguin craft."

Visual Input



With all of this extra screen time, be sure to provide soothing visuals. Most computers, tablets and smartphones offer colored screen filters in the accessibility options which can make them more relaxing to view. When using screens, follow the "20-20-20" rule: take a 20 second break every 20 minutes to look at something at least 20 feet away. Install dimmer switches on lights, if you can, and replace fluorescent lights with warm LED bulbs, halogen or incandescent bulbs. When taking breaks, offer a picture book or photo album rather than another online activity.

Auditory Input



When sensitive kids spend more time indoors, they may be even more sensitive to noise. Be sure to play both arousing and calming music. Don't keep your house too quiet. If your child needs noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs to tolerate trips to the store, thunderstorms and so on, be sure to limit their use to specific activities and situations. Try recording offending sounds and "play" them at home while eating a snack. If your child is consistently oversensitive to sound, telling others to be quiet or complaining about certain frequencies of sound, ask an occupational therapist about implementing a therapeutic listening program.

Taste and Smell



Explore flavors, including the more recently discovered flavor called umami. Plan a menu and cook together. Although your child may be a highly selective eater, "playing" with food is a great way to explore new textures, smells and tastes. You can also create smelling games using spices, flowers, essential oils and even common household items.

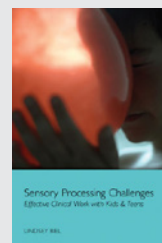
These are just a few sensory diet ideas for you and your family. You'll find more in the book *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and at www.sensorysmarts.com. Resources include a checklist for you to better understand your child's sensory processing challenges, as well as free webcasts, podcasts, magazine articles, toys and equipment suggestions, and more.



Lindsey Biel, M.A., OTR/L is a pediatric occupational therapist with a private practice in New York City where she evaluates and treats children, adolescents, and young adults with sensory processing issues, developmental delays, autism spectrum disorders, and other challenges. With the COVID-19 pandemic, she now offers teletherapy to families and schools nationwide.

Lindsey is co-author of the award-winning *Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Processing Issues*, with a foreword by Temple Grandin. She is also the author of *Sensory Processing Challenges: Effective Clinical Work with Kids & Teens* and has authored two chapters in Dr. William Steele's book *Optimizing Learning Outcomes* as well as contributed to the all-new edition of Kim West's classic *Good Night, Sleep Tight*.

Visit Lindsey's websites at www.sensorysmarts.com and www.sensoryprocessingchallenges.com for downloadable checklists, articles, webcasts and more.



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