

Sensory Strategies: What is a Sensory Diet?

Children's Therapy Services



What is a sensory diet?

- Do you find yourself longing for a walk outside after being indoors all day?
- Do you tap your feet under the table during a long meeting?
- Does background music soothe you or irritate you?

Your reactions, and your child's reactions, relate to how your body needs and processes sensory input. Everyone has sensory preferences. Many children, however, have problems integrating the sensory inputs their bodies receive.

They have difficulty with maintaining an appropriate level of alertness. This can show as behaviours such as silliness, giddiness, noise making, aimless running or pacing.

Sometimes the child will simply 'shut down' and become very passive sleepy or self absorbed. No matter how hard children with this problem try, they can't keep pace with changes, transitions, interruptions, or lots of things going on at the same time.

The concept of sensory diet is based on the idea that each individual requires a certain amount of activity and sensation to provide them with just the right level of arousal and alertness.

A good sensory diet provides the combination of input needed for peak performance from the time we wake up until we go to bed.



The important thing about a sensory diet is to help your child feel calm, alert, and organised by using special activities scheduled throughout the day in order for them to be more able to attend to tasks. A rich sensory diet can make a big difference in how your child experiences and relates to their world. It helps them focus, attend and interact and can often reduce anxiety.

Take a look at the behaviours you are seeing at home. Your child may:

- Spin through the house, crashing into everything! The Sensory Diet solution is: Give them something safe to spin and crash or provide activities which involve deep pressure and/or weight bearing through the limbs in a different/safer way.
- Mouth everything in sight! The Sensory Diet solution is: Give her more appropriate things to mouth and increase oral activities.
- Jump all over the furniture! The Sensory Diet solution is: Give him/her a safe space and something to jump on like a trampoline.

Each child is very different and has different requirements. But if you look at what your child is doing they are telling you, often in the only way they know how, what they need.

A sensory diet gives them what they need in better, safer, healthier ways and, hopefully, it is also fun and rewarding.

The essential ingredients of a rich sensory diet are heavy work, physical activity, muscle exertion, movement, and firm comforting touch.

These are the 'main courses' of a sensory diet. Other activities are also beneficial but don't last as long, these are the 'sensory snacks' that last a shorter period of time, activities that involve the mouth, the ears, the eyes and the nose.

Each child has unique sensory needs and their sensory diet must be specific to them. Activities should be carefully timed or spread out during the day and at key times during the day.

A good sensory diet should include combinations of alerting, calming, and organizing activities. The order of the activities will depend on the needs of the child.

When designing a diet of activities we need to look at the sensory inputs or strategies that your child seeks or uses to organise themselves.

Oral motor

Activating the mouth has a direct affect on the entire body. Certain tastes may be organising to your child. Intense flavours are usually alerting while sucking and chewing are more calming.

You can help your child to be more focused if they have something to chew or munch or drink – sucking through a straw, sucking a sweet or munching biscuits. Also blowing bubbles is very organising and calming.

Smells

Some smells can be relaxing and calming, some alerting.

Sound

Does your child enjoy certain music? Is music more organising when it is heard through head phones?

Vision

What types of lighting or colours seem to help your child concentrate?

Environment

Does your child do better sitting at a table or working lying on the floor? Does he enjoy an enclosed space or 'nest' or an open space when working and playing.

For children who tend to become overwhelmed by sensation and sensory experiences it is helpful to create a hideout area at home that is free from sensory intrusions and contains cushions and bean bags that they can snuggle into or under.

A small tent or hiding behind the back of a sofa can provide this kind of hide-out.

An Occupational Therapist will perform a thorough Assessment of a child's behaviour and interaction with the environment. From this Assessment, activities for a sensory diet can be deduced, as well as possible alterations to the environment. The occupational Therapist can help you determine whether a sensory diet can be beneficial for your child and can help you devise one.

See Sensory Strategies: Calming and Alerting leaflet for ideas and techniques for calming, organising and alerting your child.

Ref: Wilbarger and Wilbarger, 1991

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