

Sensory diet activities

Just as your child needs food throughout the course of the day, the need for sensory input must also be met. A “sensory diet” (coined by OT Patricia Wilbarger) is a carefully designed, personalized activity plan that provides the sensory input a person needs to stay focused and organized throughout the day.

Every individual has different ways that help support their ability to stay alert and engaged in different situations or ways that can help them stay calm and focused. You may tap your fingers on a table, jiggle your knee or chew gum to stay awake or soak in a hot tub to unwind. Children need to engage in various activities over the day as well to stabilizing their bodies, focus their attention or soothe their systems in order to complete their daily tasks.

Each child has a unique set of sensory needs. Generally, a child whose nervous system is over aroused and too wired needs more calming input, while the child who is more under aroused and too tired needs more alerting input. A qualified occupational therapist can use her or his advanced training and evaluation skills to develop a sensory diet for your child but it’s up to you and your child to implement it throughout the day.

Activities may not only perk up your child or calm him down may also help to be better able to:

- tolerate sensations and situations that are challenging.
- Regulate their emotions,
- increase attention span.
- reduce unwanted sensory seeking or avoiding behaviours.
- handle transitions with less stress

Auditory

- Listen to favorite music,
- Bang on variety of objects like drums
- Play musical instruments,
- Listen to sounds of nature outdoors,
- Singing/Humming/Whispering
- Listen to instrumental music,
- Blow whistles or party favours
- Therapeutic Listening programs
- Sound Eaze/School Eaze CDs
- White noise machine or CD
- Observe silence through a mindful moment,
- Play the game ‘SIMON’,
- Use earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones,
- “Safe space” with quiet and low light

Visual

- Look at mobiles, lava lamps, bubble lamps, starry projections on the wall/ceiling,
- Use Colored lightbulbs in a room,
- Avoid fluorescent lights or use light filter covers,
- Create a “calm space” with minimal visuals for down regulation,
- Respect color preference in clothing, objects and decor
- Toys in opaque containers
- Leave out 5-10 toys at a time to avoid visual overload,
- Look at photos or picture books,
- Look at nature - fish tanks, farm, zoo, ocean, forest,
- Watch cartoons and movies,
- Use High-quality sunglasses outdoors,
- Consider tinted lenses indoors if sensitive to glare,
- Wide brim hat or visor outdoors
- Games and activities that develop visual skills- such as Mazes, dot-to-dots, I Spy, drawing, flashlight tag.

Touch

- Use hand fidgets e.g., Kooshball, paper clips, small toy,
- Play with stuffed toys,
- Make mudpies or sandcastles,
- Use fingerpaint or other paints,
- Use glitter glue,
- Use foamy soap/shaving cream,
- Play with whipped cream,
- Play with sand, salt tray or bucket with uncooked rice/pasta,
- Play with orbeez or use a water table,
- Give toys/dolls a bath with a soapy sponge,
- Treasure hunt – hide small objects in play dough or tactile bin to find with fingers,
- Pet or brush an animal or play with stuffed toys
- Play with silly putty, play doh/clay or floam or elastic bands,
- Sit in the sunshine/shade,
- Kitchen time – mixing, tasting, pounding, smelling, washing up,
- Pulling Apart resistant toys/objects – Lego, snap beads, stretchy toys

Pressure

- Back scratch
- Massage with/without lotion
- Jump on a pile of pillows or crash mat,
- Kitchen time – mixing, tasting, pounding, smelling, washing up,
- Make home made playdoh,
- Roll up in a “burrito” blanket,
- “Sandwich” between pillows
- Vibrating toys - pens, balls,

Movement

- Rocking (in your arms or rocking chair)
- Crawling on hands and knees or full body commando style
- Walk, March, Skip, Run
- Jump or bunny hop or animal walks.
- Dance/Play the Hokey Pokey/Go Noodle on You tube.
 - Head, shoulders, knees and toes or Simon Says
- Wheelbarrow walking
- Jumping jacks
- Floor push ups/wall push ups
- Playing “Tug of War”-with ropes, scarves, stretchy bands
- Playground fun: slides, swings
- Climbing: use monkey bars, ropes, stairs, rock walls
- Jump on mini trampoline,
- Use Sit n’ Spin, Dizzy Disc Jr., or another spinning toy,
- Sit on an Inflatable seat cushions,
- Bounce on a therapy ball/yoga ball
- Ride a tricycle/bicycle/ scooter/skateboard,
- Kicking – soccer ball, big ball
- Batting at balls using a plastic baseball bat,
- Push a grocery cart or stroller,
- Yoga stretches and deep breathing,
- Roll down a hill,
- Play catch or bounce a ball back and forth,
- Balloon tennis
- Play hopscotch,
- Cartwheels and somersaults
- Ice skating/sledding/skiing
- Recess games – hopscotch, ball catch, soccer, hockey, tag

Notes: Generally, rhythmic movement is calming while erratic movement is arousing. Never force movement. Look out for physiological responses such as increased distractibility, disorientation, nausea, breathing changes, unexpected tiredness, suddenly pale or flushed skin. © 2008 Lindsey Biel, OTR/L