

Sensory Diet Activities for Home and Away

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The sensory diet, a term coined by OT Patricia Wilbarger, is a carefully designed, personalized activity schedule that provides the sensory input a person's nervous system needs to stay focused and organized throughout the day. A person whose nervous system is on "high trigger" will need more calming input, while someone who is more "sluggish" will need more arousing input to "jazz" up her nervous system. Infants, young children, teens, and adults can all benefit from a well-designed sensory diet.

Vestibular

Vestibular input (the sense of movement, centered in the inner ear) can be obtained by spinning and swinging, and to a lesser extent, any type of movement.

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Swing on playground swings, trying various types of swings and movements, such as front and back and side to side. Spin on a Sit n' Spin, Dizzy Disc Jr., or office chair. Run in circles, ride a carousel, hold your child's arm and legs and spin him around like an airplane.

Schoolage kids

Hang upside down from the monkey bars, roll down a grassy or snowy hill (good proprioceptive input as well), ride a roller coaster, use swings.

Teenagers and Adults

Swing on a hammock, use playground swings or merry-go-round (you're never too old!), do cartwheels and dance (also provides proprioceptive input).

Auditory

Auditory input is what we hear and is neuroanatomically connected with the vestibular sense. In addition to listening to various types of music, both recorded and live, here are some ways to get calming and organizing auditory input.

- Get out in nature and listen. Go to the beach or sit still and listen to a thunderstorm or windstorm. If you hear birds singing, try to identify what direction a given bird is calling from.
- Listen to natural sounds recordings such as a rainstorm, waves crashing against the beach, or birds in the forest. Sometimes natural sound recordings also feature light instrumentation with flutes, keyboards, etc.
- Play a listening game: you and your child sit very quietly and try to identify the sounds you hear (traffic, the hum of the refrigerator, a door shutting, etc.).
- Listen to Hemi Sync recordings of sounds and music specially engineered to promote calming, focus, energy, or creativity. (Available from www.discoverytoolsandworkshops.com).
- Encourage your child to play a musical instrument. For a child with auditory sensitivity, controlling the sounds she hears can be especially helpful. If your child is fearful of loud noises, let him control the volume on the stereo, exploring soft vs. loud music.
- Get a white noise machine, tabletop rocks-and-water fountain, or aquarium.

Tactile

Tactile input is the sense of touch and includes texture, temperature, pressure, and more. Don't forget that the tactile system includes not only the skin covering your body but also inner skin linings such as inside the mouth.

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Let her drink plain seltzer or carbonated mineral water to experience bubbles in her mouth (you can flavor with lemon, lime, etc.). Play with foamy soap or shaving cream, add sand for extra texture, use fingerpaint, play with glitter glue, mix cookie dough and cake batter, and so on. Let your child use the playground sandbox or create your own at home, filling a bin with dry beans and rice or other materials. Use clay such as Play-Doh (the classic Play-Doh Fun Factory provides excellent proprioceptive input as well). Don't force a child who is unwilling to touch all these "yucky" substances. Let her use a paintbrush, stick, or even a toy for cautious exploration.

Proprioception

Proprioceptive input (sensations from joints, muscles and connective tissues that lead to body awareness) can be obtained by lifting, pushing, and pulling heavy objects as well as by engaging in activities that compress (push together) or distract (pull apart) the joints like playing tug-of-war.

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Make a "sandwich" by firmly pressing on your child's arms legs and back with pillows or make a "burrito" by rolling her up in a blanket. She can push her own stroller, and a stronger child can push a stroller or cart filled with weighted objects such as groceries. Your child can wear a backpack or fanny pack filled with toys (not too heavy!).

Schoolage kids

Jump on a mini-trampoline, play hopscotch, vacuum, carry books from one room to another, help wash windows or a tabletop.

Teenagers and Adults

Shovel snow, rake leaves, push heavy objects like firewood in a wheelbarrow, do push-ups against the wall, wear a heavy backpack or pull it on a luggage cart, mow the lawn with a push mower, wear a weighted vest available from a sporting goods store that sells equipment for martial arts or weightlifting training.

Schoolage kids

Eat frozen foods (popsicles, frozen fruit or vegetables), dress up in fun costumes to get used to the feel of unfamiliar clothing, garden and repot indoor plants, play with make-up and face painting.

Teenagers and Adults

Sculpt, sew, weave, crochet or knit, create a scrapbook (lots of pasting and working with different textures), use sandpaper to smooth a woodworking project, take a very cold or hot shower or bath.

Visual

If your child is visually distractible, simplify the visual field in his home or school environment for a calming effect. Alternately, if your child seems visually "tuned out," i.e., does not seem to respond easily to visual stimulation, add brightly colored objects to attract visual attention. For example, a child who has trouble getting aroused for play may be attracted by a brightly painted toy chest filled with appealing colored toys.

- Hide clutter in bins or boxes or behind curtains or doors—a simple, solid-color curtain hung over a bookshelf instantly reduces visual clutter.
- Use solid colored rugs instead of patterned ones and solid-colored walls (for example, avoid patterned wallpaper).
- Have your child sit at the front of a classroom where there is less visual distraction. He may also need to sit away from the window to avoid the distraction of the outdoors. Keep in mind, however, that some children do best sitting in the back of the room so they can monitor what other kids are doing without constantly turning around. Work with the teacher to see which seating arrangement works best for your child.
- Avoid toys, clothes, towels, etc., in colors that your child find stress-inducing such as bright orange, yellow, and red (your child may have a different "hated" color.)
- Smell
- If your child has sensory problems, certain odors can stimulate, calm, or send him into sensory overload.
- Explore scents with your child to find the ones that work best to meet your goal (either to soothe or to wake up). While everyone has different preferences, vanilla and rose are generally calming. Peppermint and citrus are usually alerting. Let's say your child needs help staying calm and loves vanilla. You can use vanilla soaps and bath oils to ease bath time, vanilla candles or oils in an aromatherapy burner or machine at bedtime, and vanilla body lotion. Note: Avoid lavender and tea tree oil products for boys as several recent studies show a link with enlarged breast development in boys. It's probably safest to avoid using these products for girls as well.
- If your child is overtired at the mall and you know scents help, have her smell her favorite scent or stop into a strongly-smelling store that sells candles and soaps.
- Play a smelling game with your SI child. Have her close her eyes or wear a blindfold and try to identify smells such as maple syrup, apple, peanut butter, and soap.
- Life stinks sometimes. Accept your child's opinion about something she thinks smells "gross." Then help her find something that smells nice.

Taste

Taste input is strongly influenced by smell (as an experiment, chew some gum until the flavor is gone, then hold a lemon under your nose; the gum will taste like lemon).

Strong tastes can stimulate the mouth of a child with SI and make him more willing to try new foods. Before presenting new foods, let the child have one peppermint, sour gummy bear, or other strong-flavored food. If your child does not have a strong negative reaction to refined sugar (becomes very "hyper" or gets very sleepy), get an assortment of flavored jellybeans. Eat one at a time, and have her guess which flavor it is. Children will be more likely to taste something if they help make it. Let him help you select foods. For example, let him choose between chicken or fish, string beans or sugar snaps, and potato or rice. Then let your child arrange the meat in the baking pan, break off vegetable tips and dump in water, and so on. Let him help you arrange food on each plate into a pleasing presentation.

Don't forget to play with your food. A so-called picky eater may be more willing to eat "rocks and trees" than meatballs and broccoli.

Sample Sensory Diet

Here is a sample sensory diet, created for a second grade child whose sensory seeking behavior interfered with his attention and learning. We've used the annoying term, "as directed," to avoid providing a cookbook recipe. Activities should be individualized for each child and modified frequently to meet changing needs. A separate program was worked out for this child with the school, including frequent movement breaks, an inflatable seat cushion for wiggling while remaining seated, and providing crunchy/chewy oral comfort snacks at handwriting time.

Morning Routine

Massage feet and back to help wake up
Listen to therapeutic listening CD
Use vibrating toothbrush and vibrating hairbrush
Crunchy cereal with fruit and some protein
Spin on Dizzy Disc Jr. as directed
Jump on mini-trampoline as directed

After school

Go to playground for at least 20 minutes
Push grocery cart or sister's stroller
Spinning as directed
Mini Tramp — add some variety: have him play catch or toss toys into a basket while jumping
Massage feet to "reorganize," use theraputty, body sox, make body sandwiches, wheelbarrow walk
Do ball exercises as directed
Listen to therapeutic listening CD
Oral work — sucking thick liquids through a straw (smoothies, etc.), crunchy and chewy snacks (to give input into jaws and teeth) prior to and/or during homework

Dinner Time

Help with cooking, mixing, chopping, etc.
Help set table, using two hands to carry and balance a tray
Provide crunchy and chewy foods

Family time:

clay projects, painting projects, etc.

Night time

Warm bath with bubbles and calming essential oil
Massage during reading time