

Sensory Diets

A sensory diet is an individualized menu of activities to help one reach and/ or maintain an optimal level of attention and alertness. It is used throughout the day as needed or scheduled. All behaviors serve as a purpose or a function and are a result of : 1) A child trying to meet a specific need, 2) A child's response to an environmental demand or stimuli, or 3) A learned response or coping strategy. One should not try to eliminate a behavior without teaching the child a replacement behavior (ie: Instead of placing fingers in the mouth, place the fingers above or below the lip or chew a piece of gum). A child's need for a certain kind or amount of sensory input may vary daily depending on the time of day, place, or stimuli.

As adults, we each have our own strategies that can be called our sensory diets. Chewing gum, tapping your fingers on the table, swinging your foot, drinking coffee, and taking walks to decrease stress are a few examples. Children with attention difficulties, high or low activity levels, poor awareness of their body in space, sensory defensiveness, distractibility, or maladaptive behaviors can benefit from an individualized sensory diet, as they have more difficulty automatically knowing what activities can help themselves to focus and learn. The following are ideas for sensory diets.

PROPRIOCEPTION

- The sensation from our joints and muscles that tells us where each part of our body is in space and how it is moving..
- Enables us to know that our arm is out, our fist is clenched, and our index fingers are out, without looking at it.
- It helps us use the right amount of force when hugging, apply the correct amount of pressure when using a pencil, and to move without bumping into walls or tripping.
- Proprioceptive input is very grounding. It tends to be calming and organizing for most people.
- Heavy work is a kind of proprioceptive input to the muscles and joints. Heavy work includes anything that makes the muscles work against resistance.
- Deep pressure touch is also a beneficial way to obtain proprioceptive input.

Examples of activities that provide proprioceptive input:

- Crashing into mattresses
- Tug of war with inner tube tires, rope, towels, etc
- Rolling
- Climbing on playground equipment, crawling up the slide
- Commando/ Belly crawling
- Crawling through tunnels
- Squish the child between bean bags or couch cushion and have the child try to push the top layer off
- Lift or push the kitchen chairs, depending on the age and strength of the child
- Add extra weight to the backpack and fit it snug on the back
- Push-ups on the floor or against a wall
- Crab walking
- Wheel barrow walking
- Marching and skipping
- Obstacle courses that require the child to climb, crawl, and lift heavier objects
- Carry grocery bags, laundry basket, trash
- Rough housing / wrestling
- Long pressure touch strokes to dry up after a bath
- Pull a wagon
- Hot dog roll: Roll child up in a blanket, and then unroll it
- Lay in a hammock swing

- Play “Row, row, row your boat” while sitting and holding hands, leaning back and forth
- Big hugs
- Eating crunchy or chewy foods
- Theraputty or Playdough: Pinch, squeeze, pull, roll, hide and find objects in it.
- Chew chewing gum
- Squeeze stress balls
- Place a weight on your lap while completing activities in sitting.
- Complete handwriting activities while laying on the stomach in a propped-on-elbows position
- Place theraband around the legs of a chair and push outward with shins against the theraband
- Suck applesauce or a milkshake through a straw
- Place hands in a container of rice or beans
- Jump on the floor or trampoline
- Use a rolling pin to roll out dough or putty

VESTIBULAR

This system is located in the inner ear and responds to changes in head movement, direction, and movement away from and off of the center of gravity. It tells us if we are moving or not and what direction and how fast we are moving. It is important for our body’s muscle tone. The vestibular system coordinates the two sides of the body and it holds the head upright against gravity.

Examples of activities that provide vestibular input:

- Sit and spin
- Sitting on a ½ blown up beach ball
- Rough housing / wrestling
- Running, rolling, somersaults
- Swinging
- Merry go rounds
- Bouncing on a therapy ball
- Rolling backwards on a therapy ball (with assistance)
- Bouncing on a Hippity Hop Ball
- Rocking in a rocking chair
- Spinning in circles
- Spinning in circles in an office chair
- Playing “Ring around the Rosey”
- Scooter board games
- Sliding down slides
- Jumping on the floor or trampoline
- Bending down to touch your toes and stand back up again

*** Always have a proprioceptive activity following a vestibular activity to calm and reorganize the child**

TACTILE

- This system detects a sense of light touch, pain, temperature, and pressure to the skin and mouth.

-2 types: One is responsible for defense, survival, and to protect us from danger. The other is responsible for exploration, learning, and discrimination.

-Can also assist with learning how to form shapes, letters, and numbers

Examples of activities that provide tactile input:

- Rubbing arms, hands, legs, feet, and back with lotion

- Firm massage
- Digging in the sand
- Place hands in a container of rice or beans
- Theraputty or Playdough: Pinch, squeeze, pull, roll, hide and find objects in it
- Water play
- Writing or tracing in moist sand
- Finger painting with paint, pudding, bath foam, and shaving cream
- Write words and letters in shaving cream
- Wear tight spandex undergarments
- Cooking task, mixing by hand
- The Brushing Program

MOUTH

- The mouth supports all other functions. Activating the mouth has an affect on the rest of your body. Having something in your mouth is another good way to help a child focus on an activity (Think of what you do when you concentrate: Do you chew the insides of your mouth? Bite your lips? Place your hand on you chin/ mouth?)

- Providing a child with oral input during work time may help with self-regulation and organization of behaviors.

Examples of food that provides good oral input:

Crunchy Foods

- 1) Apples
- 2) Carrot Sticks
- 3) Dry Cereal
- 4) Tortilla Chips
- 5) Pretzels
- 6) Graham Crackers
- 7) Cheetos
- 8) Crackers
- 9) Popcorn
- 10) Pickles
- 11) Raw vegetables

Chewy Foods

- 1) Dried Fruit
- 2) Raisins
- 3) Fruit Roll-ups
- 4) Gummy Bears / Worms
- 5) Jerky
- 6) Skittles
- 7) Licorice Sticks
- 8) Marshmallows
- 9) Bagels
- 10) Cheese sticks
- 12) Gum
- 13) Carmel squares

Arousal/Alerting

- 1) Atomic Fire Balls
- 2) Ice chips
- 3) Red Hots
- 4) Sour gum balls
- 5) Tear Jerkers
- 6) Lemon Drops
- 7) War Heads

- Vibration and deep pressure to the mouth may also be beneficial.

BREATH

- The breath is an important part of alertness. When stressed or anxious, the breath is short, quick, and shallow. When relaxed it is longer and deeper. The breath also works closely with the eyes. It can be used to work on eye convergence. Greater diaphragmatic breathing also gives more oxygen to the brain and it helps it function better.

Examples of activities to work on breath:

- Blow through crazy straws
- Put straws together in a bucket of bubbles and blow out
- Blow bubbles and pop – provides good opportunity for visual tracking
- Blow a feather across a table
- Blow cotton balls into a box off the table

- Blow spit balls at a target
- Suck up pieces of paper with a straw and carry them across a room
- Suck up jello with a straw
- Drink yogurt or pudding through a coffee stirrer
- Whistle a tune
- Blow toys, whistles, kazoos
- Ping pong ball races by blowing them across a table
- Blow up balloons
- Blow a pinwheel
- Draw a maze on paper and blow a cotton ball around it using a straw
- Suck bingo chips onto the end of a straw and place them on a bingo card or other target

HEARING

Sounds have a large affect on our system. Some cannot have conversations when other people are speaking nearby. Others may need music to concentrate. Music affects people differently. It can be used as part of a sensory diet.

- Soft music can be calming
- Rhythmic music can assist with motor planning
- A child may benefit from wearing headphones or listening to music overhead while completing a task.

VISUAL

A child can easily become visually overstimulated in an environment. It is important to decrease the amount of stimulation and distractions to allow a child to focus.

In addition, the following recommendations may help a child with increasing attention to a visual tasks:

- Using dark lined paper may help a child write on the lines better
- Reading with a book mark can help maintain a child's place when reading
- Using colored overlays over a paper can help with the clarity of reading a page
- Reading on a slanted surface (binder) can help the eyes focus and visually track
- Visually tracking a lazy 8 with the eyes can help both sides of the brain work together.

TRANSITIONING:

- Allow time for transitions
- Prepare child by telling/showing where he will be going and what he will be doing
- Provide a "waiting toy" for the child to hold
- Encourage marching, hopping, or any type of game during the move
- Apply pressure to the top of a child's shoulders while walking
- Make a written or visual schedule for the child to follow. Either cross off or remove activities completed.