

## Sensory Strategies

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 his/her nervous system. Infants, young children, teens, and adults can all benefit from a well-designed sensory diet.

These are things to try at home and school. They are suggestions to help your child attain the best attention, behavior and focus as possible. What might work one day might not work the next day, so be flexible and try different things to see if they might work better. Go slow to implement these changes so your child will not have a negative response to the many changes. If things do not work let me know and we can come up with some other ideas that might be better. And if I find out things that work better I will also let you know. I hope these ideas will help and be beneficial for him/her, so he/she can explore, learn and be comfortable in all of his/her surroundings.

### MORNING

- Massage feet and back to help wake up
- Listen to a calming or upbeat CD (no words preferably)
- Use vibrating toothbrush and/or vibrating hairbrush
- Crunchy cereal with fruit and some protein, sit on a bumpy disk or cushion at the table while eating.
- Deep pressure input (Proprioception-See below)
- Jump on mini-trampoline or specified 'jumping cushion' as directed
- Give a picture schedule or just outline the activities of the day.

### SCHOOL

- Your child may do well with periodic movement breaks throughout his day. Make them specific and consistent every day. (ie. Take the attendance to the front office everyday; go get the napkins from down the hall, some activity also that he might have a buddy to bring along with him too.)
- Your child can sit on an inflated seat cushion while sitting on a classroom chair or on the floor at circle time. This enables him/her to get a little movement input in an appropriate way as he/she sits rather than to get up to move a bit when not acceptable to the teacher.
- Your child could try hand "fidgets" such as a koosh ball, hand exerciser, or other non-distracting handheld item. Fidget items help calm and organize the child who is "always on the go" and also gives a child who tends to "zone out" out a tool to stay alert and tuned in.
- Your child can use a weighted lap pad or weight vest to get calming sensory input, as well as a physical cue to stay put if needed during a fine motor activity.
- A written (or picture) list of what will be done in the classroom each day is very helpful for your child to know what is coming next.

## **AFTER SCHOOL**

- Play on the playground or outside for at least 15 min
- Massage feet to "reorganize," use theraputty/playdough, body sox, make body sandwiches, wheelbarrow walk
- 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
- Pushing/pulling objects at home (ie. Moving furniture), helping to carry in groceries
- Jumping on cushion, slowly, with an activity to catch/toss ball or to 'give five' in different positions

## **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
- Have him/her sit on a cushion while eating
- Give him/her choices of what he/she wants to eat FIRST, SECOND, Etc.

## **NIGHT TIME**

- Family time: clay projects, painting projects, play dough, etc.
- Warm bath with bubbles and calming essential oil (does not have to be every night)
- Massage during reading time or give calming input with a massager.
- Soft calming music playing

## **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.

Make a "sandwich" by firmly pressing on your child's arms legs and back with pillows or make a "burrito" by rolling him/her up in a blanket. He/She can push his own stroller/cart/wagon, 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!).

## **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.

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/her around like an airplane. **Your child will do well with these activities if they are graded by going slow and coupled with some above proprioceptive(deep pressure) activities because he/she tends to get over excited with fast movement activities and has a hard time calming down.**

## **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.

Let him/her drink plain seltzer or carbonated mineral water to experience bubbles in his/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 him/her use a paintbrush, stick, or even a toy for cautious exploration.

## **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.).

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.)
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## SMELL

If your child has sensory problems, certain odors can stimulate, calm, or send him/her into sensory overload.

- Explore scents with your child to find the ones that work best to meet your goal (either to calm or to wake up). While everyone has different preferences, lavender, vanilla, and rose are generally calming. Peppermint and lemon are usually invigorating. Let's say your child needs help staying calm and loves lavender. You can use lavender soaps and bath oils to ease bath time, lavender candles or oils in an aromatherapy burner or machine at bedtime, and lavender body lotion.
- If your child is overtired at the mall and you know scents help, have him/her smell his/her favorite scent or stop into a strongly-smelling store that sells candles and soaps.
- Play a smelling game with your SI child. Have him/her close his/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 he/she thinks smells "gross." Then help him/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 him/her guess which flavor it is.
- Children will be more likely to taste something if they help make it. Let him/her help you select foods. For example, let him/her 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/her 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.

Some examples of SI activities that are **CALMING**

- Sucking, a thick shake with a straw, hard candies or a Popsicle
- Cuddling, or wrapping a blanket around the shoulders
- Pushing against walls with the hands, sides of the body, back and buttocks

Some examples of SI Activities that are **ALERTING**

- Light touch, light tickles with a feather, back scratch, koosh ball
- Fast, irregular movement, bouncing on a therapy ball, playing tag and jumping
- Crunchy foods: pretzels, crackers, popcorn or raw vegetables

Some examples of SI activities that are **ORGANIZING** (can be both alerting and calming)

- Pushing and pulling activities: playing with a 'stretch Armstrong toy or stiff clay, pushing a loaded cart
- Moving furniture, putting up chairs
- Carrying and passing out books
- Hiking, climbing, tug of war
- Chewy foods: gum, day old bagels, stale licorice, fruit bars, dried foot etc.

Information and ideas were taken from the website <http://www.sensorismarts.com/diet.html> from the book Raising a Sensory Smart Child

The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Integration Issues

by Lindsey Biel, M.A., OTR/L and Nancy Peske

Foreword by Temple Grandin

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