

A young girl with light brown hair and eyes is smiling, looking directly at the camera. She is surrounded by numerous colorful pop-it toys in shades of purple, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red. The toys are arranged around her face, some partially obscuring it. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

The Sensory Diet

**for Children by
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Child's Name:

Therapist's Name:

Date:

Occupational Therapy
Home Program
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Sensory Diet for Children

Purpose: Introducing a strategic mix of sensory activities decreases mood swings, difficult behaviors, and temper tantrums (meltdowns). Sensory diets can be used at specific time periods during the day or as needed. Note: Similar to a diet of food, the body needs to be replenished every few hours. Participating in a sensory diet for at least 5-10 minutes can be helpful; however, doing a sensory diet for 30 minutes has a longer-lasting effect. Choose one activity or several activities per session.

Guidelines

1. To prevent confrontation, use activities in which child is interested. Start with something simple and gradually move on to something more challenging. Look for facial expressions and body language and listen for vocal tones or words that show the child is involved and interested.
2. If necessary, prepare child when transitions are made from one activity to another. For example, say "One more minute of doing such and such" or count to five.
3. Routines are important. However, occasionally changing the routine helps child expand his interests. Changing the routine also helps a child learn to make transitions.
4. Crying, whimpering, and laughing, can mean it is time to cool off or calm down. Watch for signs of child starting to relax when switching to calming activities.
5. Although I listed a particular activity once, putting it into only one category – calming, energizing, or organizing – some of the activities can be used in more than one category. Heavy work (defined as pushing and pulling against resistance and carrying heavy items) can be calming, energizing, and/or organizing. Use a strategic mix of sensory activities by paying attention to your mind/body. Note: When in doubt, use heavy work (proprioception).
6. Borrowing the wisdom from the quote, "If you know one person with autism, then you know one person with autism," one can say, "If you know one person with SPD, then you know one person with SPD." In other words, all persons with SPD are unique individuals. So the sensory diet that works for one person, might not work for another person.
7. Talk with occupational therapist regularly to be certain the sensory diet continues to fit child's sensory needs.

Notes on Other Types of Sensory Input:

Auditory (sounds) – Many children with auditory defensiveness/over-responsivity can avoid becoming overwhelmed by controlling and predicting the noxious sounds. Give your child some control over the environmental noises, whenever possible.

Many of these children can avoid becoming overwhelmed by predicting the noxious sounds. So help your child anticipate noises by encouraging him to do tasks such as turning on a vacuum cleaner or a hairdryer.

Visual (sights) – Visual (sights) – Visual input can be over-arousing. Avoid clothes, towels, rugs, wall colors, etc., in colors that your child finds distressing. In contrast, if your child seems “tuned out,” add brightly colored objects to encourage visual attention. For example, if your child has difficulty getting aroused for play, he may be attracted to a brightly painted toy chest filled with toys in appealing colors. If your child seems unable to watch a ball as it rolls, he may be able to watch it if the ball lights up and/or makes noise as it moves.

In school, your child might be less distracted if he sits in the front of the classroom. He may need to sit away from the window to avoid the allure of the outdoors and/or the bright sunshine. In contrast, some children are less distracted when sitting in the back of the room, so they can monitor what the other students are doing without constantly turning around. Work with the teacher and an occupational therapist to see which seat placement works best for your child.

Olfactory (smells) – Odors calm, stimulate, or send a person into sensory overload. Persons with olfactory defensiveness can become upset by something “stinky.” Avoid wearing perfume and using air fresheners. Some children become upset by the smell of vanilla in hot tea and by the smell of herbal teas, including mint.

Precautions

Avoid using lavender products with boys who have not yet reached puberty. In several recent studies, researchers found a link with breast growth. Experts also suggest not using these products with girls because the effects are not yet known. When applied directly to the skin, lavender sometimes causes irritation.

Other oils can cause irritation when applied directly to the skin. Experiment on small patches of skin before applying oils in large quantities. Putting a few drops into a warm bath can lower the risk of skin irritation. You can use a diffuser to dispense the oils; however, this method has a less intense impact.

Scents that generally are calming and relaxing: Lavender, rose, rosemary, chamomile, ylang ylang, vanilla (the smell of vanilla in hot tea can make some persons nauseous), and frankincense.

Scents that generally are alerting without causing over-stimulation: Citrus – the best oils for feeling awake (e.g., bergamot, grapefruit, orange, lemon, and lime), mint (e.g., peppermint and spearmint), pine (e.g., juniper and white fur), eucalyptus, and some condiments and spices (e.g., basil, rosemary, and cinnamon).

To Create a Strategic Mix: Sensory diets should include calming, energizing (alerting), and organizing activities to be used based on your child's performance. Use calming activities during periods of high arousal or stress and energizing activities during low periods.

<http://www.alertprogram.com>

This website has a one-page PDF handout explaining the Alert Program. You can buy a book called "How Does Your Engine Run? – A Leaders Guide to The Alert Program for Self-Regulation," written by Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger. The program has step-by-step instructions to help you identify your level of alertness (arousal) and activities that can enable your engine to run at an optimal speed. Many therapists, teachers, and parents have taught themselves how to use the program by reading this book. However, when possible, use the program with the guidance of an occupational therapist.

Calming Activities

If child is over-stimulated, the following activities may help to calm him.

- Cuddling an bear hugging
- Getting a massage or backrub with deep/firm pressure
- Carrying books or other heavy objects across a room/up and down the stairs
- Wearing a heavy backpack (Precautions: the conservative estimate to prevent injuries is to carry no more than 10% of your child's body weight; use a backpack with wide and padded shoulder straps, a padded back, and a waist strap; distribute the load so it does not become bottom-heavy or top-heavy, and wear the backpack across both shoulders)
- Wearing a heavy backpack while carrying a few books
- Pushing against a wall with back, buttocks, hands, head, or shoulders
- Doing pushups on the floor – from knees or feet
- Pushing into chair seat; holding self above chair seat; doing chair pushups
- Leaning against a desk; doing desk pushups
- Doing animal walks, e.g., bear and crab; wheelbarrow walking
- Pushing hands together in a "praying" position; hooking hands together and pulling without separating the hands; pushing knee(s) up against hands
- Pushing feet against something (e.g., "push-of-war" with a pillow between two persons sitting on the floor across from each other – not wearing shoes)
- Pushing/pulling doors open and holding them for others to enter/exit
- Playing in a "hideout," a "hideaway," a "fort," or an "office" (drape sheets, blankets, or large towels over a table, a desk, or two chairs): Fill this quiet space with pillows for cuddling
- Making a "kid burrito" by rolling child up tightly in a blanket
- Making a "kid sandwich" by carefully squishing child between two sofa cushions or exercise mats
- Slow rocking in a sleeping bag: Child rocks himself or you rock him
- Crawling through a "caterpillar" (long tube of stretchy fabric)
- Slow rocking, e.g., in a rocking chair
- Swinging with slow, linear, and rhythmical movements
- Lifting weights
- Swimming

- Moving furniture/vacuuuming
- Taking out the rubbish/trash/garbage
- Washing windows, mirrors, or tables
- Watching the fish swimming in an aquarium
- Listening to rain, a waterfall, and ocean waves
- Listening to a tabletop fountain or an aquarium
- Listening to quiet/soothing/relaxing music such as Mozart and Baroque music, e.g., Bach, Handel, Pachelbel, and Vivaldi
- Listening to colored noise (e.g., white, pink, and grey); however, some persons find colored noise to be irritating
- Taking a warm bath or shower, then rolling up in a large towel (avoid using towels in colors that you find distressing)
- Using calming scents such as lavender and/or rose in oils, soaps, lotions, or candles (strong scents can be alerting rather than calming, so experiment)
- Wearing compression clothing, e.g., short-sleeved and long-sleeved t-shirts, shorts, and pants

Energizing Activities

If child needs to be aroused, wake up his senses by trying some of these activities:

- Jumping on a mini-trampoline (use a backyard trampoline if one is available)
- Being dragged or dragging someone around a room
- Bouncing on a hopper ball, exercise ball, or therapy ball
- Rolling, including up and down hills
- Spinning in rotating chair or on swing
- Taking a cool shower

Organizing Activities

These activities may calm or energize, depending on child's needs. Look for facial expressions and body language and listen for vocal tones or words that indicate child's level of arousal

- Sucking, e.g., water from a squeeze bottle, a popsicle, a lifesaver
- Sucking drinkable (liquid) yogurt through a straw
- Eating healthy, crunchy foods like carrots or chewy food like Gummy Bears
- Blowing soap bubbles
- Chewing bubble gum (only if age-appropriate)
- Lying on stomach to watch TV or play a videogame
- Playing in a baby pool filled with water, sand, dry beans (e.g., pinto beans), or rice
- Finding objects hidden in bucket full of dry beans (e.g., pinto beans) or beads
- Dumping and pouring: Give child two cups and have him pour blocks, dry beans (e.g., pinto beans), sand, or water from one to the other; he can scoop the material from a bucket
- Imitating songs such as, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands"
- Hand games such as "Patty cake"
- Squeezing, flattening, rolling, or kneading Play-Doh or Silly Putty
- Squeezing squishy balls (NOT filled with liquid)
- Playing with a stretch toy, e.g., a Pop Tube, or stiff clay, e.g., Silly Putty
- Ripping paper: Have child tear strips from some type of paper.

- Finger painting: First use plain finger paints, then add sand, rice, cereal, or other textures
- Painting with water
- Climbing stairs (up and down)
- Rolling a ball back and forth
- Tossing a ball back and forth: Use a variety of balls, e.g., tennis balls, Nerf (sponge) balls, and beach balls
- Kicking a ball back and forth
- Pushing heavy items; e.g., toy shopping cart, laundry basket, or box filled with books
- Pulling heavy items; e.g., wagon filled with toys, books, or laundry detergent
- Piggyback and horsey-back rides
- Animal (e.g., bear, duck, crab, frog, and rabbit) walking
- Wheelbarrow walking
- Camel walking: Have child carry a "load" on his back while creeping on hands-and-knees
- Doing pushups (on the floor from toes or knees or standing against a wall)
- Doing sit-ups
- Tumbling
- Doing headstands or handstands against a wall
- Doing jumping Jacks or making snow angels
- Climbing a ladder or a jungle gym; hanging upside-down
- Pulling up on monkey bars; crossing monkey bars
- Standing on one leg, hopping, jumping
- Running
- Biking
- Jumping rope
- Roller skating
- Walking on stilts (you can buy commercial stilts or make stilts from aluminum coffee cans and rope)
- Jumping on a pogo stick
- Stretching, including tai chi and yoga
- Vacuuming
- Taking out the trash or hauling bags of leaves to the curb
- When you are cooking, let child play with the cookie dough, the bread dough, etc. Let him knead the dough and/or mix the dough in the bowl
- Playing dress up: Collect a box of dress-up items for child to use. Items can include hats, gloves or mittens, scarves of different materials, etc.

Organizing Games

- Hot Potato
- Tag and freeze tag
- Follow the Leader
- Simon Says
- Tug-of-War
- Red Light/Green Light
- Races

- Obstacle courses
- "T" ball, softball, or baseball
- Martial arts, including tai kwon do and karate
- Dancing and singing
- "Stop dancing": Child freezes and holds his position during breaks in the music
- Leapfrog: While you're on hands-and-knees on the floor, child jumps/vaults over you; then child gets in a hands-and-knees position and you jump/vault over him
- Play wrestling/rough housing with rules: (a) each person says "go" to start, (b) when one person says "stop," take a brief timeout, (c) when one person says "final stop," the game is over. Pushing, pulling, tugging, hugging, gentle squeezing, and tumbling are okay. Hitting, kicking, jumping on the other person with feet or knees, and squeezing with fingertips digging into the other person are not okay. NOTE: Use safety precautions.

Example of a Sensory Diet

- Things you'll need: Large pillows, beanbag chair or soft foam mat, laundry basket with heavy objects to weight it down, Play-Doh and beads, and shaving cream, gel, or foam
- Step 1: Place the beanbag chair or soft foam mat on the ground and surround it with several large pillows. Under your supervision, have child jump into the beanbag chair or onto the soft foam mat landing on his feet or knees or with his legs crossed. Crashing provides child with important proprioceptive (pressure) input.
- Step 2: Fill an empty laundry basket with items (e.g., toys or laundry detergent) to weigh it down. Once the laundry basket is filled with enough weight to provide resistance for child, encourage child to push the basket. Child might be more inclined to push the laundry basket if you make a race out of it to see how quickly he can get the laundry basket from point A to point B. Pushing a weighted laundry basket is called heavy work.
- Step 3: Open child's favorite color of Play-Doh and mix the beads into it. By mixing the Play-Doh with beads, child will experience multiple tactile sensations during one activity. Encourage child to continue to play with the Play-Doh by asking him to find beads of a certain shape or color.
- Step 4: Spray shaving cream onto a smooth, clean surface and have child draw pictures in the shaving cream. Different textures are important when creating a sensory diet. Experiment with shaving cream, gel, and foam.
- Tips & Warnings: Go at child's pace when challenging him from a sensory standpoint. Child may be resistant to an activity at first. Strive for fun.