SENSORY DIETS

Just as your child needs food throughout the course of the day, he needs sensory input, and opportunities for getting away from stimulation, spread out over the whole day. A “sensory diet” is a carefully designed, personalized activity plan that provides the sensory input a person needs to stay focused and organized throughout the day. In the same way that you jiggle your knee or chew gum to stay awake or soak in a hot tub to unwind, children need to engage in stabilizing, focusing activities, too. Infants, young children, teens, and adults with mild to severe sensory issues can all benefit from a personalised sensory diet.

Each child has a unique set of sensory needs. Generally, a child whose nervous system is causing her to be hyperactive needs more calming input, while the child who is more underactive or sluggish needs more arousing input. A qualified paediatric occupational therapist can use her advanced training and evaluation skills to develop a good sensory diet for your child (or for you, if you’re an adult with sensory processing disorder). However, it’s up to you and your child to implement it every day.

The effects of a sensory diet are usually immediate AND cumulative. Activities that perk up your child or calm him down are not only effective in the moment; they actually help to restructure your child’s nervous system over time so that he is better able to:

- tolerate sensations and situations he finds challenging
- regulate his alertness and increase his attention span
- limit sensory seeking and sensory avoiding behaviours
- handle transitions with less stress

Creating a Sensory Diet: The Ingredients

Ideally, in creating a sensory diet, you should work with an occupational therapist who specializes in sensory processing issues. One of the trickiest aspects of SPD is recognizing when a child is over-reactive or under-reactive in any given moment, and then adjusting sensory input so that he doesn’t experience “sensory overload.” The goal is to provide a “just right challenge” to help him move forward into being not too active, not too inactive. That’s why it’s important to partner up with knowledgeable professional if you can.

PLANNING FOR TODDLERS

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, including one’s own weight. A child can also stimulate the proprioceptive sense by engaging in activities that push joints together such as pushing something heavy or pull joints apart like hanging from monkey bars.

Make a body “burrito” or “sandwich”. Firmly press on your child’s arms legs and back with pillows or make a “burrito” by rolling her up in a blanket.

Push and pull. A toddler or young child can push her own pushchair/stroller, and may even be able to push one or trolley/cart filled with weighted objects such as groceries.

Carry that weight. Your child can wear a backpack filled with toys (not too heavy!).

Vestibular

Vestibular input (the sense of movement, centred in the inner ear). Any type of movement will stimulate the vestibular receptors, but spinning, swinging, and hanging upside down provide the most intense, longest lasting input. If your child has vestibular (movement) sensitivities, please work closely with a sensory smart OT who can help you recognize and prevent signs of nervous system overload.

Swing. Encourage them to swing on playground swings, trying various types of swings and movements, such as front to back and side to side.

Spin. Have them spin using a Sit n' Spin or office chair etc. Let them run in circles, and ride a carousel. Hold your child's arm and spin in a circle as they lift off the ground, or play airplane by holding one of their arms and the leg on the same side of his body as you spin in place (only if they do not have low muscle tone).

Tactile

The tactile sense detects light touch, deep pressure, texture, temperature, vibration, and pain. This includes both the skin covering your body and the skin lining the inside of your mouth. Oral tactile issues can contribute to picky eating and feeding difficulties.

Food and drink. Let your child drink carbonated water to experience bubbles in their mouth (you can flavour it with a little juice or with lemon, lime, etc.).

Messy play with textures. Have them play with foamy soap or shaving cream, and later add sand for extra texture. Let them finger-paint, 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 and small toys. Cover and store the bin for future use.

Use child-friendly modelling material such as Play-Doh etc (the classic Play-Doh Fun Factory provides excellent proprioceptive input as well). Never force a child who is unwilling to touch "yucky" substances. Let them use a paintbrush, stick, or even a toy for cautious exploration.

Dress up. Dress up in fun costumes to get used to the feel of unfamiliar clothing.

SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

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, including one's own weight. A child can also stimulate the proprioceptive sense by engaging in activities that push joints together like pushing something heavy or pull joints apart such as hanging from monkey bars.

Jump! Have your child jump on a mini-trampoline or rebounder or play hopscotch.

Push and pull. Have them help to vacuum, carry books from one room to another, help wash windows or a table top, and transfer wet laundry from the washing machine to the dryer.

Vestibular

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Get upside down. Have them hang upside down from playground equipment, do somersaults, or ride a loop-de-loop rollercoaster.

Swing and roll. Encourage them to use playground swings and roll down a grassy or snowy hill (which provides good proprioceptive input as well).

Spin. Encourage them to go on amusement park rides that spin etc.

Tactile

Food and drink. Provide your child with frozen foods (lollipops/popsicles, frozen fruit or vegetables) and mixed temperature foods (hot fudge sundae, hot taco with cold toppings, etc.).

Get in touch with nature. Encourage them to walk barefoot in the grass (avoiding pesticide applications), sand, or dirt. Have them garden and repot indoor plants.

Play dress-ups. Encourage play with make-up, face painting, and costumes, putting on a play or making a mini movie with a video camera.

TEENAGERS & ADULTS

Proprioception

Proprioceptive input (registered in receptors in the joints, muscles and connective tissues) provides body awareness. It can be obtained by heavy work: lifting, pushing, and pulling heavy objects, including one's own weight. You can also stimulate the proprioceptive sense by engaging in activities that push joints together, such as doing push-ups, or pulling joints apart by hanging from a chin up bar or throwing objects (safely!) or hitting something.

Heavy lifting. Teens and adults can shovel snow or lift free weights.

Push, pull, and carry. Ways to get heavy work include raking leaves, pushing heavy objects such as firewood in a wheelbarrow, wearing a heavy backpack (not too heavy!) or pulling a luggage-cart style backpack with wheels, rowing a boat, or mowing the lawn with a push mower.

Reassuring deep-pressure. Deep pressure against the skin, combined with stimulating the receptors in the joints, can be very calming as well. You might get a firm massage, wear tight clothes (alone or under looser clothing), or sleep under a heavy blanket.

Vestibular

Vestibular input (the sense of movement, centred in the inner ear). Any type of movement will stimulate the vestibular receptors, but spinning, swinging, and hanging upside down provide the most intense, longest lasting input. If you have vestibular (movement) sensitivities, please work closely with a sensory smart OT who can help you recognize and prevent signs of nervous system overload.

Swing and spin. Swing on a hammock, spin on an office chair, or use playground swings or merry-go-round (you're never too old!).

Get upside down. Do yoga inversions or positions that involve having your head upside down or nearly so

Move that body! Do cartwheels, swim (doing flip turns and somersaults in the water), do jumping jacks and other calisthenics, and dance.

Tactile

Tactile hobbies. Sculpt, sew, weave, crochet or knit. Create a scrapbook (which involves lots of pasting and working with different textures). Use sandpaper to smooth a woodworking project. Make things out of clay, and try using a potter's wheel. Cook, touching slippery and gritty ingredients with your hands.

We hope this helps with giving you some ideas and that it actually helps?!