

Using a “Sensory Diet” with Children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

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What is a Sensory Diet?

A sensory diet is a carefully designed, personalized daily schedule of sensory enriched activities, equipment, and strategies to help a person stay focused and organized throughout the day. Children with a Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) may have a difficult time adjusting to everyday stimuli. Some children are overly responsive to some types of input in their environment, while other children are under responsive. Many children are under responsive to some inputs, such as movement, and overly responsive to other inputs, such as touch.



Children with SPD demonstrate abnormal responses (under- or overreactions) to stimuli such as a particular clothing fabric, pressure on the skin, routine changes or transitions of their schedule, visual input, certain food items, sounds, and smells. Children with sensory dysfunction do not respond normally to these environmental stimuli and require additional planned activities that allow their focus and attention to be redirected. Physicians may refer these children to occupational therapists.

An occupational therapist (OT) can develop a sensory diet to help a child with SPD by engaging the child in activities specifically tailored to his/her needs. This “diet” provides the right amount of sensory input for readjusting the neurological system and helps the child to function at his/her “optimal” level. After participating in sensory diet activities, the child is more able to focus and handle the stresses of his/her everyday environmental situations. The child is usually happier and better prepared for learning after participation.

Information Needed to Help Create a Sensory Diet

The key to creating a successful sensory diet is providing the right frequency, duration, and intensity of sensory experiences in order for the child to maintain the appropriate level of arousal for daily functioning. The OT creates a sensory diet by evaluating the child’s needs for certain stimuli through observation and involvement with the child. The OT may use a parent/teacher questionnaire to gather additional information. In order to create the most effective plan of activities, the OT may ask the following questions of parents, teachers, and caregivers.

- When does the child demonstrate “upset” behavior? Can you determine the “trigger” for this behavior?
- Are transitions a problem for the child? When do they occur?
- Does the child have specific food or clothing preferences? Specific food dislikes and/or clothing dislikes?
- Does the child have difficulty with peer relationships? Does he/she play too roughly with other children or prefer to play alone?
- Does the child have gross motor problems such as falling down frequently, bumping into things, trouble with balance, or coordination delays?

- Does the child have fine motor problems such as difficulty grasping a pencil, poor handwriting, poor ability to cut with scissors, or a weak grasp resulting in difficulty with fasteners, buttons, zippers, and snaps?
- Is the child sensitive to things on his/her hands and face? Is he/she upset by shaving cream, glue, fingerpaint, or food items?
- Does the child overreact to nail cutting, hair washing, bathing, or other forms of hygiene?



The Sensory Diet

After a close evaluation, the OT devises the sensory diet to help the child cope with his/her environmental stimuli. While planning the sensory diet, the OT:

- Involves the child and includes his/her input about activities he/she enjoys.
- Determines the setting(s) in which the child will experience the sensory diet.
- Plans the activities around logical breaks throughout the day.
- Has any special tools or necessary equipment readily available for the activities.
- Involves teachers and encourages classroom involvement.
- Includes the use of picture schedules for those with more severe needs.
- Determines if there is a need for a trained professional to be available during the activity.
- Uses a variety of sensory activities to maintain interest as well as target the student's needs.

Each and every child with SPD is unique and special. No two therapies or sensory diets will be the same. Consult your child's occupational therapist or pediatrician if you suspect that your child is having sensory processing and integration issues. For more information, read extensively about SPD at the web sites and resources listed below.

Resources

All About Sensory Processing Disorder. Retrieved March 15, 2007 from <http://www.spdnetwork.org>.

Biel, L., M.A. OTR/L, and Peske, N (2005). Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Integration Issues. London: Penguin Books. Ltd. <http://www.sensorysmarts.com>.

Nelson, S., Sensory Integration Dysfunction; The Misunderstood, Misdiagnosed, and Unseen Disability. Retrieved March 15, 2007 from <http://home.comcast.net/~momtofive/SIDWEBPAGE2.htm>.