

Sensory Diet

When people think about the sensory system, they think of the senses of taste, touch, smell, vision and hearing. Most of us don't realize that we also have powerful senses of movement, body position, and gravity. These sensory systems also pick up information from the environment and relay it to our brain. For most children, sensory integration – the organization of all of the sensory messages in the brain and the coordinated response to these messages – develops through ordinary childhood activities. When this process is compromised, development, learning, and behavior may be negatively affected and a Sensory Integration Disorder may be diagnosed.

Not all children with developmental or educational problems have an underlying sensory integrative disorder, but **the following indicators can signal parents that problems in this area may be present:**

- Under-reaction to sensory stimulation – Children may seek out intense sensory experiences, such as prolonged spinning or repeatedly crashing into surfaces. Children in this group may also be under-reactive to pain.
- Over-reactive to sensory stimulation – These children may become overly distressed in reaction to touch, movement, sight or sound. They may become irritable when touched and/or avoid particular clothing or food textures. They may also be distracted by barely audible or visible stimuli, or they may be fearful of specific movements.
- Unusually high or unusually low activity level
- Impaired fine or gross motor skills
- Poor organizational skills
- Delays in speech or language acquisition
- Compromised academic achievement
- Delayed social development

Sensory diet activities are usually quite simple and can be done at home. Special equipment is not a must, although some parents have used swings, hammocks and small items that can be obtained from catalogs. The following lists offer a few examples of activities that may be done at home:

Games (alerting activities)

- Tag
- Follow-the-Leader
- Obstacle Courses including dragging/sliding things
- Silly Walks (e.g. crab walk)
- Red Light/Green Light
- Running Races
- Tug-of-War
- Simon Says
- "Stop dancing" where you freeze and hold your body posture at breaks in the music

Swinging/Bouncing (alerting activities)

- Inside swings
- Trampoline
- Hang-bar
- Outside swings/hammocks
- Outside trolley
- Exercise ball
- Jump rope
- Stilts/Roller skates

Exercises (organizing activities)

- Jumping jacks
- Climbing
- Sit-ups and Pull-ups
- Tumbling/Head Stands
- Wheelbarrow/Camel Play: Have the child carry loads on the back like a camel.
- Pushing a loaded box/wagon/cart
- Running/jogging/biking/stair climbing
- Hopsy and leapfrog: These are great contact sports. Leapfrog is where one person jumps over the other. Next the other person does the same.
- Roughhousing: This can be a good all over sensory experience especially if you push, pull, tug, roll, and tumble. Make sure to use proper safety precautions.

Calming activities

- Slow swinging or rocking
- Cuddling with pillows in a "hideout"
- Making a "kid burrito" by rolling the child up tightly in a blanket, or a "kid sandwich" by carefully squishing the child between two gymnastic mats or sofa cushions.
- Deep pressure massages, back/neck rubs, cuddles or hugs
- "Heavy work," such as moving furniture, carrying heavy bags, or lifting weights.
- Hideaway: use towels, sheets, blankets, and other materials for placing over a table or two chairs put together to make a fort for the child to play in.
- Quiet music listening, books on tape
- Warm bath or shower
- Pushing on walls with, back buttocks, hands head, or shoulders
- Sucking on something... it can be ice water from a squeeze bottle, a Popsicle, or anything the child enjoys