

A Sensory Diet Happens 24/7: Part Two

Lindsey Biel, OTR/L



Kids with sensory processing difficulties need appropriate sensory input 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to feel and function well.

In the March-April 2010 issue, I reviewed the concept of “sensory diet,” the term occupational therapists (OTs) and others use to describe scheduled activities that provide sensory input at regular intervals throughout the day.

Like a child with hypoglycemia, the child with sensory challenges benefits from frequent, small, nourishing “sensory snacks” to feel and function optimally all day long. Just waiting for “OT time,” even if you are lucky enough to get 60 minutes 3 -5 times a week, simply isn’t enough. Kids with sensory processing difficulties need appropriate sensory input 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to feel and function well. Yes, we even have sensory needs while we are sleeping! That’s why it’s so important that everyone get involved—parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, baby-sitters, teachers and bus drivers.

Listed below are some ideas to get you started on your own. If you are working with an OT, your therapist is likely to give you other recommendations, which may include Deep Pressure and Proprioceptive Technique (commonly called brushing), a therapeutic listening program, an oral sensitization program, a vestibular program, and other activities to carry out on a regular basis.

Some of the suggestions below are quite easy to implement, like providing a hand fidget at home. If an idea works well, you may ask that it be formally added to your child’s IEP so he can use it at school. Your parents or in-laws may think you are being silly when you bring along your child’s own pillow, sheets, and blanket for a sleepover, but that’s okay. What’s important is that you discover what helps your child and then advocate for it—and ultimately teach your child to advocate for himself too.

Morning Routine

- Begin the wake-up process early enough so neither you nor your child are rushed
- If your child wakes up irritable, start with a gentle backrub or footrub and favorite music played at a low level. Raise lights slowly. Speak gently and softly.
- Sandwich your child between pillows and give deep pressure if he prefers this type of touch. Check to be sure he’s still enjoying it!
- Have the child take a shower or quick bath at preferred temperature (some like it hot, others not)
- Provide her with a vibrating toothbrush
- Offer a nutritious breakfast that includes protein
- Have the child drink thick liquids through a straw
- To rev up a sluggish child or soothe a bouncy one, have him jump on a mini-trampoline or dance to favorite music
- Incorporate heavy work: have your child carry a reasonably weighted backpack, take the stairs instead of elevator, walk, ride, or scooter to school
- If your child takes the bus, give him a hand fidget, weighted lap pad, and/or favorite music on an MP3 player

Every 2-3 hours throughout the school day/work day

- At school, *all* students should have an opportunity for “sensory snack breaks” such as getting up to walk, march, do animal walks, stretch, do wall push-ups, jumping jacks, or other sensory-organizing physical activity.
- The ideal classroom offers non-coercive opportunities to explore a variety of interesting textures such as clay, sand, papier mache,

and other craft materials. Announce that any child is allowed to use a paintbrush or wear gloves if he can't tolerate the feeling.

- Encourage the child to drink water frequently
- Provide a hand fidget such as a small Koosh ball, hand exercise ball or putty. If your child tends to throw objects, sew a durable fabric tab on to your child's clothing or clip the fidget to a belt loop.
- Provide chewing gum if allowed, or another oral comfort item (sucking candy, Dr. Bloom's Chewable Jewels, Chewlery, Pencil Toppers)
- Have her wear a weighted vest, lap pad, or other weighted wearable according to your OT's time limits
- Give him an inflatable cushion on a chair or floor that enables the child to bounce and wiggle without getting up
- If sounds or sights tend to be overwhelming, allow the child to take a break in a prearranged quiet, low stimulation spot

After school/work

- Make sure the child gets intense vestibular and proprioceptive input to get the "ya-yas" out: go to the playground or gym, attend a yoga or active exercise class, take the stairs instead of elevator, jump on a trampoline, do wheelbarrow walking, use spinning toys, jump on a "crash pad" of sofa cushions or bean bags
- Have the child eat a small, healthful snack

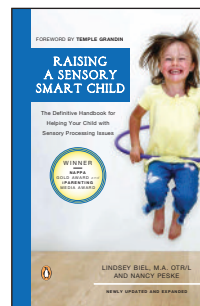
- Provide some down time before asking the child to do homework
- Provide a quiet, organized space with non-glare, no-flicker lighting for homework
- Have the child help with cooking activities: measuring, mixing and chopping
- Provide additional heavy work opportunities prior to sitting down for dinner: carry heavy plates, help carry dishes, move chairs, etc.

Bedtime

- Develop a predictable evening routine that is soothing and organizing. Try to maintain the routine even when the child sleeps elsewhere for a night, bringing along favorite bedtime items, a familiar pillow, and so on.
- Have the child take a bath or shower before bed only if it is soothing for him. Some kids need to bathe much earlier or in the morning because it is too alerting at the end of the day.
- Usually deep pressure works well at bedtime. Gently squish your child between pillows, and provide a massage. Occasionally, very active kids may need a bout of roughhousing before they can calm down for bed.
- Experiment with lighting. Some kids like nightlights, while others can't tolerate even the tiny LED light on clocks, computers, or other electronics. (Cover these if so.)
- Experiment with sound. Some kids self-soothe with lullabies, white noise CDs, or classical music while others fall asleep more easily to rock and roll.

- Experiment with temperature and bedding. Some children need the room to be significantly cooler or warmer than you'd think. Make sure bedclothes don't have annoying seams and waistbands. Make sure linens and blankets are comfortable and the preferred weight. Some people have had excellent results with weighted blankets.

There's no cookbook recipe for creating a successful sensory diet. Ideally, you are working with an OT who can guide you on what activities work best to calm your child when he's wired, and pep him up when he's tired. It takes some trial and error to discover the activities best suited to your child. When you do, resist the temptation to think you've got "THE plan", though. What works one day may not necessarily work the next because of the inconsistently functioning nervous system that is the hallmark of a child with sensory processing problems. As a sensory smart parent, learn to read your child, be flexible and creative, and then implement the strategies as needed to empower your child to feel and function better each and every day.



Learn more about implementing a sensory diet at home and school on the sensorysmarts.com website, and in *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*. 📖