



CENTRE FOR AUTISM
MIDDLETOWN

Sensory Diets

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Learning Aims

- To understand the concept of a Sensory Diet.
- To identify factors to consider when setting up a Sensory Diet.
- To provide ideas for sensory activities.

Background to Sensory Diets

- Concept developed by American Occupational Therapist, Pat Wilbarger.
- Children and young people with sensory processing differences require regular sensory input throughout the day to keep them in the calm and alert state.
- This is the state of readiness to support engagement in play, social interaction, learning and all other daily activities.

Sensory Diets for Autistic Children and Young People

- 85-95% of autistic people have difference in how they perceive, process and respond to sensory input (Tomchek and Dunn, 2007; Baum et al, 2015).
- Sensory input includes stimuli from the surrounding environment and from internal messages within the body.
- These differences mean that many autistic children and young people are not in the calm and alert state.
- A Sensory Diet is required to provide activities which will help them attain the calm and alert state.



Establishing a Sensory Diet

- Factors to consider:
 - WHAT sensory activities will be provided?
 - WHERE will the sensory activities take place?
 - WHEN will the sensory activities happen?
 - HOW LONG will a sensory break last?

Sensory Profile (Dunn, 1999)

	PASSIVE	ACTIVE
HIGH THRESHOLD	Low registration	Sensation seeking
LOW THRESHOLD	Sensory sensitivity	Sensation Avoiding



Activities for Sensory Sensitivity and Avoidance

- Students with a low threshold are hyper-reactive to sensory input.
- They are likely to be in a heightened state of anxiety and experience sensory overload frequently throughout the day.
- The focus of their activities will be on **calming**.
- The aim is to develop proactive calming strategies in order to maintain a consistent regulated state throughout the day.



What activities are calming?

- Depends on individual sensory responses/preferences.
- Observe the child/young person...what seems to calm them?
- Some respond to low arousal approach e.g.
 - Calm corner/room
 - Pop-up tent
- Some respond better to active calming input:
 - Deep pressure input
 - Proprioceptive activities
 - Movement activities
 - Also: sounds, lighting, smells



Deep pressure input (passive)

- Massage
- Steamroller
- Sandwich game
- 'Hot dog'
- Weighted items
- Lycra garments

Proprioceptive static/passive strategies



Steam roller with therapy ball



Weighted Items



Beanbags



Wrapped up in lycra



Tight Spaces

Calming activities: Proprioceptive input (active)

- Weightbearing
 - 4-point kneeling, crawling, wheelbarrow walks, animal walks
 - Press ups, wall pushes
 - Lying on stomach over peanut roll/gym ball
 - Traction and climbing
 - Heavy work activities
- Resistance
 - Theraband
 - Body sock
 - Propelling scooter board on carpet or incline
 - Lifting light weights
 - Pushing and pulling

Proprioceptive Active/ dynamic strategies



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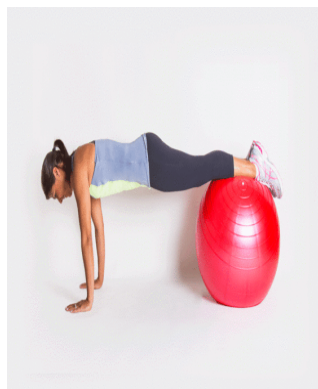
climbing/traction



Pushing Heavy
Trolley



Scooter Board



Therapy ball



Bouncing through feet



Body Sock

Other calming activities

- Movement
 - Linear and rhythmic
 - Backwards and forwards on swing
 - Bouncing up and down
 - Rocking
- Oral motor input
 - Blowing bubbles
 - Sucking through a straw
 - Chewing
- Predictable and repetitive input
 - Listening to a familiar song
 - Watching a spinning or light-up toy
 - Familiar toys, books, puzzles etc.

Rocker boards



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Activities for Low Registration and Sensory Seeking

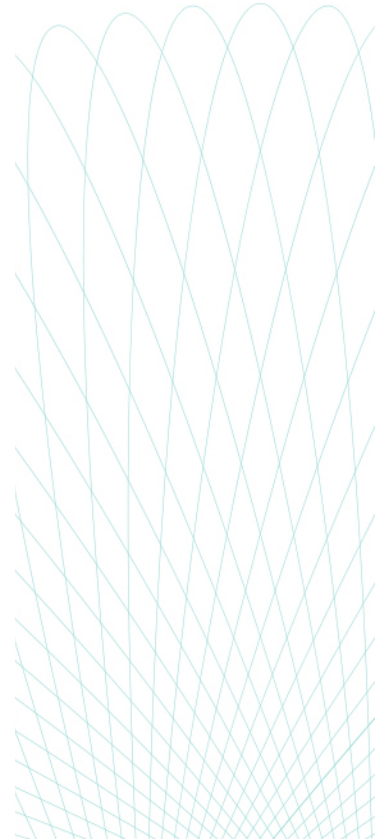
- Students who present with low registration and sensory seeking need activities which will increase their alertness, attention and engagement.
- The focus is on **increased sensory input**.
- Movement activities are often the most effective, but depends on the sensory preference of the child/young person.
- Again, observe the child/young person...what type of sensory input do they seek out or what is effective in increasing alertness?



Movement activities

- Fast movement, often with sudden changes of direction:
 - Scooter board, including on a downward incline
 - Rotational movement on scooter board
 - Spinning e.g. spinners, spinning chair
 - Bouncing and rocking on a gym ball or space hopper
 - Trampoline
 - Swing which can move in all planes, and spin

Spinner



Regulating activities

- Movement, combined with deep pressure input, tends to create the optimal level of alertness.
- Revisit the proprioceptive activities listed in the calming section, especially the dynamic strategies:
 - Exercise bike or standard bike/trike
 - Scooter board
 - Exercises on peanut roll/exercise ball
 - Climbing
 - Trampoline
 - Hopscotch
 - Space hopper
 - Cardiovascular activity

Other sensory input

- Tactile play
 - Sand play, water play, trays of varied textures
 - Barefoot play
 - Tactile road
- Aroma dough, jars of aromatherapy oils
- Drinks of iced water
- Strongly flavoured food items

Sensory Needs



Where will the sensory activities take place?

- Make use of whatever space you have available
 - In-chair activities
 - Allocated space in the classroom or at home
 - Other available spaces in school e.g. corridors, locker room
 - Outdoor spaces

When will the sensory activities happen?

- Observe the child/young person...when do they need the sensory input?
- Calm breaks
 - Before an activity which causes sensory overload and anxiety.
 - Breaks during these activities.
 - Calm time after the activity.
- Alerting/movement breaks
 - Provide before activities which require sustained attention.
 - Allow breaks before and during activities which require periods of sitting still.
- Incorporate the Sensory Diet into a visual schedule so the child/young person can see when they will get the sensory breaks.



How long will the sensory break last?

- Observe when the child/young person has reached the calm and alert state.
- Short and frequent is usually more effective.
- A few longer breaks may be provided (e.g. first thing in the morning), but shorter top-up breaks will be required throughout the day.

Concluding considerations

- The Sensory Diet should be led by the child or young person- observe their sensory needs and provide these through a structured Sensory Diet.
- A Sensory Diet should be proactive, allowing access to sensory activities before the child or young person is in a highly dysregulated state.
- Sensory breaks are not contingent on behaviour; they are needs led.
- A successful Sensory Diet will support the child or young person in maintaining a regulated state throughout the day.



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