

## TOPIC: SENSORY DIETS

(Adapted from Wilbarger & Wilbarger, 1992)

### A. Description and Purpose:

**A sensory diet** is a strategy that consists of a carefully planned program of specific sensory activities that are scheduled according to each individual's needs. Like a diet designed to meet an individual's nutritional needs, a sensory diet consists of specific elements designed to meet the individual's sensory integration and regulation needs.

Possible goals of a sensory diet:

1. To reduce sensory defensiveness
2. To help individual maintain optimal arousal level
3. Promote self-regulation and behavioral organization

### B. Equipment Needed:

Equipment varies greatly depending upon the individual's needs. In general, diets usually offer a variety of sensory input to the individuals that can include the following equipment: swings, rocking chairs, weighted items, large balls, trampolines, tents, items to chew, suck on, blow with, or eat (like gum, chewy candy, plastic tubing), items to smell (like candles, essential oils), music to listen to, items to fidget with in their hands (like stress balls, Rubik's Cubes, small puzzles), and items to provide visual input (like oil/water toys, lighted spinners, tops).

### C. Setting it Up:

The sensory qualities of certain activities have a "modulating" influence on behavior because of their effect on the nervous system.

Deep pressure, proprioception, heavy work, and rhythmic movement, in general, promote organization. Other activities and sensory input such as using fidget toys, oral motor activities or vibration can also be calming.

Proprioception and Deep Pressure: the sensation felt in the joints and muscles, effects typically last 1.5 - 2 hours

Heavy Work: is a kind of proprioception and includes anything that makes muscles work against resistance, effects typically last 2 hours

Movement (Vestibular): such as swinging, rocking, jumping, tumbling, depending upon effectiveness, effects can last up to 4 hours

#### **D. Implementation:**

Sensory diet activities must be repeated throughout the day to help the student maintain an optimal level of organization. They should become a part of the individual's daily schedule.

#### **E. Evaluation:**

Together with an Occupational Therapist, teams should examine the success of the sensory diet. OT's can also do more formalized assessments like the Sensory Profile (Dunn, 1999) and the Sensory Integration and Praxis Test Battery (SIPT) (Ayres, 1989).

#### **F. Teaching Tips:**

Along with the sensory diet, consider reducing disruptive or disorganizing stimulation in the environment and interactions. Watch for subtle signs of avoidance. There is often a cumulative effect. The following are stimuli that are likely to be most disruptive.

- Light or unexpected touch
- Loud or high pitched noises
- Complex noise
- Bright lights
- Over-stimulating environments
- Some kinds of smells

#### **G. Resources:**

- Kranowitz, Carol Stock. *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction*. 1998. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group.
- Ayres, A. Jean, PhD. *Sensory Integration and the Child*. Western Psychological Services: Los Angeles, 1979.
- *The "How Does Your Engine Run?" Program* (Williams & Shellenberger, 1994)
- Wilbarger & Wilbarger, 1992 *The Wilbarger Protocol for Sensory Defensiveness*.

**\*\*ALWAYS CONSULT AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST WHEN CONSIDERING USING A SENSORY DIET.**