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Creating Rich Sensory Experiences

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Some children, including those with autism, may have difficulty dealing with different sensations within their bodies and from the environment. This is known as sensory processing disorder. Different sensory experiences include sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, vestibular (body's sense of movement in relation to gravity), and proprioception (body's sense of itself and its position in space). Some examples of sensory experiences in school are school bells ringing, children yelling on the playground, desks sliding, cafeteria smells, and activities in physical-education class.

To help a child process and integrate different sensations, an occupational therapist may develop a sensory "diet" as part of a child's daily activities.

The focus of the "diet" is to combine motion with sensory input to help the child learn, play, and function. Occupational therapists generally focus on three areas of sensory integration—touch, vestibular, and proprioception. Remember to consult a qualified professional for activities that are appropriate for your child's needs.

What Are Some Sensory Experiences?

When a therapist incorporates different sensory experiences into a child's daily activities, the child can form meaning and attach that meaning to the sensation—and learn to react appropriately. For example, when a child experiences loud or cold, he/she becomes familiar with the sensation and can learn to adjust to it. Sensory experiences can also help a child feel "regulated" or "adjusted" during the day before and during different activities. Below are some examples of sensory integration techniques:



For tactile-sensitivity problems:

- Use materials with different textures/temperatures—Have the child touch different items such as rice, sand, water, shaving cream, or fake snow. Encourage the child to become familiar with these textures and how they feel.

Game idea—Hide toys in a sandbox and have the child find each one and describe it.



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- **Practice dressing**—Practice dressing skills using a variety of clothing items and textures.

Game idea—Play dress-up using costumes and props. Talk about your characters and act out a story as you play.



For vestibular problems:

- **Try walking/balancing**—Have the child walk and balance on the edge of a curb or balance beam.

Game idea—Have the child pretend he/she is performing in the circus.

- **Try dancing**—Have the child do different dances that require his/her body to be in a variety of positions.

Game idea—Have the child dance to the "Hokey Pokey," "Pop Goes the Weasel," or "London Bridge."

- **Try swinging**—Have the child swing on a regular swing, tire swing, or rope in the playground or designated sensory room/area.

Game idea—Sing songs while the child is swinging.

- **Try jumping**—Have the child carefully jump on a springy surface such as a bed or trampoline.

Game idea—Have the child count each jump and see how many he/she can do.



For proprioceptive problems:

- **Try deep-pressure massage or hugs**—Make a "kid sandwich" by gently squeezing a child between two pillows or sofa cushions (try different fabrics).

Game idea—While the child is in the "sandwich," have him/her talk about his/her favorite sandwich.

- **Do some heavy work**—Have the child perform challenging heavy work to send regulating input through the muscles and joints.

Game idea—Build a blanket fort or obstacle course, push or move boxes, or participate in a wheelbarrow race with friends.

Resources:

BBB Autism Online Support Network (last updated February 20, 2007).
Sensory integration (SI). Retrieved December 18, 2008, from
http://bbbautism.com/sensory_integration.htm

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