

# THE SENSORY DIET

NUTRITION FOR YOUR BODY AND BRAIN



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**DISCOVERING YOUR AND YOUR  
CHILD'S SENSORY NEEDS**

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# INTRODUCTION

You are aware that there are basic food groups for your body's nutritional needs.

But did you know that your body and brain also need a certain amount of sensory input for you to be your best? Your brain takes in sensory information from **seven senses**.

We're familiar with five of the senses: touching, tasting, hearing, seeing, and smelling.

There are two others that you use unconsciously because the information comes from **within the body**.

**1** One sensation is called **proprioception** and it receives information when pushing and pulling occurs in muscles, joints, tendons and ligaments.

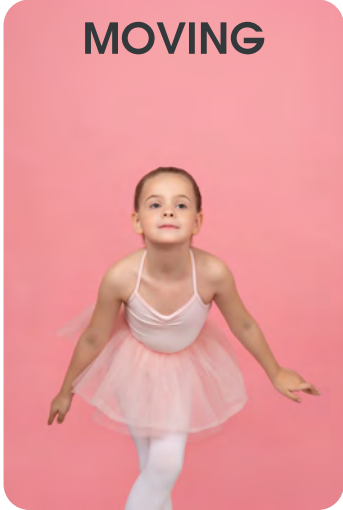
**2** The other is called **vestibular** and it receives information when the head changes position as the head and/or body move.



In this booklet you are going to learn about the **7 sensory categories** you can use to integrate into your own personal **sensory diet**.

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**MOVING**



**MUSCLES**



**TOUCHING**



**MOUTH**



**HEARING**



**SEEING**



**SMELLING**



The term 'sensory diet' coined by Patricia Wilbarger, an occupational therapist, refers to "how certain sensory experiences can be used to enhance occupational performance in any individual." (Bundy, Lane & Murray, 2002)

Everyone has individual sensory preferences for calming, waking up, concentrating, etc. The key is to figure out which strategies work for YOU and how you can integrate them into your lifestyle.

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## Here are some examples:

- MOVING** Taking a brisk walk after 20 minutes at the computer
- MUSCLES** Working out at the gym before homework time
- TOUCHING** Fidgeting with a small koosh-like ball during a long lecture
- MOUTH** Popping in a piece of candy just before a big exam
- HEARING** Listening to soft music while studying
- SEEING** Dimming the lights when wanting to take a nap
- SMELLING** Using lavender-scented sheets for sleeping

## DISCOVER WHAT WORKS FOR YOU!

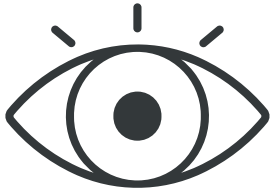


# PARENT SENSORY TOOL SURVEY

Complete with **all** of these categories in mind:



HEARING



SEEING



TOUCHING



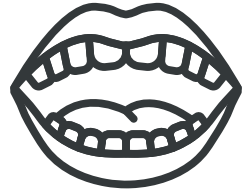
MOVING



SMELLING



MUSCLES



MOUTH

- To help me wake up in the morning, I usually need to...  
(take a cold shower, drink hot coffee, take a brisk walk)



- When I prepare for bed or to calm myself, I prefer to...  
(eat a snack, turn the lights down, listen to music or TV, snuggle under a blanket)

- What I like most about my home is...  
(cosy or open spaces, large windows, soft or firm furniture, scents of candles or potpourri)

- When I am frustrated or upset, it helps to...  
(go to the gym, take a walk, sit on the porch, listen to music, go to my room and close the door, take a bath, curl up and read a book, call a friend)

- When I need to read or study, I prefer to...  
(sit at a table, lounge on the couch, use a rocking chair)

- When I need to concentrate, the environment I create includes...  
(quiet or music, food and/or drink, bright or dim light, solitude or others around)

- When I need to listen at a meeting, I usually find myself...  
(doodling, playing with small objects like paper clips or pens, chewing on pencils, pens or straws, snacking, drinking coffee or soda)

**You might also find it very helpful to speak with your child and other family members about these situations.**

**How similar or different are your sensory needs?**

# DISCOVERING YOUR CHILD'S SENSORY NEEDS

## PROBLEMS

My child...

- Is very irritable
- Is inattentive and becomes easily distracted
- Has difficulty to keep still
- Can't keep his hands to himself
- Constantly chews on clothing or other objects
- Appears hyper sensitive – covers his ears, squints his eyes, avoids touching certain textures, dislikes being touched
- Is often labelled "lazy" or unmotivated



## GOALS

- **Become a detective:**

Learn about your child's sensory preferences. Just like you, every child has his own sensory needs.

- **Utilise sensory tools safely and effectively:**

Recognise that many factors may influence changes in your child's sensory needs from day to day, from activity to activity and even from minute to minute.

- **Teach others to understand:**

Sensory preferences are to be honoured. Individual sensory needs are not to be judged as good or bad, right or wrong. They just are.

- **Teach your child to be a self-advocate:**

Put the control in your child's hands by teaching him how to ask for what he needs, in socially appropriate ways.

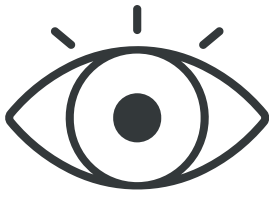


# SOLUTIONS

**STEP 1** Think about the following 7 categories throughout the day and in every situation:



HEARING



SEEING



TOUCHING



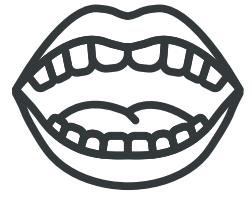
MOVING



SMELLING



MUSCLES



MOUTH

## HEARING

**Observe your child's response to different types of music or sounds.**

- Minimise verbal actions. Your child may have difficulty processing verbal input, especially if the environment is noisy.
- Sounds can be perceived as irritating or even painful.
- Earplugs, headphones or even background noises can help counteract irritating sounds.
- If using headphones, the volume should be between #2 and #4 (digital) to avoid damaging the hair cells in the ear.
- Your child may enjoy background 'white sound' when in his quiet 'womb' space
- Listening difficulties may include problems with the ability to accurately perceive, process and respond to sounds. They may also be related to movement, timing and postural problems. In addition to sensory integrative treatment, evaluations which include sound-based technologies may be warranted.



## SEEING

**Observe how your child reacts to different types of lighting.**

- Your child may prefer darker spaces over brightly lit areas.
- Bright lights can cause glare and be irritating, while natural or dimmed lights tend to be calming.
- Try visual cues such as pictures, charts or short printed directions for chores and daily care activities.
- Certain positions can promote visual control.



# TOUCHING

**Respect your child's responses to different types of tactile or touch input.**

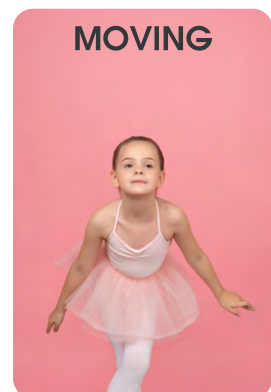
- When your child complains that 'it hurts' or pulls away, acknowledge that what he is feeling is real for him.
- Experiment with different types of materials and clothing. Terry cloth, tight and soft cotton or lycra can be calming and soothing.
- Play the 'sandwich game' and apply calming pressure touch. Let your child crawl between large pillows or roll up in a large terry cloth towel (with the head and arms out) as a burrito or hot dog. Pretend to add ingredients with your hands slowly, firmly, from head to toe.
- When your child needs to think or pay attention, experiment with a variety of small hand fidgets such as: squishy (porcupine ball), smooth (slinky), textured (finger monster), and soft (beanie animal).



# MOVING

**Use movement activities to help with balance, posture, coordination, eye movements, making transitions, attention, alertness, calming and even to change your child's emotional state.**

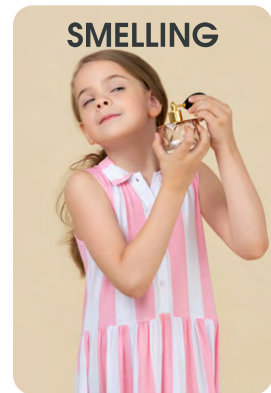
- Up and down movements (jumping rope, bouncing on a ball chair or trampoline) may help your child wake up and get going. Be creative and play a game of hopscotch or make up a silly dance.
- Back and forth movements (swinging, sitting on a rocking chair) may help your child calm down. Put a swing on the porch or in the back yard. Ask your child's teacher how often the swings are available to him during the school day.



# SMELLING

**Experiment with different scents to find which ones meet your child's sensory needs.**

- Be aware of those smells which can be calming (such as vanilla, banana, lavender) and those which can be alerting (such as citrus, peppermint, anise).
- Play 'guess which scent'. With his eyes closed, have your child identify those which help him feel his best. Together, make a scented sachet for your child's backpack or pillowcase.
- Alert others to any **allergies** your child might have. Certain smells found in school (i.e. cafeteria) and certain perfumes that family members may wear, can be uncomfortable and even painful for your child.



# MUSCLES

**Provide your child with opportunities throughout the day to use his muscles.**

- Whether your child is a **sensory seeker**, **sensory avoider**, **hyper-reactive**, **hypo-reactive** or displays a combination of these behaviours, activities using many muscle groups simultaneously appear to help the nervous system organise and focus.
- Therapists have called these 'heavy work patterns'. We have found that children prefer to have 'jobs' rather than 'work'.



**For example:**

Before engaging in activities that require concentration, encourage your child to help with chores or do exercises such as wall or chair push-ups.

# MOUTH

**Use oral motor activities. Find what works for your child to calm, alert and increase focus.**

Such as...

- Sucking on mild flavours, blowing, and slow breathing
- Eating or sucking sour, salty or spicy
- Crunching or chewing on resistive foods, gum or latex-free tubing.



# SOLUTIONS

## STEP 2 Detective tips to keep in mind:

- **Observe, observe, observe!**
- Whether it's 'getting ready' time, homework time, playtime, mealtime or bedtime, be aware of your child's unique sensory needs at different times of the day for specific environments.
- Think about modifying the environment and/or the activity to better meet your child's sensory needs.
- Add or take away sensory input.
- Change the intensity, the duration and the location of the sensory stimulus on or around your
- child's body.
- Create opportunities for your child to be actively engaged in taking in the sensation.
- As a parent, your detective work will be ongoing.
- Work together with your child, family, friends and school community. With teamwork, there will always be plenty of good ideas to meet your child's sensory needs. Be creative, flexible and have fun.
- Your child will become the expert in forming his own Tool Chest of ideas. Empowered with these tools, he will meet his day-to-day challenges with increasing understanding and success.



# A NEW WAY OF LEARNING AND THINKING

