



Karen O'Connor

**OPENING
YOUR
MIND**

THE SENSORY DIET

NUTRITION FOR YOUR BODY AND BRAIN



A NEW WAY OF LEARNING AND THINKING

Karen O'Connor

Consultant Speech &
Language Therapist

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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.

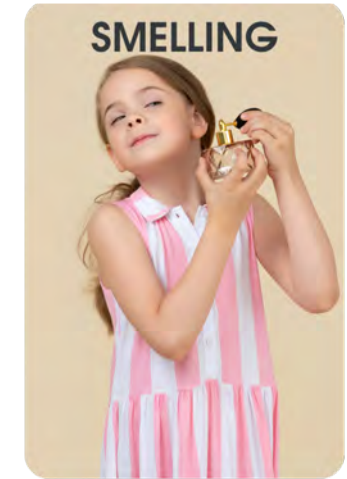
There are two others that you use unconsciously because the information comes from **within** the body.

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



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.

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

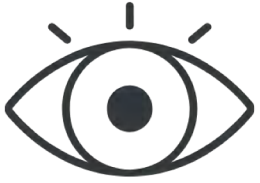


DISCOVER WHAT WORKS FOR YOU!

PARENT SENSORY TOOL SURVEY



HEARING



SEEING



TOUCHING



MOVING



SMELLING



MUSCLES



MOUTH

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

- 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)



PARENT SENSORY TOOL SURVEY

- When I need to read or study, I prefer to...

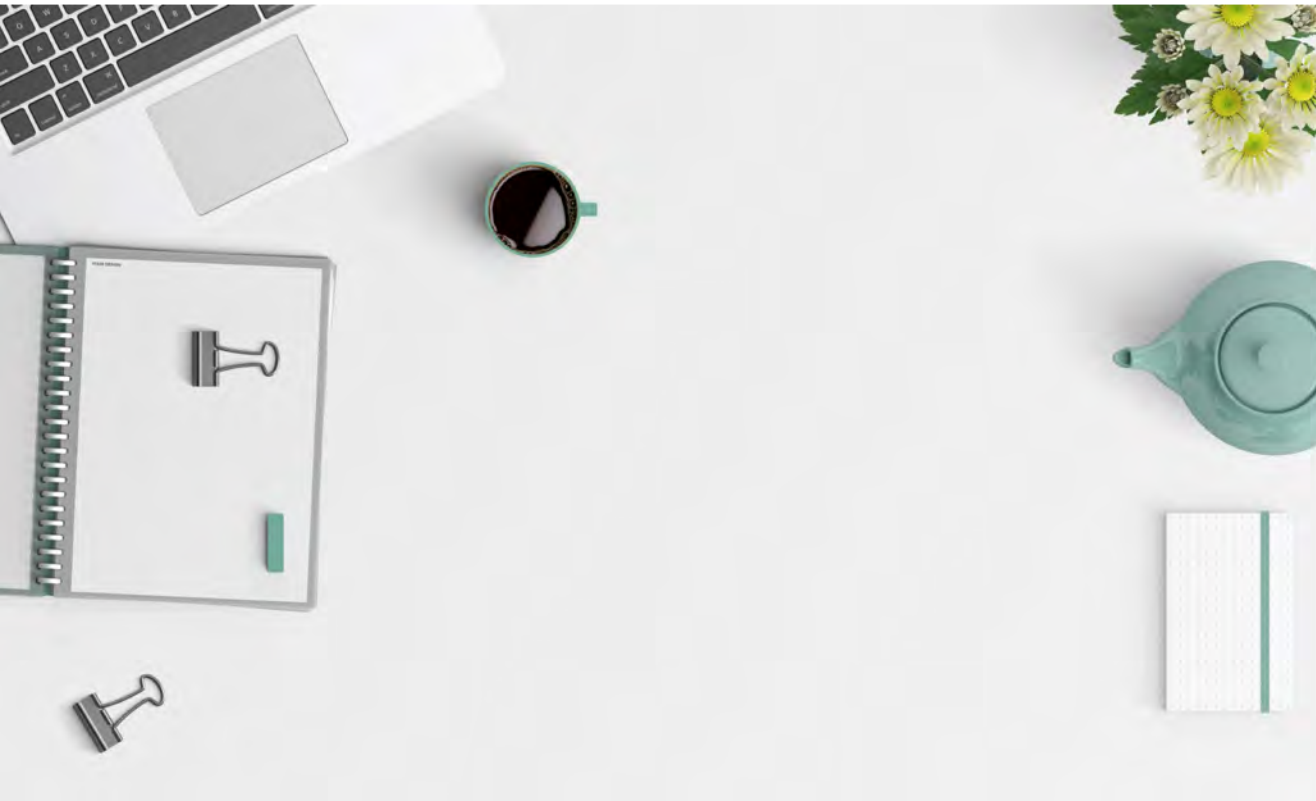
(sit at a table, lounge on the couch, use a rocking chair)

- 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



DISCOVERING YOUR CHILD'S SENSORY NEEDS

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.



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



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

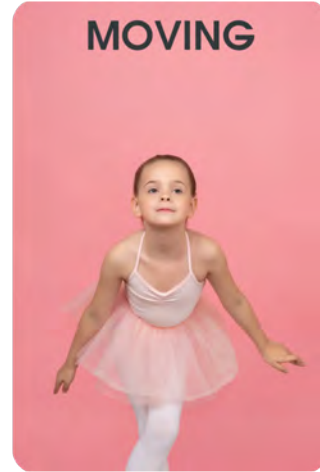
Use movement activities to help with balance, posture, coordination, eye movements, making transitions, attention, alertness, calming and even to change your child's emotional state.

- 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.



Go to [Can't Sit Still](#) for more information.

MOVING



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'. Therefore you will find an entire section in this presentation labelled **Heavy Jobs**, listing many of these 'muscle' activities.



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.

Consult with your paediatrician and nutritionist to identify possible **allergies**.



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.



GETTING READY

PROBLEMS

My child...

- Can't seem to get himself and his things organised
- Becomes 'stressed out' while getting ready for school
- Becomes irritable during transition times
- Does not want to stop what he is doing when it's time to go home
- Does not like going to bed

GOALS

- Learn how to integrate sensory strategies into your child's daily transitions and routines at home and school.
Transitions are as important as the activities themselves. As Betty Snow, RN and SI movement specialist, would often say, "the silence between the notes also creates the music".
- Discover how sensory **tools** can be used to support transitions.



STEP 1 Starting the Day

Make a schedule with your child. Being rushed or stressed can put a child's sensory system on alert and overload. Some children need more time in the morning.

- As a parent, you may need to allow plenty of time to start your day without rushing, even if it means getting up earlier.
- Discuss how much time is needed for each task such as: "it takes 10 minutes to eat, 6 minutes to dress, etc."
- Prepare things the night before such as organising backpacks, laying out clothes, planning breakfast.
- Use music and songs to sequence activities such as dressing.
- Be consistent with your schedule. A visual or auditory timer may be helpful.



STEP 2 Throughout the day, at home, with friends and at school

- Collaborate with family, friends and school. Encourage your family and your child's teacher to discuss daily plans with your child.
- Explore ways they can make sure your child knows what is going to be next. Discuss which sensory tools they can use.

Explore the 7 categories and see what works for them in their specific environments to help your child.



HEARING



SEEING



TOUCHING



MOVING



SMELLING



MUSCLES



MOUTH

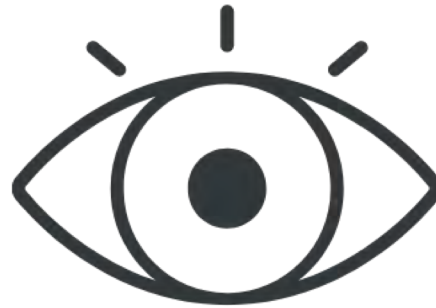


TIPS & IDEAS



HEARING

Listening to Baroque music can capture attention, calm and help focus your child when getting ready for school.



SEEING

Using a virtual chart with step by step activities sequenced in order can assist in getting ready to follow daily routines.



TOUCHING

Wearing a weighted vest intermittently (approximately 15 minutes on and 20 minutes off, especially if your child is not moving his centre of gravity) provides maintained firm pressure touch. This can assist in calming and organising when getting ready to go into a group situation.



MOVING

Bouncing on a chair ball holding onto its small feet, from the kitchen to the homework space, can help your child get ready for work.



SMELLING

Having a scented lamp with your child's favourite calming smell can help your child slow down when getting ready for bed.



MUSCLES

Marching to rhythmical music with a steady beat can assist in getting ready for transitioning from outside to indoor activities.



MOUTH

Crunching on carrot sticks or popcorn can help your child focus when getting ready for (and during) homework time.

BE CREATIVE AND HAVE FUN!

STEP 3 Ending the day

Many things can make bedtime more difficult, including...

- Unexpected touch sensations like tickling or taking a shower. These types of activities can 'wake up' the senses when the goal is to calm down and go to sleep
- Too much visual or auditory stimulation such as TV or video games prior to bedtime
- Not enough time to prepare for bed. Remember, routines often help with transitions
- Scratchy or rough bedding. These types of textures can be irritating and alerting to sensitive skin



Tips for bedtime include...

- A warm bath (not too hot though!)
- A five minute body rub-down in a large terry cloth towel and/or with unscented lotion. Be sure to use slow rhythmic downward strokes in the direction the hair grows.
- Calming scents such as vanilla or lavender (ask your aroma therapist for suggestions)
- A soft, snuggly blanket
- Many pillows or a body pillow
- A sleeping bag which can retain the body's heat, inducing a calming sensation from the neutral warmth
- Quiet rhythmic music or background sounds such as a fan
- Snuggling with a bedtime story, especially poetry with strong rhythm and rhyme.



CAN'T SIT STILL

PROBLEMS

My child...

- Slumps in his seat and lies on the table
- Always seems to be wiggly and squirming when he is supposed to sit still
- Constantly gets up out of his chair



GOALS

- Detect your child's unique sensory preferences before and during 'sitting' activities
- Discover how movement may prepare your child for sitting
- Improve posture with dynamic sitting during eating and table top activities



STEP 1 Prior to quiet sitting

Children need good nutrition from food, and they also need sensory experiences for their body and brain. If your child has difficulty sitting still, he may need more movement experiences throughout the day or prior to sitting activities. As a parent, you can encourage and allow your child to move.

Some activities include...

- Up and down movements on a chair ball, trampoline or with a jump rope
- Back and forth movements on a swing, in a rocking chair or stroller
- Activities such as dancing, running, jumping, sliding, rolling
- Helping with chores. See **Heavy Jobs** for ideas.



STEP 2 During quiet sitting in a typical chair

If your child tends to wiggle or squirm in his seat, you may need to use a sensory strategy. Firm pressure touch (like a hug) tends to calm and quiet the body.

Some strategies include...

- Wearing a heavy coat, weighted best, or Bear Hug
 - Putting something on his lap (book bag, lap tray, heavy pillow)
 - Performing a heavy job intermittently throughout the activity.
- See **Heavy Jobs**.



CAN'T SIT STILL

SOLUTIONS

For additional activities, think about the 7 categories:



For example:

A mother needs her small child to sit in the grocery cart.

She gives her child a box of raisins to eat while they shop.

As you can see, several of the sensory categories listed above are involved.

The box of raisins (which provides seeing, touching, smelling and mouth **tools**) helps him to sit still without becoming wiggly or fussy.



STEP 3 During quiet sitting on an unstable surface

Dynamic or active sitting on an unstable surface can provide your child with the little bit of additional movement he may need to maintain attention.

Dynamic sitting prevents ergonomic casualties by...

- Challenging and supporting the spinal muscles and the back
- Facilitating and training the body in an upright posture
- Preventing uneven pressure on vertebral discs
- Preventing constant one-sided strain
- Promoting flexibility of the spine, joints and ligaments
- Enhancing balance
- Encouraging health and, over time, preventing postural deconditioning and back pain



Other dynamic sitting alternatives include...

'T' stools, wedges and inflated disks.
Each item varies in the type of input it provides.
Together with your child, find which works **best for him**.

HEAVY JOBS

What are **Heavy Jobs** and what do they do?

Activities that provide heavy muscle work are frequently used to develop stability for coordination **and** to promote attention, focus and calmness.

Although these are often labelled 'heavy work' activities, we prefer to call them 'heavy jobs'. Children often appear to be more motivated to do 'jobs' than they are to do 'work'.



HEAVY JOBS

GOALS

- Integrate the 'just right' amount of heavy muscle work activities throughout your child's day to meet his unique sensory needs
- Provide your child with opportunities to safely seek and obtain the heavy muscle work he needs through outdoor play and indoor games
- Select helpful chores that use heavy muscle work activities, to increase focus and improve social skills. Choose heavy jobs he *likes* to do



SOLUTIONS

Together with your child and family, choose activities which work for you outdoors, indoors, during playtime, work time, mealtime, bath time and bedtime

You may find it helpful to make a list from the following pages and post it on your refrigerator



INSIDE

- Put groceries away. Include some low shelves where he needs to be on his hands and knees
- Take the cushions off the sofas, vacuum under them, then put them back
- Mop or sweep the kitchen floor
- Help dust the furniture
- Clean the windows or the front of appliances (spray bottles are great for hand muscles!)
- Carry the laundry basket
- Change the sheets on the bed, then toss the linens down the stairs
- Rearrange the bedroom furniture



OUTSIDE

- Sweep the porch or driveway
- Do yard work (rake leaves, mow the lawn)
- Shovel sand into a wheelbarrow, wheel the wheelbarrow to a spot, dump out sand and use a rake to level it out (functional for filling in low spots in backyard)
- Carry buckets to water flowers, plants, trees
- Recycle (carry a box of cans or newspapers)
- Pull a heavy trashcan
- Stack the patio chairs
- Wash the car
- Bathe the dog
- Perform wood projects requiring sanding and hammering



INSIDE

- Push or pull a box with toys or a few books in it
- Play 'cars' under the kitchen table where your child is on hands and knees pushing the car in one hand while weight bearing on the other hand
- Play 'row, row, row your boat' both sitting on the floor, pushing and pulling each other
- Play 'magic carpet' (pull someone on a sheet, blanket or small rug)
- Bounce on a mini trampoline or on a 'chair ball' while holding its legs
- Climb on pillows, hide under them, jump and 'crash' into them, pull them up the stairs
- Play 'pillow fight'
- Fall into a beanbag chair
- Do the army crawl and animal walks (crab walk, bear walk)
- Play 'sandwich games' where your child places you between beanbags, sofa cushions, mattresses and applies light pressure top top layer
- Be a pizza and have your child slowly roll a ball over you, applying pressure



OUTSIDE

- Fill up big toy trucks with heavy blocks, push with both hands to knock things down
- Play in a sandbox with damp heavy sand
- Colour a 'rainbow' with large paper or with sidewalk chalk while your child is on his hands and knees
- Jump over or climb inside inner tubes
- Play catch with a heavy ball
- Play 'tug of war' with a jump rope
- Roll or sled down a hill
- Swing from the monkey bars and climb on playground equipment
- Participate in activities such as gymnastics, horseback riding, karate, pulling self up climbing walls



REMEMBER FUN AND SUCCESS ARE KEY!

HEAVY JOBS

TRANSITIONS

- Push heavy doors using both hands
- Carry groceries into the house
- When travelling, let your child pull his own suitcase on wheels



MEAL TIME

- Mix and knead cookie dough
- Help cook with an onion chopper (or other simple and safe kitchen utensils)
- Push or pull chairs in/out from the table
- Wipe the table after dinner with a large sponge and use hand muscles to squeeze
- Sip applesauce or thick milkshake through a straw



HEAVY JOBS

HOMEWORK TIME

- Chew gum, eat chewy foods or crunchy foods, or sip water from a water bottle with a thin straw
- Do chair push ups
- Say 'let's pretend to make the room bigger' and push against the walls



BATH TIME

After a bath, rub your child briskly with a large heavy towel, firmly squeezing his muscles.
He can help fold the towel when done.






BED TIME

- Help fold a heavy quilt
- Wear tight flannel or soft snug pyjamas
- Go 'camping' with a heavy blanket pulled across a few chairs. Your child can help set up and take down the blankets
- Change the sheets on the bed.



HOW DOES YOUR ENGINE RUN?

	Getting up	Breakfast	Morning	Lunch	Afternoon	Dinner	Evening	Bedtime
HIGH 								
PERFECT 								
LOW 								

A NEW WAY OF LEARNING AND THINKING



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**OPENING
YOUR
MIND**