Sensory Diet at Home

Using the BEST (Body, Emotional, Sensory, and Thinking Strategies Framework

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This resource accompanies the webinar, "Sensory Strategies that Support Participation in Daily Routines at Home". Click on the link to view: https://bit.ly/4inYPFK

Sensory processing is how we receive, interpret, and respond to information from our body and environment. Most autistic individuals experience differences in sensory processing, which can bring both strengths and challenges. These differences can significantly impact a child's participation in daily tasks and routines at home.

What is a Sensory Diet?

A sensory diet is a personalized plan of activities, sensory inputs, and environment adjustments designed to help a person stay focused, regulated, and comfortable throughout the day. Just as a food diet supports physical health, a sensory diet promotes emotional regulation and sensory well-being. Often developed with an occupational therapist, a sensory diet includes all 8 sensory systems: tactile, gustatory, olfactory, auditory, visual, vestibular, proprioceptive, and interoceptive.

Goals of a Sensory Diet

- ✓ Understand why certain behaviours occur
- ✓ Identify which sensory input support self-regulation
- ✓ Adjust the environment to match the person's sensory profile
- ✓ Support motor planning, strength, and endurance
- ✓ Improve quality of life for the person – and their family!

Getting Started with a Sensory Diet

- **Be proactive:** The goal is to prevent challenging or interfering behaviours before they arise.
- **Create a sensory-friendly environment:** Set up spaces for success.
- **Strategically embed activities into your day:** Try one selected activity 1-2 minutes before and after a challenging transition.
- **Track what works:** Keep a record of which activities are helpful and repeat as needed.
- **Practice in calm states:** Introduce and practice activities when your child is happy and regulated.
- **Prioritize your relationships:** If your child resists, honour their feelings and try something else.
- **Be observant:** If you see signs of distress or discomfort, stop and reflect on what you've learned about your child.

Start with the Power Senses

- **Proprioception:** Heavy work activities like squatting, lifting, carrying, pulling, pushing, and dragging
- **Vestibular:** Movement-based activities
- **Tactile:** Deep pressure touch activities

Use the BEST Strategies Framework to Guide You

B Body Strategies - Using the body to calm the mind

Vestibular
(movement and balance)

Essential for developing a sense of psychological safety.

Tip: Look for opportunities to add movement throughout the day!

Vestibular activities for home:

- **Calming:** linear swinging, rocking, yoga poses
- **Alerting:** jumping, obstacle courses, spinning, "red light/green light"
- **More ideas:** safe trampoline jumping, dance breaks, chores with embedded movement in them

Proprioception
(joint and muscle awareness)

Adds to our sense of body awareness.

Tip: Include heavy work activities that require squatting, carrying, pulling, pushing, dragging, and lifting.

Proprioceptive activities for home:

- **Weight-bearing:** crawling, animal walks, wearing a heavier backpack, carrying heavier objects
- **Resistance activities:** tug-of-war with a towel, pushing the wall away, chair push-ups, chewing crunchy snacks
- **Heavy work activities:** household chores, digging, carrying, shovelling, pushing a heavy laundry basket across the floor

Tactile
(deep pressure touch)

Provides calming and organizing sensory input.

Tip: If your child leans into people or furniture, they may benefit from receiving more of this sensory input.

Tactile activities for home:

- Hugs (self or from trusted adult)
- Massage (self or from a trusted adult)
- Compression wear (smaller swimming shirts, tights, compression sports wear, etc.)
- Playfully squishing sides of body with pillows
- Pushing hands together
- "Crashing" onto mattress
- Access to fidget tolls
- Access to mouth tools (using straws to drink liquids, chewable necklaces, blowing bubbles)
- Sitting in bean bag chair

Consider Sensory Preferences and any other Body Sensory Strategies

• Consider the olfactory system: what scents are calming? Explore different scents, such as cinnamon or other easily available kitchen spices
• Explore preferred fragrant lotions, room sprays, etc.
• Alternatively, eliminate non-preferred scents
	• Explore visual apps:
	  ◦ Heat Pad
	  ◦ Choice Works
	  ◦ Sensory Fidgets Games
	  ◦ Fluid App
	• Click here for more ideas for sensory activities

Add the FUN factor! Incorporate the Power Senses into recreation and leisure activities choices

• Bike riding • Climbing and hanging from bars at the park • Running • Swimming • Stretching • Bowling	• Rock climbing • Yoga and mindfulness • Martial arts • Horseback riding • Lifting weights • Bouncing on a ball

E Emotional Strategies - Co-regulation options

To promote flexibility, parents first need to model flexibility. When child is struggling, pause and ask: "What might they be trying to communicate?" and "How am I already co-regulating my child?"

To support co-regulation, caregivers can:

- Reflect on own sensory profile and how it may be impacting your relationship with your child.
- Change your tone of voice based on the child's sensory profile.
- Add predictability by using transition songs.
- Use humour, novelty, and surprise.
- Model:
  - Deep breathing
  - Using a sensory tool (e.g., parent wears noise cancelling headphones, too, throughout the day)
  - Taking a sensory movement break together
  - Using positive self-talk or scripts

S Sensory Strategies - Change the environment, not the child!

Depending on your child's sensory profile, consider which environmental sensory inputs (lights, sounds, textures, smells) are soothing or overwhelming for your child.

Adapt the environment:

- Adjust the lights
- Visual choice board and schedules
- Reduce or add auditory sensory inputs
- Predictable routines
- Step-by-step guides
- Social Stories

Create a sensory safe space, quiet nook, or cozy corner at home. Ideas for a sensory safe space include:

- Swivel chair
- Yoga ball
- Lava lamp
- Blankets
- Small tents
- Bean bag chair
- Preferred scents
- Comfort items

Create a sensory kit:

- Sunglasses
- Visors
- Hats
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Chewable necklaces
- Ear plugs
- Fidget tools
- Soft textures
- Cold drink
- Social Story

T Thinking Strategies - Add predictability through visuals

It is important to establish structure and predictability in daily routines. Visuals can help support participation in task while decreasing the need for verbal prompting from an adult.

To establish structure and predictability in daily routines:

- Provide predictability by keeping the environment as consistent as possible.
- Establish routines within specific contexts.
  - For instance, create a designated area in the bedroom for dressing activities (e.g., stool, bean bag chair)
- Prepare for upcoming events or transitions ahead of time.

Visual Supports help support psychological safety at home:

- First, Then boards
- Visual timers
- Visual schedules
- Charts
- Various timers and scheduling apps
- Social Stories



Reminder: Remain curious about your child's sensory needs and preferences. Notice what you are already doing to help co-regulate your child and do more of that! Be open to trying new strategies and adapting as you learn what works best for your child and your family.

Sensory Diet Examples using the BEST Framework

Remember, there is no universal template; each person has unique sensory needs and personalized sensory diets are always the best!

Example 1: Sensory Diet to Support Morning Transitions 

⟶ Profile: Sensory Hyper-Reactivity

B is for Body: Use the body to calm the senses

Proprioceptive Input

- Tug-of-war resistance activity to support child getting out of bed
- "Bumming" down the stairs
- Animal walks (crab, bear) to the kitchen table
- Carrying a weighted sensory tool (weighted stuffy, weighted ball) out the door
- Wearing a heavier backpack
- "High fives" out the door

Vestibular Input

- Using a wobble cushion at the kitchen table
- Gentle bouncing on a therapy ball
- Side-to-side balance board activity
- Having child move from different corners of room to complete dressing sequence

Tactile

- "Squishing with pillows" as a wake-up activity
- Trying tighter or compression clothing
- Use fidget tools before and after transitions

E is for Emotional: Self Check-In

"How can I model staying calm and connected to my child?"

S is for Sensory: Change the environment, not the child!

- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Fidget tools
- Adjust auditory input
- Adjust the lights

T is for Thinking: Add predictability through visuals

- Take pictures of steps in morning routine, including sensory activities and include in visual schedule.
- Choose visuals that are most accessible to your child (photos, icons, objects, etc.).

Example 2: Sensory Diet for Toothbrushing 

⟶ Profile: Sensory Hypo-Reactivity

B is for Body: Use the body to prime the senses

Before Brushing

Proprioceptive Input

- Crunchy foods (carrots, apples, pretzels with intense flavours).
- Chew tubes or chewable necklaces.
- Sucking liquid through a straw.

Vestibular Input

- Marching or stomping with feet on floor when walking to bathroom.
- Safe jumping on mini-trampoline.
- Fun dance moves to the bathroom.

During Brushing

- If child enjoys, brush tongue and inner cheeks to stimulate oral awareness.

After Brushing

Tactile

- If child accepts, firm wiping of mouth with towel

E is for Emotional: Self Check-In

"How can I model staying calm and connected to my child?"

S is for Sensory: Change the environment, not the child!

- Try an electric or vibrating toothbrush.
- Offer flavoured toothpaste (mint or cinnamon if tolerated).
- Make bathroom environment more inviting: consider preferred room and water temperature, lighting, songs, fun stickers, or anything else related to special interests, etc.

T is for Thinking: Add predictability through visuals

- Take photos of toothbrushing steps and arrange in a visual schedule or sequence.
- Use visuals that are most accessible to your child (photos, icons, objects, etc.).