

PFA Tips

Strategies for Sensory Processing Disorder

Imagine if:

You couldn't focus your eyes on your teacher because everything and everyone in the room catches your attention and your eyes just go there instead.

Every time you tried to write with your pencil, it broke because you pushed too hard.

The humming of the lights sounded louder than your teacher's voice.

People's whispers sounded like they were yelling.

The tag in the back of your shirt makes you feel as uncomfortable as you would if a spider was crawling on you and you couldn't get him off.

You wanted to write something down but it took you at least 5 seconds to form each letter. You can see the letter in your head, but your hand will not go in the right direction to write it.

The lights are so bright you have to squint, then you get a pounding headache half way through your first class in school.

Every time someone touches you, it feels like they are rubbing sand paper on your skin.

You could only sit for 15 minutes, then you had to take a run around the building or do 20 jumping jacks so you could sit for another 10 minutes

before your muscles felt like they were going to jump out of your skin.

What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Sensory Processing Disorder is a neurological disorder that results from the brain's inability to integrate certain information received from the body's basic sensory systems. Sensory processing refers to our ability to take in information through our senses (touch, smell, taste, vision, and hearing), organize and interpret that information, and make a meaningful response. In addition to those five senses we are all familiar with, we also have proprioception (our body awareness) and our vestibular sense (movement and balance).

Sensory Diet Activities

A sensory diet is a part of Sensory Integration Therapy and is a group of specifically designed activities to assist someone to stay alert or calm down by regulating sensory input. The following is a sample listing of sensory diet activities:

Auditory (hearing): Sound sensitivity

1. Use various types of music/sounds, e.g. sound machines, classical music, Gregorian Chant, spa music
2. Provide noise cancelling headphones, ear plugs, ear muffs, cotton balls (being very judicious, don't over use, only when absolutely needed)



3. Bring small sticky notes to cover automatic flush in public bathrooms, to delay flush response

4. Therapeutic Listening program <https://vitallinks.com/therapeutic-listening/>

Tactile (touch): Have children play with a variety of sensations:

1. Dry beans, pasta, rice, sand
2. Work with silly putty, play dough, shaving cream
3. Water play, with different types of soap – scented, texture, etc.
4. Use gloves if your child is too sensitive to touch, to gradually desensitize them
5. Use a timer to "time limit" activity to help the child persist, knowing there is an end in sight
6. Deep pressure brushing, "Wilbarger Protocol", combines brushing with joint compressions, taught by a

continued on back

therapist, to be followed throughout the child's day.

Visual (sight):

1. Reduce visual stimuli around the child.
2. Add color coding, darker outlines, etc. to homework
3. Provide extra visual stimuli with the use of glitter pens to draw attention
4. Allow use of sunglasses and a hat with a brim outside
5. Provide a study carrel in school to block out distractions
6. Allow preferential seating, head of class room, away from windows.

Olfactory & Gustatory (taste & smell):

1. Experiment with crunchy foods, e.g. apples, celery, hard bagels, pretzels
2. Try sucking thick liquids, milkshakes, kefir, through a straw
3. Blowing activities, blow pompoms

across the room with/without a straw, blow bubbles in the sink filled with dish detergent, blow bubbles, blow out candles, blow toys, whistles, wind chimes

4. Tongue exercises in front of a mirror – try to touch your nose with your tongue, make circles with your tongue, touch each side of your mouth
5. Make funny faces in front of a mirror
6. Allow your child to put their favorite perfume on their shoulder, on a hair tie on their wrist, special beads to “smell” when needed
7. Use coffee beans to smell to “erase” unwanted smells.
8. Allow your child to carry scented hand cream to use after the bathroom

Vestibular (balance & movement) & Proprioception (body position)

1. Provide opportunities to enjoy playground activities, swings, ladders, jungle gyms

2. Balance beams, balance circles
3. Animal walks, army crawls, wall and chair pushups
4. Simon says, follow the leader games
5. Heavy work activities, weighted blankets, vests, backpacks, fanny packs, no heavier than 10% of their body weight
6. Pushing medicine balls through a tunnel, carrying heavy balls through an obstacle course
7. Stacking chairs, cans, books
8. Pulling/pushing heavy objects, wagon activities
9. Wiping down windows, tables, chalk boards, cars

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Signs and Symptoms of Sensory Processing Disorder

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/treatments-therapies/signs-and-symptoms-of-sensory-processing-disorder>

Pathfinders for Autism Online Provider Database

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>

Choose category > Sensory products and toys

Choose category > Therapies > Occupational Therapist

Sample Sensory Diet Activities and Worksheet

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/therapies/download-sample-sensory-diet>

“The Out-of-Sync Child Series” by Carol Kranowitz available on Amazon

Written by Deb Taylor, OTR/L SIPT
Certified, Chesapeake Occupational
Therapy Associates, LLC.

© 2018 Pathfinders for Autism

Pathfinders for Autism does not endorse any treatments, therapies or products. This article is not intended to replace medical advice. Consult with your loved one's doctor and occupational therapist.