

## Using a Whole Class Sensory Diet approach in School

The concept of a 'Sensory Diet' was developed by two Occupational Therapists Julia and Patricia Wilbarger in order to assist parents and carers in structuring activities to meet a child's specific sensory needs day in, day out.

It is a planned and scheduled programme of activities designed to provide the "just right" combination of sensory input to achieve and maintain optimal levels of arousal and performance in the nervous system. That is, by including a good mix of sensory motor activities throughout the day students will be in a better state of focus to work in class.

Although all of our students have their own unique sensory needs there are very good reasons to provide a class based group sensory diet. Not only is it impractical to have each student on an individual sensory timetable throughout the day but as there are certain types of sensory input that work for nearly everyone the whole class approach is very effective.

This is a programme designed by you for your own class of students and which should fit in with your class timetable. The OT is available to help you set up and monitor – please just ask.

The most effective and long lasting types of sensory activities are those involving

1. **Vestibular** activities, those involving **movement of the head in space**. Also known as '**alerting**' type activities as they tend to wake us up a bit. Things like bouncing, jumping, running, spinning, climbing and jumping, rocking.
2. **Proprioceptive** activities, those involving **moving the body against resistance**. Also known as '**heavy work**' or '**organising**' activities. They give us good feedback as to where our limbs are in space. Things like pressups, rolling across the floor, using a scooter or scooterboard, crawling, swinging on monkey bars, pushing/pulling heavy toys, rough and tumble, skipping.
3. **Deep touch pressure** activities, usually **calming** activities and sometimes involving weights or whole body pressure. Things like rolling up in a blanket or mat, getting into a sleeping bag, use of weighted or deep pressure clothing or blankets, being squashed with a gym ball.

Lots of games and activities cross over these types of sensory input. Using a sensory diet we are aiming to have at least 3 'main courses' of activity in a school day. Usually this fits best first thing in the morning, after morning break and just after lunch.

“Main course” activities for a younger class might include Wake Up Shake Up, 5 a day or Sensory Circuits first thing in the morning, a run (in a line, across the playground and back 5 times) mid morning and a session of dancing or action rhymes or active soft play in the afternoon.

For a class of older students, you could substitute some aerobic exercises in class first thing, a short session on the rowing machines after break, and a run in the afternoon if you don't feel like dancing and singing.

Your main course activities are most effective if they are part of your everyday class routine and are on the students' visual timetables. If you find students difficult to settle after the activities, include more organizing and calming activities, and fewer alerting ones.

“Sensory snacks” are further opportunities for sensory input throughout the day which might be more tailored to individual needs. For the younger classes a short session of messy play, music, dancing, relaxation, playing with vibrating toys, action rhymes etc. For older students, making sure there is a multisensory element to every class taught, or that there is a movement break in each session is useful, as is the use of fidget toys.

A sensory diet for children with autism does need to have elements of repetition and predictability, and is definitely not just indiscriminately putting more sensory input into a child's day.

**The activities are not rewards for good working, but a part of the students' day which makes them better able to work.**

Please try it with your class and let me know how you get on. If you are stuck for activities, or find that one of your students is not coping with it, please don't hesitate to ask for help.

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