Students with autism and other disabilities may have sensory needs which can be regulated with the help of an occupational therapist (OT) and a carefully designed, personalized sensory diet. The diet could include equipment and strategies such as swings, thera-bands, putty of various resistances, body socks, weighted blankets, scooter boards and more. The key is staying flexible and providing the right frequency, duration and intensity of sensory experiences. This helps your student to maintain the appropriate level of arousal for daily activities while staying focused and organized throughout their day.

**Here are some tips and techniques:**

**Clinical Observation of Student**

Your team can start the process of developing a sensory diet by observing a child in their natural environment. Look for specific triggers or signs of being over stimulated, such as if the student is wiggling around a lot, biting on pencils or other objects within their work space or standing up frequently. It is important to observe if your student’s desk area is organized or unorganized, if at any point in the day certain activities appear to be more challenging than others, or if he or she is bothered by loud noises and is covering their ears. These observations are the basic foundations for creating an appropriate sensory diet for your student.
Parent/Teacher Questionnaire
The use of a parent/teacher questionnaire can be helpful in gathering additional information on a child’s particular sensory preferences. To create the most effective plan OTs may ask questions similar to:

• When does your child/student demonstrate sensory overloaded behavior? Does there appear to be a trigger?
• Does the student have food or clothing preferences?
• Difficulty with peer relationships? Plays too rough or plays alone?
• Does the child have gross motor issues such as falling down, bumping into things, balance and coordination difficulties?
• Does the child have fine motor challenges such as trouble grasping a pencil or using scissors?

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Ingredients for the Diet
After a close evaluation, OTs can create a personalized sensory diet of strategies to assist your student in coping with his or her environmental stimuli. Some of the discovery is by trial – using different pieces of equipment and actions to see what works best for that student. As part of the planning process:

• Ask input from student about activities he or she enjoys
• Determine the setting for the student to experience the sensory diet
• Plan the activities around natural breaks throughout the day
• Have any special tools or equipment readily available for the activities
• Involve teachers and encourage classroom involvement

Sensory input
A variety of sensory activities is recommended to maintain your students’ interests as well as satisfying their needs. Providing a step-by-step guide that teaches students simple changes to their daily routine – such as jumping on a trampoline before class work or listening to calming music – can help them self regulate. Sensory diet activities are designed for the individual student but are based on scientific principles about how the brain takes in and makes use of sensory input to create optimal states of arousal and performance. Using touch, pressure, movement, oral motor, tactile and proprioceptive input, an OT educated in multi-sensory approaches can design an appropriate sensory diet to help students participate in learning and improve their overall well-being. Depending on the student, you can build into their sensory diet plans walking, weighted vests, deep pressure techniques, objects for chewing, push-ups, jumping jacks, stretching, swinging and gym time, to name a few.

No two sensory diets or therapy plans are the same, as each student has unique needs. By providing sensory input your student craves, he or she will be able to function successfully in the classroom, at home and at play.

For more Teaching Tips and Strategies, visit www.cmf.org/tips

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