



WHAT IS A SENSORY DIET?

A [sensory diet](#), first created by occupational therapists [Wilbarger and Wilbarger](#) (1991), is an individualized plan of physical activities and accommodations to help a person meet their sensory needs. This plan provides the sensory input needed to stay focused and organized throughout the day. For example, some people may feel overwhelmed or overloaded and need to get to a calmer state; some may feel lethargic or sluggish and need some activities to feel alert.

The main goal of a sensory diet is to prevent sensory and emotional overload by meeting the nervous system's sensory needs; however, it can also be used as a recovery technique. Understanding a child's sensory profile and the activities which create calmness and regulation can really help when a child feels overwhelmed and out of control. Engaging children in sensory experiences on a regular schedule can support focus, attentiveness and interaction. Children may feel less anxious when they feel comfortable and in control.

An occupational therapist (OT) usually designs a sensory diet. Parents and caregivers can then use the tailored activities at home; teachers/educational assistants can use it at school. The reason it is recommended to consult with an OT who has experience with sensory processing issues is because one of the trickiest aspects of sensory difficulty is recognizing when a child is overreactive or underreactive in any given moment, then adjusting sensory input to meet them where they are, and providing the right challenge to help them move forward into a “just right” state of being.

Observational checklists can be used to gather information about a person’s sensory profile. There are numerous [sensory checklists](#) available [online](#) or in books such as [Answers to Questions Teachers Ask about Sensory Integration](#) or [Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration](#).

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Activities for a Sensory Diet

Certain activities address specific sensory systems. Activities will also vary based on age and ability. Here are some examples of activities that can be used as part of a sensory diet:

Proprioception

Proprioceptive input can be achieved through lifting, pushing, and pulling heavy objects. Some ideas are:

- pushing a stroller or cart
- pulling a wagon filled with objects
- carrying a backpack
- playing hopscotch
- push ups against the wall
- lifting weights
- wearing a weighted vest
- vacuuming
- swimming



INTEROCEPTION AND AUTISM: BODY AWARENESS CHALLENGES

Most of us know about the seven senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, [vestibular](#), and [proprioception](#). There is also a lesser-known sense, the eighth sense, called interoception. This sense helps a person understand what is going on inside of the body like hunger, thirst, feeling hot or cold, fatigue, or a full bladder. It also affects the ability to interpret emotions; butterflies in the stomach may not be felt as anxiety or nervousness. Not understanding this sense can make self-regulation a challenge. It can also be the cause of eating and [toileting difficulties](#), something we frequently see in autistic people.

What is Interoception?

Muscles and joints have receptors that tell you where your body parts are. [Interoception](#) works much the same way, but the receptors are in your organs including your skin. These receptors send messages about the body to the brain, helping to regulate vital functions such as hunger, thirst, digestion, or heart rate.

Understanding these bodily feelings can help with interpretation of what's going on inside the body. If your bladder is full, you need to urinate. If your heart is beating fast, you may need to take a few deep breaths to slow it down.

Interoception also affects the interpretation of emotions.

How can interoception issues make things difficult for autistic people?

Autistic people may have difficulty making sense of this information. They may not be able to tell when they are feeling pain or fatigue. An itch may be felt as pain or pain may feel ticklish. They may not get the feeling of having to defecate and hold on to a bowel movement, which can [lead to constipation](#).

Interoception also affects the interpretation of emotions. Emotions may not be “felt”. If you can't tune in to the body cues that help interpret emotion, it's harder to identify the emotion. It's important to understand this aspect, because not feeling emotions affects a person's behavior. For example, a child may not recognize fear because he doesn't recognize that tense muscles, shallow breathing and a racing heart equals fear. My daughter recently told me that when she was in elementary school, she could only feel happiness or just “blank”. This lack of interoceptive awareness could explain explosive behavior because it's not until the emotions are so big that an eruption occurs.

This is a short [introductory video](#) on interoception that explains what it's all about.

Interoception Challenges and Difficulty with Self-Regulation

Interoceptive challenges will also affect the ability to self-regulate. If you don't know that you're hungry, thirsty or have a full bladder, you may feel uncomfortable but not know why. Frustration can build when you can't explain what is troubling you.