FAQ about Sensory Diets: Type of Input

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A sensory diet is an individualized plan that is designed to meet sensory needs in order to function optimally. This means maintaining attention and arousal for daily tasks and having adaptive responses, both emotionally and physically. Each individual has different sensory needs. Implementing a sensory diet is a sensory strategy often used in schools and homes to allow individuals to improve their processing and to improve interactions within daily tasks.

When creating a sensory diet, occupational therapists (OTs) should be a part of the process. OTs are trained to be able to assess and treat sensory processing and integration differences. OTs will assess individual systems and processing using evaluation tools, observations, and interviews. Implementing a sensory diet requires the preparation of activities and consistent monitoring and data collection to adjust for responses. Remember that the goal is for an individual to respond adaptively, which means being able to successfully meet the demands of tasks and activities within the current setting or environment.

FAQ #1: How do I know what type of input to include or avoid?

A: Everyone has changing sensory needs from day to day and in different environments. To have a general understanding of an individual’s sensory needs, a sensory evaluation should be completed by an occupational therapist to assess which systems process efficiently and which systems over or under respond to input. In addition to this information, careful observation of arousal, attention, affect, and activity level will provide indicators to what sensory systems may be functioning optimally, becoming overwhelmed, or displaying reduced responsivity. Increased behavioral and emotional outcomes and changes in activity level are an indication of sensory differences. Individuals seeking sensory input may need more intense input and individuals avoiding input may need personal or environmental modifications to improve processing.

Use of visually-based sensory diets that indicate a level of arousal and activity and which activities to provide based on response can be helpful. Two examples of this type of visual sensory diet system are Brainworks™ and SticKids™. When in doubt, consult with your OT to determine some choices of activities to offer an individual as a part of their sensory diet. Keeping and sharing data on responses will help guide clinical decision-making. Offering choices and individualizing the plan is integral to developing self-management skills.

For more strategies and ideas, check out IRCA sensory articles online or visit us at http://www.pinterest.com/IRCAIU/.