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 #4: What if I overdo it when providing sensory input?
A: Because there are changing sensory needs from day to day, it can be a challenge for even experienced therapists and individuals to avoid overdoing sensory input, particularly with intense vestibular input. If an individual has behavioral or arousal changes that indicate being overloaded with sensory input, it is important to counter-balance the effects. Signs of overload include: tantrums, irritability, over-excitability, extreme silliness or emotional lability, decreased focus and attention, fight or flight, increased sensitivity to typical input, nausea, and somatic complaints. If there is too much vestibular input or tactile input, individuals can use deep touch or proprioceptive input to calm the system. If there is too much visual input or auditory input, reduce the environmental input and allow individuals to cocoon or withdraw briefly into a quiet space. Although shutting down can be a sign of overload, if an individual is simply lethargic, they may actually require more input to alert their system.

Use visuals to allow individuals to indicate their level of sensory arousal and begin to teach individuals to understand their optimal level. When in doubt about whether sensory input is overwhelming, consult with your OT to adjust time or duration and choice of activities in individual sensory diets. Remember to keep data on responses and to offer choices while teaching self-management skills. The overall goal is for individuals to be able to participate in functional activities throughout their day and to seek out or make accommodations to do so.

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