

Joie de Vivre at Home

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In previous columns, we discussed our philosophy of treatment. We described the six SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder) subtypes and how important it is to identify which subtype your child has before deciding to target activities and events for your child. At our STAR Center, children receive intensive treatment (often 30 or so sessions in 6 weeks) and approximately 20 percent of sessions are educational: "parents only."



Do not seek a single sensory diet item or activity to “fix” your child. Instead, imagine a process that focuses on fun, on joy, on togetherness.

In our last column, we discussed how people are looking for a quick fix for their child’s issues. At STAR Center, we find that within a few sessions almost every parent is asking, “When am I going to get my child’s sensory diet?”

What is a *sensory diet*? It is a list of activities designed to meet your child’s sensory needs. Sensory diets are lists of activities, but do not reflect the child’s needs in the moment. The only way *you* can help your child when he needs it is to understand the problem-solving process that an occupational therapist (OT) would go through in determining what a specific child needs in the moment.

In occupational therapy, we call this problem solving process *clinical reasoning*. To us that phrase means that we look at everything we know about the child and consider all the possible options. The following are some features we think about:

- What is the environment like, and is there anything about the environment that might be exacerbating the child’s issues in the moment?
- What task is the child doing? Is it too easy? Too hard? Triggering his sensory issues?
- Who else is around? Peers? Relatives? Siblings? Is there something about what they are doing that is contributing to the child’s issues?
- What about the child’s characteristics? What is his mood usually like? What are his sensory needs in general? What do we know about what triggers his behavior that we are currently seeing?

You can see from this that there is no recipe, formula, or sensory diet that will work with your child in every situation. That is why you (the parent, teacher, or caregiver) must know how to problem solve, and this means that you have to understand basic



principles of treatment so that you can ask questions and independently move forward in assisting your child.

Keep in mind that even though it may look like an OT has the answer to what your child needs in the moment, basically she is using trial and error to find out what works with a child in a certain situation at a particular point in time. What she has been trained in that you have not is how to problem solve by considering a wide variety of factors. Once you learn the questions to ask and the process for trial and error, then you will have what it takes to competently solve problems without feeling you have to talk to the professional to get an answer. That’s why we refer to what families need as a *sensory lifestyle* rather than a sensory diet.

Here is one tool that might be useful for you as you focus on bringing joy into your child’s (and your) day! It is called **PROCESS: Problem solving, Relating, Organizing, Community involvement, Emotion regulation, Social participation, and Sensory solutions**. Rather than giving the child (and thus the parent) a series of home exercises or protocols to complete, the key is setting up a process of strategic developmentally appropriate play opportunities. Play and *fun* is the key—the kind of play that involves you and your child on the floor building a castle with blocks or your family sitting around after dinner doing “emotional charades” (where you each act out a feeling and the others guess what it is).

You must have fun for your child to have fun. What kind of play do you like (not including anything electronic)?

No cell phone, no tablet, no computer, no gaming system. Now what do we do?

Here are some ideas that may sound simplistic and ho-hum, but remember *you* have to be able to play, too!

Dress Up

Do you have a dress-up corner or steamer trunk full of clothes that you and your children can

put on to pretend you are dinosaurs, princesses, kings, or superheroes?

Play House

Can you create a pretend area with a fridge or oven, or inside a dollhouse, to act out stories using animals or dolls?

Perform a Play

Where can you and your child put on a show for someone else? Can you write a story together and assign roles and act them out?

Create Art

Do you have giant paper that is big enough to trace your child’s body? His friends’ bodies? His toys’ bodies? You can cut out all these things and tape them to the wall to be colored.

There are a million more ideas and guess where they are? They are inside your mind. One time a Dad was here and said, “OK, OK, OK. I get it. You want me to play. But what does that mean? Do you have a book I can read on that?” Remember, it’s about the **process**, not the product—not what you end up with but how you get there. Do not seek a single sensory diet item or activity to “fix” your child. Instead, imagine a process that focuses on fun, on joy, on togetherness. This may sound trite, but it’s the key to a balanced, joyful life. Yes, you need to understand how to use sensory solutions; but what you are seeking is joy in life or *joie de vivre*. When you and your child find that, you will have the key to our successes in occupational therapy. ■