



The 6 Step Guide to Optimizing Your Child's Sensory Diet

**Expert advice designed to improve self
regulation so both your child and your
family can feel sensational!**

By Aubrey Schmale, OTR/L



From My Sensational Toolbox to Yours!

I am so excited to bring this resource to you. My name is Aubrey Schmale. I am a pediatric occupational therapist specializing in evaluation and treatment of sensory processing disorders. I have been in this field since 2005 I still feel joy and excitement every time a parent says, "We are so grateful for all you have done. You changed my child's life." But even more rewarding are the words from the children, "Remember when I first came here I was afraid of the swing? Well, guess what? I went on a roller coaster this summer!" and the excitement of the discovery of the perfect calming tool, "Can you tell my mom to get this for me?!? Can you take a video of it and send it to her?"

The reason for their success and feeling of empowerment is that at my clinic, [Sensational Achievements](#), we treat every child as unique and design programming to meet individual needs. Parents always say that they find out something no one has ever told them about their child and that now their child's behaviors make SO much more sense. Our mission is to provide the hope and help parents of children with sensory processing disorders are desperately looking for.

And your child can get better too! I know that as a parent, your deepest desire is for the happiness and well-being of your children. But sometimes you just need a new lens from which to view your child to support him/her in the best way possible.

Disclaimer: While I have put together what I feel is a solid guide to optimizing sensory diet plans, this should not take the place of professional advice. If you are working with or plan to work with an occupational therapist on your child's sensory diet, please share your observations with your therapist. Together, you can collaboratively develop a treatment and support plan individualized to your child's unique needs.

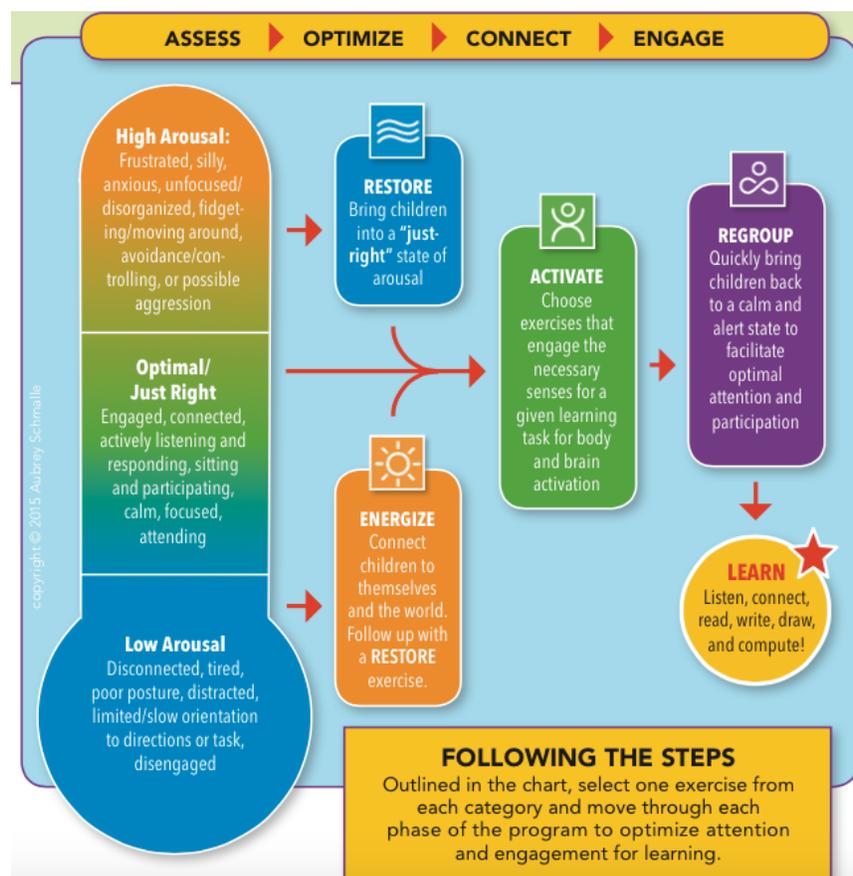




First, let me orient you to our Body Activated Learning Approach.

This chart is a roadmap to Activating your child for Learning. Any time that you want to work with your child on a developing skill, it is important to first Assess your child's state of arousal. It is hard to be motivated to try something that is challenging when your arousal is too high or low! **RESTORE** activities help your child calm and focus.

ENERGIZE activities are alerting and help to wake up the body. For a child with sensory processing deficits, a good sensory diet is a key support to optimize arousal prior to **ACTIVATING** the senses for motor skill development, play, and learning.



Let's get started optimizing your child's sensory diet plan!





Step #1: Assess

In order to figure out the best activities and supports for your child's sensory diet, you first need to know if your child seeks out/gravitates towards certain types of inputs throughout the day or has certain aversions.

Maybe your child LOVES making slime and you have gallons of it at home. Maybe your child is ALWAYS jumping on the couch and flipping upside down or standing on his/her head.

Or maybe your child doesn't seek out anything in particular but AVOIDS sensory inputs, is overly cautious, or does not seem to know what to do to calm and organize him/herself.

I have to be honest - the second child is MUCH harder to figure out than the first. These children may not seek because they either don't feel safe to explore, are too disconnected, or are too disorganized and just jump from one activity to another, never staying on anything long. But don't give up, your child will show you when you find a sensory match!

So take a moment to think about who your child is.

1. What kind of behaviors do you see? (Circle One)

Seeking Avoiding Low Arousal/Disconnected Disorganized/Unfocused

2. What are some signs that your child is overwhelmed or overstimulated? What about the opposite - Disengaged or disconnected?

3. Is there anything that seems to wake up your child and support engagement or calm your child to focus or relax?





Write your notes here:

*The answer to these questions tells you when you may need **ENERGIZING** or **RESTORING** activities to prepare or recover from activities.

4. When does your child exhibit any of the behaviors above?

Hint: this will give you a clue as to when you need your sensory activities/movement breaks the most.

	Before School/In the Morning
	During School
	After School
	After doing things that are hard for him/her?
	With transitions/lack of structure/Free Play
	At Bedtime
	Generally all the time
	Other: _____

Are there any activities that seem to shift your child's behavior so he/she is more connected, organized, social, and engaged in goal-directed activities?

Use this information when filling out your Planning Worksheet in Step #5





Step #2: Identify Your Resources

It is important to know what you already have in your toolbox and what might be useful additions to your home or “on the go” bag. Depending on the level of your child’s needs and previous/current intervention, you may already have a lot of tools that just need to be thoughtfully organized into a plan.

1. What do you already have around the house that is sensory supportive (**ENERGIZING** or **RESTORING**)? Cozy furniture/beanbag chair/Yogibo? Indoor trampoline? Indoor swing? Bikes and roller blades?
2. Are you handy? Crafty? Could you make DIY fidgets and activities by consulting our [Pinterest](#) Boards @SensationalAOT?
3. Do you have space for a cozy area/tent in your home?
4. Do you have a playground nearby or a playset in your backyard?
5. Do you have a community pool or a club that you belong to?
6. Have you purchased fidgets, slime kits, yoga balls, indoor trampolines, rocking chairs, spinning office chairs, spin disks, chair cushions, chewelry, blow toys, etc.? Are they working well and should stay a part of your sensory smart home environment? Or have you bought and tried a lot with not much success? Either answer will guide you more toward your optimal plan.
7. Are there certain types of activities that your child enjoys? Are the activities resistive (heavy lifting/pushing/pulling/climbing)? Movement oriented (such as dance or swinging)? Balloons, blow toys, and bubbles?





Step #3: Design Sensational Experiments!

After identifying the resources and activities you have available, the next step is to offer your child opportunities to explore different sensations and experiences to find what works best for getting your child focused and alert.

Some activities give your child **ENERGY** to stay alert and connected while some will help **RESTORE** your child to a calm place. Both are often necessary parts to your child's sensory diet.

Remember this information to put into your Planning Worksheet in Step #5

Sometimes what your child likes/seeks is obvious because your child goes for those things constantly. Other times, if it's not available, your child may not even know that it's something that will help! How can you calm yourself in class if you LOVE slime? Certainly that is not an option at your desk, so what is a reasonable substitute that provides a similar input? Experiment and find out!

Always look at the **QUALITIES** of the preferred input to find a substitute or other options that are similar. If squishing mom ALL the time is a preferred calming input - make sure to build in both "special mommy time" and activities that involve squishing to meet both the emotional and sensory need.





Sensory Diets will typically include 3-4 key inputs:

Rhythm: Music that is approximately 60-90bpm with a steady beat, rhythmic bouncing/swinging (imposed or active), repetitive simple activities of 1-2 steps, counting in rhythm while putting things away or tapping body parts, stomping and moving in rhythm are all great ways to bring a child into a rhythm that matches their resting heart rate. Some children lack internal rhythm, which can be seen by always bouncing around or not being able to maintain rhythmic body movement like jumping. In this case, it's really important as a parent to provide external rhythm to facilitate calming and organization. Seeking input from the environment in a non-rhythmic way can be very disorganizing!

Deep Touch Pressure: Hugs/Squishing with large beanbag/cushions/pillows/Yoga Mat/Stuffed Animals for calming. Explore socks filled with rice/beans, heavy blankets, giving big squishes/hugs, piling large stuffed animals into your child's bed, squishing with pillows, and comfy beanbag chairs. Activities might include: rolling a yoga ball on your child's back to make them into a "pizza" or rolling your child up in a yoga mat like a "taco"

Respiration, if able: Blow toys from pfot.com (Keyword: oral motor), Yoga breaths, bubbles, etc. My favorite game is bubble mountain. Fill a bucket with water and a little dish soap and use a Pop Tube to blow bubbles in the water to make a "mountain" that overflows. Turn it into a car wash by putting in toy cars and then setting them in the towel parking lot to dry. Note: if your child can't blow, this is a skill that should be worked on before making it part of your sensory diet plan.





Tactile Play, if not defensive: Set out a bunch of tactile materials. Bath time is often a good place to experiment that doesn't get too messy. Try different sizes and textures of sponges, shaving cream on the wall, water balloons, etc. In the kitchen or outside - explore sand, kinetic sand, rice bins, beans, slime, water beads (Orbees Spa or micheals.com). Lotion massages with your favorite calming smells are also great! These activities can improve body awareness while providing an all over calming feeling as long as your child is not aversive to the texture or sticky, unpredictable messiness of some tactile play.

In the case of **ENERGIZING to increase arousal and alertness, use 2 key inputs:**

Vestibular Input: Altering movement via quick direction changes, head tipping, and head turning such as twisting while turning your head side to side, upside down bowling, log rolls, and spinning in an office chair.

Heavy work: This is both alerting and organizing as lifting heavy objects, pulling, pushing, stomping/marching increase connection to the body as well as provide ground input with head tipping/turning.
*Note that children with low muscle tone or muscle weakness may need more passive deep touch pressure instead until strength and stability improves.

Now, let's not go crazy and think that you have to do EVERYTHING in each category, but I strongly encourage you to try out a few activities, sensory toys, hiding spots, and exercises to get a sense of what works best.

**Put these ideas on the Sensory Diet Planning Worksheet
when you get to Step #5.**



Step #4: Build Sensational Self Awareness



As you are exploring different activities with your child, comment on your own experiences and ask your child how it makes their body feel.

When I am working with children during occupational therapy sessions, you will often hear me saying “Oh, I really like this one! It feels so soft and squishy! Try it out and tell me what you think.”

If the answer is “Ew!” or “I don’t want to,” try to get your child to label something about it they don’t like by asking, “What is the part you don’t like? It feels too..., it smells...” If your child is older, ask him/her to describe how it looks/feels/tastes. This will give you insight into what is not supportive.

In contrast, when your child finds something he/she really likes or an enjoyable activity, give feedback such as “this seems like it gives your body **ENERGY**” or “This seems like it makes you feel **relaxed**” or “This seems like it makes your body feel good, should we play this game/do this activity more often?”

Note: I am sure you know this, but if you have a non-verbal child, their gestures and facial expressions will tell you A LOT about how they are feeling. I worked with one child that always puts my hands over his eyes for a “squish” when his allergies are bothering him.

My mantra is, if it works, use it. Children of all ages and abilities can communicate their sensory preferences once they (and you) know what they are!



Step #5: Plan Your Implementation Strategy



Now that you know the effect each input has on your child and his/her preferences, it's time to fill out your Sensory Diet Planning Worksheet!

- 1. Schedule at least three to four longer movement breaks (10-15 minutes)** typically involving opportunities for rhythmic movement (ex: jumping on a trampoline, doing a simple 2 step obstacle course/motor sequence 10 times, riding a bike, swinging, rocking in a chair, bouncing on a ball, etc. Schedule breaks throughout the day.
- 2. Identify portable solutions for when you are on the go:** Punch Ball Critter (balloon toy), Vibrating bug/pillow, Weighted snake socks, music, chewy/crunchy snacks, water bottles, chewy tubes, resistance bands, squishy objects, fidgets, lotion - Anything you identified while exploring that is packable and easy to use on the way to an activity/school, in new/busy environments, and with transitions.
- 3. Set up environmental supports:** Create a Hiding/Escape spot where your child can occlude his/her vision and receive some deep touch pressure until he/she is calm enough to reengage. Identify a place to go in every environment that is quiet and where your child can use calming tools until he/she is able to rejoin the group. If you know your child can't tolerate certain environments/activities for long periods of time, only go for a certain period/parts of the activity where your child is more likely to be able to successfully participate. If you know the time of day is a factor, consider that too!
- 4. Choose supportive leisure activities and chores:** Match these to your child's level of coordination and tolerance. Every child is different, soccer is overwhelming for some and great for others who love running. Swimming can be a very supportive solo sport. Window washing is simple and repetitive. So is using a Swiffer!





Step #6: Be consistent!

This is VERY important. A sensory diet happens daily. It is not always done in a prescribed way such as “every 30 minutes” but is often best implemented when it can be embedded into daily routines and before/after activities that trigger an increase in arousal or when the child needs to get into a calm/alert state. Once you have identified the best times to incorporate movement breaks, make sure they are listed on your Sensory Diet Planning Worksheet.

Remember: Your child’s sensory diet is not just about toys and fidgets or seat cushions. It is about setting up a comprehensive plan to help your child stay connected, regulated, and focused throughout the day.

By making your child’s sensory diet a part of your lifestyle, scheduling it into your daily routine and making a toolbox to have “on the go,” you are MUCH more likely to make it manageable because you will be thinking differently about your SENSATIONAL LIFESTYLE.

And keep in mind that matching your resources with you child’s abilities and skill level is an important step in optimizing your child’s sensory diet so that it’s realistic and feasible.

Does it take some time in the beginning to explore and make a plan?

ABSOLUTELY

Will the extra time be worth it? DEFINITELY

How nice would it be to have less stress, less tantrums, fewer meltdowns, less redirection and more engagement?

You can and should enjoy spending time with your child and creating sensational memories for both of you!



Assessment:

Interests/Sensory Preferences

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

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Sensory Needs (Circle All That Apply)

Speed/ Movement	Resistance	Pressure
Noise Level (Quiet, Background Music, Noisy)		
Small Spaces	Oral (Suck, Chew, Breathe)	

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Tools for the On the Go Bag

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

+

Tools, Activities and Exercises for Optimal Self Regulation:

Energize

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Restore

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



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Sensory Lifestyle and Routines:

Environmental Supports

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Routine (Best Times of Day)

Sensory Break 1: _____

Sensory Break 2: _____

Sensory Break 3: _____

Sensory Break 4: _____

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Supportive Leisure and Chores

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

+





Final Words

I hope this resource provided valuable insight and support into optimizing your child's sensory diet. Remember that each child has a unique sensory system and needs. Make sure to include your child in the process of finding what works best. This discussion will start a positive collaboration between you and your child so that you can set your child up for success.

Once your Sensory Diet Planning Sheet is complete, organize your new sensory toolbox and pick a date on the calendar to begin!

Remember: This resource is meant for educational purposes only and not designed to replace the advice of a qualified sensory integrative occupational therapist who knows your child and likely also has some tools/activities that you never even thought about.

Be consistent! Change does not happen overnight. Just like we can't lose 10 pounds in a day by cutting out sweets and carbohydrates, changing the brain takes time. We can influence a child's self regulation through movement, sensory tools, and daily routines. As adults we know that doing or not doing any one of these things can make our day overwhelming or a smashing success! So stick with it for the next six weeks and see what happens!

If you felt this resource was useful, please email me at: admin@sensational-achievements.com and let me know!

If something was missing or unclear, I want to know that too so I can keep making it better for the families I serve!

Want more resources and advice? Like our [Facebook](#) Page, Subscribe to our [YouTube](#) Channel, and Follow our [Pinterest](#) Boards





Feeling stuck or overwhelmed? No problem! My staff and I are here to help!

To get more individualized guidance and support, please feel free to contact our office for a consultation, evaluation, and/or direct intervention.

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