



## Tips for a sensory successful summer

By Anne Trecker, M.S., OTR/L

**H**ot weather and the slower pace of summertime provide excellent opportunities for children to get increased sensory input through enjoyable activities. Learning new skills may be easier without the pressures of school.

For some children, however, with sensory issues who thrive on consistency, routines, and structure, summer can be disorienting and lacking needed direction. Transitions from school to a summer program or camp may be difficult, and vacations, even when enjoyable, can further disrupt a child's routine. Below are some suggestions to help children with sensory integration difficulties, and their parents, enjoy the summer months.

### Camps

**Inform camp directors and counselors about your child's special needs.** Uninformed people can misinterpret sensory defensiveness, gravitational insecurity, and motor planning problems as behavior problems. Explain the concept sensory integration dysfunction, point out your child's underlying difficulties, and discuss strategies that work for your child. OTA-Watertown can provide written materials to increase understanding. Ask your child's occupational therapist to speak with camp counselors.

**Include sensory diet items in your child's backpack.** A sensory diet consists of a variety of multi-sensory experiences that help a child to maintain self-regulation. (See "New Developments" 6:5.) A child's occupational therapist can develop a prescription for the "just right" sensory input to be implemented by parents, teachers, and other individuals working with the child during the summer months. Items often forbidden at school, such as sour foods, chewing gum, objects to squeeze, therapand strips, and putty, can easily travel to camp. Explain the sensory diet concept and the use of the objects to camp counselors so they will support their use.

### Trips

**Motion sickness.** Provide ginger in capsules, candied, or in foods. Acupressure wristbands, available at most drug stores, can also aid greatly in motion sickness. Chewing gum, pulling on a piece of therapand, or listening to music or stories through headphones can often alleviate motion sickness and general restlessness.

**Offer frequent movement stops.** When traveling by car, make frequent stops that include opportunities for movement. Pushing against a parked car during a quick stop can provide the much needed heavy work input. Use rest stops for more than just bathroom breaks. Toss a Frisbee or play ball.

**Establish routines even when away from home.** Have regular meal and bed times, except for very special occasions. This structure provides needed energy for the next day's activities.

**Continue sensory diet activities while away.** Bring a child's favorite, familiar toys and clothing to ease being away from a familiar environment. Try some massage and music for comfort.

**Educate relatives.** Remind family members about sensory integration problems and your child's need for a steady, balanced sensory diet and other accommodations that will make for a successful summer.

### Summer Sensory Activities

**Go to the playground often.** Climbing, hanging, swinging, and sliding are excellent sensory activities. An older sibling or friend can model play activities to help a child with motor planning problems.

**Move messy art activities outside for more sensory fun.** Invite your child to play in shaving cream, fingerpaint, draw with sidewalk chalk, and "erase" the pictures with a squirt gun. Instead of brushes, paint with sticks, pinecones, and cat's tails. Instead of paint, use water or shaving cream. Instead of paper, paint rocks, driftwood, and toenails. Add sand to paint for a new tactile experience.

**Go Swimming.** Water is an excellent environment for providing strong sensory input and for working on muscle strength and endurance. Attempt to include water activities every day. Try out all kinds of pools. Temperatures and chlorine levels differ. The chlorine might bother a child in one pool, but not another. Private pools may be less chlorinated than public ones. Cold water is harder to tolerate than warm. Indoor pools can resonate and may trigger auditory sensitivities not apparent outside. If possible, swim in fresh or salt water.

Use various equipment, including bathing suits of different fabrics, masks, snorkels, nose and ear plugs, until a child is comfortable. Swim laps, go under water, wade at different depths. Experiment with slip-and-slides to help older children gain confidence in their abilities on wet surfaces.

**Build obstacle courses.** Make the back yard into a maze with railroad ties, stepping stones, long boards, and large, sturdy boxes. Use flour or cornstarch to connect distant obstacles, sprinkling it on the ground in a tactilely pleasing and biodegradable path.

**Take hikes and bike trips.** Build children's stamina and endurance with short and gradually longer itineraries. Add hills and different surfaces. Plan a surprise reward at the destination.

**Go to the beach.** Encourage your child to build with sand, walk or run along the shore, and, of course, play in the water. To alleviate stress for the child who has tactile defensiveness, bring digging tools, beach shoes, extra clothes, and large blankets to control the amount of contact with the sand, if necessary.

### Have a Sense-sational Summer

Remember that walking in the grass, eating and drinking cold foods, sweating in the broiling heat are all sensory experiences. You don't always need special equipment to provide sensory integration therapy. Let kids use their imaginations and whatever is around, before buying new products. You never know what might turn into a great toy. It just could be that huge box the new clothes dryer came in. Remember making a clubhouse? I do.

*This article is an expansion of one by Anne Trecker, M.S., OTR/L, published in "New Developments" 4:4, Spring 1999. Anne is Clinical Assurance Director, Occupational Therapy Associates (OTA) – Watertown, MA.*