Recently, there has been a lot of ‘buzz’ around the term “SENSORY” … “sensory processing”, “sensory friendly performances” and “sensory seeking behaviors.” Even though these terms may be common in today’s lingo, they may be misunderstood. But they don’t have to be.

Sensory Processing (also known as Sensory Integration) is the ability to take in information from our environment through our senses and process that information to make a response. We are constantly bombarded by input from our environments through our sense of touch, smell, taste, hearing and vision as well as the sense of knowing where our bodies are in space and how to grade the speed and force of our movements. For most of us, this ability to process sensory stimuli is automatic and we are able to receive sensory messages and organize them efficiently into motor responses without even thinking about it. However, some children (and some adults) may have difficulty processing and using this sensory input, which can negatively impact their ability to interact and engage with the world around them.

Some children may be over-responsive or hyper-reactive to sensory information; they have increased arousal levels: they may perceive a light touch or a tickle as a punch or kick; they may not be able to stop feeling the tag in their shirt; they cannot “tune out” noises that go unnoticed by others (whispers of classmates or the hum of the air conditioner.)

Other children may present as under-responsive or hypo-reactive; their arousal levels are decreased and they may not hear or respond when their name is called; they may appear as tired or lethargic; or they may be clumsy or disorganized in their motor movements.

Because efficient sensory processing is the building block and foundation for learning and academic achievements, both our under-and-over responsive children may benefit from sensory strategies or sensory diet activities to jump start their nervous systems. The goal of these strategies and sensory diets is about meeting their sensory needs throughout the day, to keep them calm, focused, and alert enough to optimally function. And the key is to incorporate these strategies consistently, not waiting until something distracts or frustrates them.

Here is a brief list of sensory strategies that may be helpful for your child. Please remember that activities listed in below are ‘generic’ and basic ideas. It is important to remember that children can respond in different ways to sensory strategies.
Ideas To Increase Arousal/Activity Level:

- Eat crunchy foods (dried cereal, pretzels, raw veggies, crackers)
- Drink thick smoothies or applesauce through a straw
- Chew gum
- Jump on a trampoline or pile of pillows
- Sitting and bouncing on a large therapy ball
- Listen to fast-paced music
- Fidgeting with an object with the hands (stress or koosh ball)

Ideas To Decrease Arousal/Activity Level:

- Reduce lighting and noise
- Listen to soft music
- Warm baths
- Create a small, quiet place (tents, blankets, bean bag chair)
- Deep pressure or heavy work activities
  - “steam rolling” – roll a large ball on top of legs or back
  - Wall or chair push ups
  - Animal walks
  - Squeezing play doh or putty

When to initiate a sensory diet, how and where are important considerations. An experienced pediatric occupational therapist can provide specific and individualized recommendations to best meet your child’s needs. Let us know if you have questions.