

Heavy Work Activities List for Occupational Therapists --
Useful for Designing a Sensory Diet for Children with Sensory Processing Disorders
Compiled and Edited by Elizabeth Haber, MS, OTR/L and Deanna Iris Sava, MS, OTR/L

Following are activities that can be used to design a sensory diet for children with sensory processing disorders. The activities are divided into three sections. The first section lists therapeutic activities the occupational therapist can use during treatment sessions. The second section lists naturally occurring activities found within the school environment. The occupational therapist and school team can use these activities to design a sensory diet for a particular student. The third section lists naturally occurring activities found within the home environment. These activities can be used by the occupational therapist and family to design a sensory diet for home use. Special thanks to all the therapists who openly shared ideas!

Therapeutic Activities for Use During Treatment Sessions

1. Scooter Board Activities:

- Push scooter board to or from a designated location (sit or lie on stomach and propel with arms).
- Have the child pull him/herself up a ramp while seated or lying on stomach on a scooter board.
- Propel scooter board across a carpeted floor.
- Push the therapist or another person around on a scooter board.
- Have someone pull a child who is sitting or lying (on his/her stomach) on a scooter board, holding onto a rope or Hula Hoop.
- Have one child use a rope or Hula Hoop to pull another child who is sitting or lying (on his/her stomach) on a scooter board, holding onto the other end of the rope or the Hula Hoop.
- Have the child pull him/herself (using hand over hand movements) by a long jump rope tied by one end to a doorknob while seated on a scooter board with legs crossed and off the floor. You can also have one child hold one end of a jump rope while another child, who is sitting or lying on a scooter board, pulls him/herself with the other end of the rope up to the child holding the rope.” A variation is to play “army jungle maneuvers” where the child on the scooter board delivers secret messages to the other child, and that child (who is holding the rope) has to write a secret answer back to the commander (therapist). This could be incorporated into academics in lots of ways. For example, the first child can take a math problem to the second child, the second child solves the math problem and sends it to the commander (therapist).
- Find a hallway area and have the student lie prone on a scooter board. The student is positioned with feet on the wall behind him/her and pushes forward with hands in front to stop him/her (before crashing). Child can push back and forth from wall to wall. Obviously, students with delayed processing, motor planning difficulties, etc. are not appropriate for this activity. Also, a helmet should be worn if there is any concern that the child would be unable to react appropriately to this activity.

2. **Hippity Hop Balls.** You can use two ramps that fasten together at right angles and let the children hop up one, cross to the platform of the second ramp and hop down. After about 10-15 trips, it takes all the "aggressiveness" out of them for the whole day.

3. **Therapy Balls.** Push a large therapy ball across/around the room (can purchase weighted therapy balls).
4. **Heavy Ball.** Play catch, bounce and roll a heavy ball.
5. **Boxes.** Push square plastic nesting boxes from one room to another. A carpeted hallway provides extra resistance. One or two of the nested boxes can be removed to decrease the weight, and small balls and/or beanbags can be added to the box to increase the weight. You can also turn the smallest box upside down over the balls and beanbags to help distracted students complete the task.
6. **Wheeled Therapy Stool.** Push a wheeled therapy stool while someone is seated on it. If necessary, the person on the stool can assist by “walking” with his/her feet.
7. **Bubblepack.** Use it as part of an obstacle course. The child can jump onto it or run across it.
8. **Suitcase and Cart.** Pull the therapist's suitcase on wheels or therapy cart.
9. **Ramp.** Walk up a ramp or incline.
10. **Theraband or Tubing.**
 - Attach it to a door and pull it, then let it snap.
 - Two children can play “tug of war” with jump rope or heavy Theraband. (If you use the Theraband, children need supervision so they don't purposely let go of the Theraband and “snap” the other child).
11. **Play Wrestling.** Play a game of “play wrestling”: two people lock hands facing each other and try to see who can push and make the other person step back first. Use other body parts also, but be sure to have rules (no hitting, no biting, no scratching, if one person says stop then both stop).
12. **Row Your Boat.** Have two children play "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" sitting on the floor, holding hands, pushing and pulling each other.
13. **Stand Up.** Have two children sit on the floor, back to back, with knees bent and feet flat on the floor. They interlock their arms, and then try to stand up at the same time.
14. **Wood Projects.** Make wood projects requiring sanding and hammering.
15. **Jumping Games.** Play jumping games, such as hopscotch and jump rope.
16. **Therapy Ball for 2.** Push on a large therapy ball with someone else giving resistance from the other side.

Naturally Occurring Activities Within the School Environment (used to design a sensory diet with the school team):

1. Place chairs on desks at end of day or take down at beginning of day.
2. Erase the chalkboard/dry erase board.
3. Wash desks and/or chalkboard/dry erase board.
4. Help rearrange desks in the classroom.
5. Help the janitor with emptying wastebaskets, mopping the floor, etc.
6. Fill egg crates (small ones that students can carry) with books to take to other classrooms. Teachers could ask students to move these crates back and forth as needed.
7. Help the gym teacher move mats, hang them up, etc.
8. Take chewy candy breaks with licorice, Fruit Roll-ups, Starburst or Tootsie Rolls.

9. Take crunchy food breaks with dry cereal, vegetables, pretzels or popcorn.
10. Sharpen pencils with a manual sharpener.
11. Cut out items for display from oak tag.
12. Carry appropriately heavy notebooks to the office or from class to class.
13. Carry books with both hands hugging the book to the chest.
14. Push the lunch cart or carry a lunch bin to the cafeteria.
15. Staple paper onto bulletin boards.
16. In the classroom, fasten a large phone book to the bottom of the student's chair with heavy duty tape. The teacher can rearrange the student's schedule so the student has to move to a different location within the classroom (carrying or pushing his/her weighted chair) between certain subjects or activities.
17. Have student move several packs at a time of Xerox paper from the storage area to the school copy center.
18. Use the Ellison cut-out machine. Students can collect orders from teachers (who provide the paper and use these cut-outs for bulletin boards, etc.) and then press out the number of pieces required under the supervision of an adult. This very heavy work is a great strategy for organizing behavior.
19. Climb on playground equipment.
20. Swing from the trapeze bar.
21. Perform sports activities that involve running and jumping.
22. Run around the track at school.
23. Push against a wall. For younger students, you can use the idea that "the room feels small this morning. Can everyone help me push the walls out to make the room bigger?"
24. Fill up big toy trucks with heavy blocks, push with both hands to knock things down.
25. Have the student color a "rainbow" with large paper on the floor while on hands and knees.
26. Play "cars" under a table in the classroom where the student pushes the car with one hand while creeping and weight bearing on the other hand.
27. Open doors for people.
28. Use squeeze toys that can be squeezed quietly on the student's lap under the desk so that the student does not disturb the class.
29. Do chair push-ups.
30. Do animal walks (crab walk, bear walk, army crawl).
31. Jump on a mini trampoline.
32. Stack chairs.
33. Take isometric exercise breaks.

Naturally Occurring Activities Within the Home Environment (used to design a sensory diet with the family):

1. Carry heavy items (baskets with cardboard blocks, groceries for Mom, etc.).
2. Chew gum, eat chewy or crunchy foods, or sip water from a water bottle with a straw while doing homework.
3. Push or pull boxes with toys or a few books in it (more resistance is provided if boxes are pushed/pulled across a carpeted floor).

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4. Fill a pillowcase with a few stuffed animals in it for weight. Child can then push or pull the pillowcase up a ramp, incline or stairs.
5. Take the cushions off sofas, vacuum under them, then put them back. Can also climb on them or jump and "crash" into them.
6. Pull other children around on a sheet or blanket.
7. Roller skate/rollerblade uphill.
8. Pull a heavy trash can.
9. Perform household chores, such as:
 - vacuuming,
 - sweeping,
 - mopping,
 - dusting,
 - carrying the laundry basket,
 - wiping off the table after dinner,
 - carrying buckets of water to clean with or to water flowers/plants/trees.
 - cleaning windows or the fronts of appliances, using a spray bottle,
 - scrubbing rough surfaces with a brush, and
 - helping change the sheets on the bed (then toss the linens down the stairs).
10. Perform yard work, such as:
 - mowing the lawn,
 - raking the grass/leaves,
 - pushing the wheelbarrow,
 - shoveling sand into a wheelbarrow, pushing the wheelbarrow to a spot, dumping out sand and using a rake to level it out (functional for filling in low spots in backyard).
 - digging dirt to help plant flowers.
11. Pull a friend or heavy items in a wagon.
12. Push a friend in a wheelbarrow.
13. Drink thick liquids (as in milkshake, applesauce, or Slurpy) through a straw. The thickness of the straw and the thickness of the liquid can be varied to change the degree of heavy work (sucking) required.
14. Carry heavy cushions.
15. Have pillow fights.
16. Play in sandbox with damp heavy sand.
17. Push chairs into the table after a meal.
18. Push a child's cart filled with cans and then put the cans away on a low shelf so that the child has to be on hands and knees (a weight bearing position) to put the cans away.
19. Participate in activities such as gymnastics, horseback riding, wrestling, karate, swimming (can also have child dive after weighted sticks thrown in pool).
20. Bathe the dog.
21. Wash the car.
22. Jump or climb in inner tubes.
23. Fill up a child's suitcase with heavy items (such as books) and push/pull the suitcase across the room.

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24. Pull a small suitcase on wheels.
25. Go "shopping" with a child's shopping cart filled with items, or have the child push the shopping cart when you go shopping.
26. Go "camping" by pulling a heavy blanket across a few chairs.
27. Rearrange bedroom furniture.
28. Put large toys and equipment away.
29. Participate in climbing activities (such as playground equipment).
30. Swing from the trapeze bar.
31. Push against a wall.
32. Fill up big toy trucks with heavy blocks, push with both hands to knock things down.
33. Participate in sports activities involving running and jumping.
34. On hands and knees, color a "rainbow" with large paper on the floor or with sidewalk chalk outside.
35. Play "cars" under the kitchen table where the child pushes the car with one hand while creeping and weight bearing on the other hand.
36. Walk up a ramp or incline.
37. Make wood projects requiring sanding and hammering.
38. Play a pushing game where two people lock hands facing each other and try to see who can push and make the other person step back first. Use other body parts also, but be sure to have rules (no hitting, no biting, no scratching, if one person says stop then both stop).
39. Two children sit on the floor, back to back, with knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Interlock arms, and then try to stand up at the same time.
40. Two children play "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" sitting on the floor, holding hands, pushing and pulling each other.
41. Open doors for people.
42. Do chair push-ups.
43. Play jumping games such as hopscotch and jump rope.
44. Jump on a mini trampoline.
45. Bounce on a Hippity Hop Ball.
46. Play catch with a heavy ball, or bounce and roll a heavy ball.
47. Do animal walks (crab walk, bear walk, army crawl).
48. Stack chairs.

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