




Autism Parenting
Magazine

Sensory Enrichment
Therapy: A New
Approach

Sensory Enrichment Therapy: A New Approach

Children with autism often have [sensory issues](#). They may be sensory seeking, or they may be sensory avoiding or even a little of both. For a child who is living with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), some textures can be very irritating. Sounds, crowds, lights or smells can upset them.



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Many sensory approaches already aim to help in this area, and that is great. It is a good idea to develop a sensory plan for your child to help him/her be more comfortable. One approach is to keep the child isolated from the sensory stimulation that is upsetting. Another approach is to give the child what seems to soothe and satisfy him/her. Some sensory approaches also try to expose a child to different sensory stimulations repeatedly so he/she can get used to them, hoping to reduce the child's negative response over time.

New approach for improved brain function

Sensory Enrichment Therapy (SET), not to be confused with Sensory Integration Therapy, is a new sensory approach that comes from an entirely different perspective. Although SET is effective at helping children with autism regulate their sensory-seeking and sensory-avoiding behaviors, that is not the only purpose of the therapy. Instead, it is designed to help improve brain function, which then results not only in improved sensory processing, but also in improved IQ, attention span, eye contact, speech, [social skills](#), and many other of the core symptoms associated with autism.

SET can be traced back to an accidental discovery made during research on animals by Donald Hebb in 1947. Pet rats would outperform lab rats in problem-solving tests. Why was that? Did the pet rats learn things from the humans? Hebb did not draw conclusions at that time. It was not until 1962 that Mark Rosenzweig discovered that it was the enriched environment the rats were exposed to, whether or not they were pets, which would result in larger, healthier brains.

To be the right kind of stimulation, the enrichment activity should involve the senses or movement and combine more than one sense or motion at a time. It is best when that combination is not normally found in a day-to-day experience and is interesting enough to capture the participant's attention. The stimulation should also be as pleasant and as free from distraction as possible.

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SET has taken the research from Environmental Enrichment and then “humanized” the protocols. It has found a way to introduce the right sensory stimulation and movement in a pleasant way, combining multiple sensory inputs or movement at once. There are now hundreds of protocols that strike that balance and are put together like games that you can play with your child.

Tips for sensory enrichment at home

Here are a few things you can do to introduce a little sensory enrichment at home:

1. Introduce a pleasant fragrance to your child several times a day while giving him/her a gentle, pleasant back rub with your fingertips. If the child doesn't like that, find a place he/she likes or will at least tolerate a gentle, pleasant touch, e.g., the cheek, forearm, forehead or the palm.
2. Following a bath or shower, have a warm towel ready to wrap around your child. (You can put the towel in the dryer for a few minutes to warm it). Give your child a foot massage and hand massage with scented lotion.
3. Place mats of different textures in a place where your child may frequently walk without shoes.
4. Set up the environment with more textures, smells, music, art, and other pleasant passive sensory opportunities.

These are things which can be done for free and can make a difference. If you can make a daily habit of sensory enrichment, you can begin to see improvements.

Structured Sensory Enrichment Therapy: Individual programs

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Structured SET involves more than just good sensory ideas such as those outlined above. To create an individual program, SET begins with an assessment that gives an idea of which areas of the brain to focus on, and therefore which daily sensory enrichment exercises to follow. A set of three or four exercises make up a worksheet that is followed daily. The therapy takes about 10 to 15 minutes, once a day.

Here is an example of one of the exercises that may be done in Sensory Enrichment Therapy:

- **Step 1:** The parent prepares two large bowls. One has warm water, and the other has cool water.
- **Step 2:** The parent instructs or helps the child place one hand in each bowl simultaneously. For example, the left hand in warm water, and the right hand in cool water, at the same time. If possible, avoid touching the bowls. We want temperature, but not pressure.
- **Step 3:** The parent swaps the bowls, and now the hands will feel the opposite temperature. Continuing with the example, the left hand is now in the cool water, and the right hand is now in the warm (Note that the child does not cross their arms, but instead the bowls are swapped).
- **Step 4:** Repeat swapping bowls and dipping the hands two more times, for a total of four hand dips.

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This exercise may be assigned, for example, if the initial assessment shows that it would be good to focus on improving the function of the corpus callosum, which is the main communication bridge between the two halves of the brain. Many complex functions require speedy interaction between both sides of the brain, such as speech, sensory processing, and math. Recent studies have linked issues with the corpus callosum and autistic symptoms. This water exercise would be combined with another protocol intended to prepare the brain for growth and repair. So, with the combination of these exercises, the ideal results would be improved corpus callosum function and improvements in the corresponding symptoms.

This is just one example of hundreds of exercises that may be assigned depending on the results of the assessment.

Powerful results for all ages

So, does it work? This is a very important question to ask of any approach. Some therapies, [diets](#), or other approaches seem to work better than others, which is normal. The good thing about SET is that its effectiveness has been the subject of three studies published in peer-reviewed journals. This means that it is not just supported by research, or 'based' on science, but is actually the subject of research itself. Here are the three studies measuring what happens when children with autism engage in SET:

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- Study 1: Showed a 9 point increase in raw IQ on average. 42% of participants improved on the Childhood Autism Rating Scale by 5 points or more. 69% of parents reported that their child improved. The article published in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Behavioral Neuroscience* won the D.G. Marquis award for best neuroscience paper of the year in 2013 from the American Psychological Association.
- Study 2: Replicated the first study, showed an 8 point increase in IQ, 11 point improvement in sensory profile, 7 point increase in receptive language, 5 point increase in expressive language. What's more, 21% of the children no longer qualified for the autism diagnosis on the Autism Diagnosis Observation Schedule (ADOS), the gold standard for an autism
- Study 3: Results from 1,002 subjects showed on average a significant improvement in learning, memory, anxiety, attention span, motor skills, eating, sleeping, sensory processing, self-awareness, communication, social skills, and mood/autism behaviors. Equally effective for all ages, including older teens.

The research concludes that SET and its new sensory approach to treating autism is effective for many children. Of course, the only measure that matters is if it works with your child.

Free program - just stick with it!

SET is done by the parent at home with their child and requires taking time every day to incorporate a new therapy. This is perhaps the “Achilles’ heel” of the therapy. SET works, but like introducing a new diet or exercise into your life, it can be hard to stick to.

At the same time, many parents have expressed appreciation for the fact that they get to spend quality time with their child, and they don’t have to drive anywhere for the therapy. Parents have also shared a feeling of empowerment to be directly in charge of their child’s recovery.

The full SET program can be accessed online for free. This free online version gives families everything used in the clinical studies, including a thorough online assessment in the form of a questionnaire, as well as video instructions for each exercise. For local support, parents can access over 200 professionals certified in SET. There is also currently an option to enroll in a platinum service plan and work directly with the creator of SET. You will find a wealth of information online.

Whether you are ready for a new therapy or not, SET looks like a new sensory approach that is here to stay!

Website: <https://www.mendability.com/autism/>

This article was featured in Issue 72 – Sensory Solutions For Life