

Strategies for HOME for students with sensory differences:

USE THESE SUGGESTIONS AS A STARTING POINT FOR YOUR CHILD AND FAMILY.
HIGHLIGHT IDEAS THAT FIT YOUR CHILD'S CURRENT NEEDS

1. ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN ROUTINES: Following an already established predictable routine or developing a new routine (e.g., keeping a consistent and predictable schedule that the child has done previously).

- **Morning Routine:** Continuing a consistent wake-up time, getting dressed in the same order, having breakfast at a set time, and following the same steps before leaving for school. For example, always brush teeth, then get dressed, then eat breakfast.
- **Evening Routine:** Sticking to a predictable sequence before bedtime, such as a bath at a specific time, reading a story, and then lights out. This could also include quiet activities like drawing or listening to calming music before bed.
- **Mealtime Routine:** Having meals at consistent times and in the same location. This could also involve a predictable order of what happens during and after the meal (e.g., clearing the table, then quiet play).
- **Sensory Breaks:** Scheduling regular sensory breaks throughout the day at predictable times. If a child benefits from quiet time, this could be a 15-minute break in a designated calm space after a certain activity.
- **Activity Transitions:** Providing a consistent warning before transitioning from one activity to another. For example, "In five minutes, we will be finishing playtime and getting ready for dinner."

2. ALLOW THE CHILD TO HAVE MORE CONTROL AND CHOICE in the environment:
Enhancing the perception of control by the child of either how the activity is completed or the environment in which it is completed.

It's wonderful to empower children by giving them more control and choice! It helps them feel capable and respected and reduces the 'no's' as a response. Here are some examples of how you can do that at home, focusing on how activities are completed or the environment in which they happen:

How an Activity is Completed:

- **Getting Dressed:** Instead of laying out a specific outfit, offer a selection of weather-appropriate clothing items they can choose from. "Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the green one today? And these pants or these shorts?"
- **Meal Preparation (Age-Appropriate):**
 - Younger children can choose between two healthy snack options (apple slices or a banana).

- Older children can decide which vegetables to include in a salad or how to arrange toppings on a pizza. "Do you want to put the tomatoes on first or the peppers?"
- They could also choose which type of bread to use for sandwiches.
- **Homework/Quiet Time:** Offer a choice of where they want to complete their work or quiet activities. "Would you like to do your reading at the desk in your room or at the kitchen table today?"
- **Creative Activities:** When drawing or painting, let them select the colors, type of paper, or even the tools they want to use (crayons, markers, watercolors). "Do you feel like painting with the big brushes or the thin ones today?"
- **Chores (Age-Appropriate):** Provide options for which chores they would like to do (within reason and safety). "Would you rather help set the table or put away the silverware after dinner?"
- **Bath Time:** Let them choose which bath toys they want to play with or the scent of bubble bath (if appropriate and safe). "Do you want to use the rubber ducky or the boat tonight?"

Environment in Which an Activity is Completed:

- **Reading Time:** Allow them to choose their reading spot – in their bed, on a comfy chair in the living room, or even outside on a blanket (weather permitting).
- **Playing:** If they have multiple play areas (e.g., their room, playroom, backyard), let them decide where they want to play.
- **Quiet Play/Relaxation:** Offer options for where they can have their quiet time. "Would you like to have some quiet time in your tent or on the beanbag chair?"
- **Listening to Music/Audiobooks:** Let them choose where they want to listen – in their headphones in their room, or together in the car.
- **Organizing Their Space:** While you might set overall expectations for tidiness, allow them some control over *how* they organize their belongings within their designated space (drawers, shelves). "How would you like to arrange your books on your shelf?"
- **Learning Activities:** If you're doing a learning activity together, ask if they'd prefer to do it inside at the table or outside (if suitable).

Key Considerations:

- **Age Appropriateness:** The level of control and choice should always be appropriate for the child's age and developmental stage. Younger children need simpler choices.
- **Realistic Boundaries:** While offering choices, it's important to maintain necessary boundaries for safety, health, and household functioning. The choices should be within reasonable limits.
- **Not All the Time:** It's not necessary or always practical to offer choices for every single activity. Pick moments throughout the day where it makes sense.
- **Follow Through:** Once a child makes a choice, try your best to honor it, unless there's a very good reason not to.

By providing these opportunities for control and choice, you're not only making your child feel more empowered but also helping them develop decision-making skills and a greater sense of autonomy. It can lead to increased cooperation and a more positive home environment overall!

3. PROACTIVE PREPARATION AND ANTICIPATORY PLANNING are fantastic ways to set your child up for success and make things smoother at home. Here are some examples, keeping in mind the unique needs of your child:

Anticipating Transitions:

- **Visual Schedules:** If your child benefits from knowing what's coming next (especially helpful for children with anxiety or sensory processing sensitivities), create a visual schedule for the morning routine, after-school activities, or even just a specific outing. This could use pictures, words, or a combination. Before the transition, review the schedule together.
- **Verbal Warnings:** For children who struggle with sudden changes, provide clear verbal warnings before a transition. "In five minutes, we'll be finishing up playtime and getting ready for dinner." You can even use a timer to make it more concrete.
- **Social Stories:** If your child gets anxious about a specific event (like a doctor's appointment or a visit from relatives), create a short social story that explains what will happen, what to expect, and how they might feel. Read it together beforehand.
- **Transitional Objects:** For younger children or those with separation anxiety, having a special comfort item (a small toy, a blanket) can help them transition between activities or locations. Make sure this item is readily available before the transition.

Preparing for Specific Activities:

- **Outings:**
 - **Sensory Needs:** If you're planning a trip to a local park, consider the potential sensory experiences. Will there be bright sunlight reflecting off the lake? Will there be the sounds of many people or wildlife? Prepare your child by talking about what they might experience and bringing along helpful items like sunglasses, a hat, or noise-canceling headphones if needed.
 - **Medical Needs:** If your child has allergies, pack safe snacks and necessary medication (like an EpiPen) and inform caregivers or hosts.
 - **Communication Needs:** If your child uses a communication board or device, ensure it's charged and readily accessible. Have visual supports or key phrases written down if needed.
 - **Comfort Items:** Pack a favorite blanket or toy for comfort during travel or waiting times.
 - **Movement breaks:** If a longer car ride is anticipated to visit family or attend an event in the Twin Cities, plan for regular movement breaks at rest stops or quieter areas along the way. This could involve a short walk, some jumping jacks, or stretching to help regulate their sensory system.

- **Clothing preparation:** Lay out clothing options the night before, considering the weather forecast for Wyoming. If it's a potentially itchy sweater day, ensure a soft undershirt is available. This proactive approach can prevent morning sensory meltdowns related to clothing textures.
- **Transitional warnings:** Before transitioning from a preferred activity (e.g., playing outside) to a less preferred one (e.g., dinner), provide a clear warning a few minutes in advance. For example, "In five minutes, we will be coming inside to wash our hands for dinner." This helps the child prepare and reduces potential sensory overload or meltdowns associated with sudden changes.
- **Preparing for visitors:** If you're expecting guests, discuss who will be coming and what the child can expect (e.g., "Grandma and Grandpa are coming over. There might be more talking than usual."). You could also designate a quiet space where the child can retreat if they feel overwhelmed.
- **Meal Times:**
 - **Sensory Sensitivities:** If your child has texture sensitivities, prepare safe foods that you know they will eat. Have different utensils or plates available if needed.
 - **Positioning Needs:** If your child requires specific seating for safe eating, ensure the high chair or booster seat is properly set up.
 - **Communication:** Have visual supports for food choices or "more" readily available if your child uses them.
- **Homework/Learning Time:**
 - **Attention Challenges:** Create a quiet, organized workspace free from distractions. Have necessary materials (pencils, paper, etc.) laid out beforehand. Break down tasks into smaller, manageable chunks.
 - **Sensory Needs:** Provide fidget tools or allow for movement breaks if it helps with focus. Consider using a slant board or colored overlays if they aid reading.
 - **Organizational Support:** Help your child organize their materials (folders, notebooks) at the beginning of the week to avoid last-minute stress.
- **Bedtime Routine:**
 - **Anxiety:** Establish a consistent and calming bedtime routine (bath, story, quiet time). Use dim lighting and soothing sounds.
 - **Sensory Needs:** Ensure bedding is comfortable and not irritating. Consider a weighted blanket if it provides comfort.
 - **Visual Supports:** Use a visual schedule for the bedtime routine if it helps your child understand the steps.

Preparing the Environment:

- **Creating Safe Spaces:** If your child needs a calm-down area, prepare a designated space with comfortable seating, soft items, and perhaps some calming sensory tools.
- **Organizing for Independence:** Arrange toys, clothes, and materials in a way that is accessible to your child, promoting independence in getting dressed, tidying up, or playing.
- **Labeling:** Label drawers, shelves, and containers with words and/or pictures to help your child know where things belong.

- **Adapting Materials:** Modify materials as needed. For example, use larger handles on tools if your child has fine motor challenges, or provide picture instructions for multi-step tasks.

The key to effective preparation and anticipatory planning is understanding your child's individual needs, potential challenges, and what supports them best. It takes observation and sometimes a bit of trial and error, but the payoff in terms of smoother routines and increased independence is well worth the effort!

4. ENSURING THE PRESENCE OF CERTAIN SENSORY FEATURES: Recognizing and leveraging the natural sensory features of a home environment or activity can be incredibly supportive for a child's participation! Here are some examples of how you can ensure the presence of these beneficial sensory features at home:

Movement & Vestibular Input:

- **Swinging Indoors:** If space allows, a gentle indoor swing (like a hammock chair or a small therapy swing) can provide calming vestibular input. The natural swinging motion is the sensory feature.
- **Rocking Chair/Glider:** A rocking chair or glider offers a more contained and predictable form of vestibular input that can be soothing during reading or quiet time. The rhythmic rocking is the key sensory feature.
- **Rolling/Somersaults on a Mat:** Encourage rolling or gentle somersaults on a soft mat. The natural movement of the body provides vestibular input and helps with body awareness.
- **Crawling Through Tunnels:** Fabric tunnels create a contained space and encourage movement, providing both vestibular and proprioceptive (body awareness) input. The act of moving through the tunnel is the sensory feature.

Deep Touch/Proprioceptive Input:

- **Weighted Blanket/Lap Pad:** A weighted blanket or lap pad provides deep, calming pressure, similar to the feeling of being hugged. The weight itself is the inherent sensory feature.
- **Firm Hugs:** Offering firm, intentional hugs can provide needed proprioceptive input, especially during times of stress or transition. The pressure of the hug is the sensory feature.
- **Squeezing/Squishing Toys:** Providing access to squishy balls, playdough, or other resistive materials allows for hand squeezing, which offers proprioceptive feedback to the muscles and joints. The resistance of the material is the sensory feature.
- **Helping with "Heavy Work" Activities:** Involve your child in activities that require pushing, pulling, or lifting (within their ability), like carrying groceries, pushing a laundry basket, or helping to move furniture (safely). The resistance and effort involved provide natural proprioceptive input.
- **Organized activities** like gymnastics may offer deep touch experiences.

Tactile Input:

- **Sensory Bins:** Create bins filled with various textures like dried beans, rice, pasta, water beads, or shredded paper. The different textures naturally provide a range of tactile experiences.
- **Water Play:** Even simple water play in the sink or a tub offers a variety of tactile sensations (wet, smooth, flowing), or swimming. The feel and resistance of the water are the inherent sensory features.
- **Playdough/Clay:** The malleable nature of playdough and clay allows for squishing, rolling, and manipulating different textures.
- **Different Fabrics:** Have a variety of fabrics available (soft blankets, fuzzy pillows, textured rugs) that your child can interact with and explore the different feels.

Visual Input:

- **Dim Lighting:** Using dimmer switches or lamps with softer light bulbs can create a calming visual environment, especially helpful for children sensitive to bright lights. The reduced intensity of light is the sensory feature.
- **Natural Light:** Maximize natural light where appropriate, as it can be more regulating than artificial light for some individuals. The quality and spectrum of natural light are the key sensory features.
- **Calming Colors:** Incorporate calming colors (blues, greens, soft pastels) in the environment, as these can have a naturally soothing effect for some.
- **Visual Schedules/Timers:** For children who benefit from visual structure, these tools provide clear visual information about routines and time, reducing anxiety. The visual representation is the supportive sensory feature.

Auditory Input:

- **Quiet Spaces:** Ensure there are designated quiet areas in the home where your child can retreat from overwhelming sounds. The absence of loud or chaotic noise is the key sensory feature.
- **Nature Sounds:** Playing calming nature sounds (rain, ocean waves, birdsong) can create a soothing auditory environment. The specific types of sounds are the sensory features.
- **White Noise Machine:** A white noise machine can help to block out distracting sounds and create a more consistent auditory background, which can be helpful for focus or sleep.
- **Music:** Offer a variety of music genres to explore different auditory experiences and allow your child to choose what feels regulating for them.

Olfactory (Smell) Input:

- **Aromatherapy (with caution):** Gentle, natural scents like lavender or chamomile (used safely and with consideration for any sensitivities) can be calming for some. The specific scent molecules are the sensory feature.
- **Fresh Air:** Regularly opening windows to allow fresh air in can improve the overall sensory environment. The natural outdoor smells are the sensory feature.

By being mindful of these natural sensory features and intentionally incorporating them into your home environment and activities, you can create a more supportive and enabling space for your child to participate and thrive. Remember to always observe your child's responses and adjust accordingly to their individual needs and preferences.

5. DIRECTLY MODIFYING THE SENSORY ENVIRONMENT OR ACTIVITY ITSELF is a powerful way to support a child with sensory differences.

Modifying lighting:

- **Lowering intensity:** Instead of relying solely on bright overhead lights, use lamps with dimmer switches to create softer, more adjustable lighting. This can be particularly helpful during evening hours or for activities that require focus, like reading.
- **Color temperature:** Experiment with different light bulb colors. Some individuals find warmer, yellower tones more calming than cool, blue-toned lights.
- **Natural light management:** Utilize curtains or blinds to control the amount of natural light entering a room, especially during bright summer days. Sheer curtains can diffuse harsh sunlight while still allowing some natural light in.
- **Reducing auditory input:**
 - **Using rugs and soft furnishings:** Incorporate rugs, upholstered furniture, and fabric wall hangings to absorb sound and reduce echo in rooms. This can create a calmer auditory environment, especially in open-plan living spaces.
 - **Quiet zones:** Designate a specific area in the home as a "quiet zone" where the child can retreat when they feel overwhelmed by noise. This could be a bedroom, a corner with comfortable seating, or even a tent.
 - **Appliance adjustments:** Choose quieter appliances when possible (e.g., a low-noise vacuum cleaner or dishwasher). Be mindful of the noise level of electronics like televisions and gaming consoles.
- **Modifying tactile experiences:**
 - **Clothing choices:** Opt for clothing made from soft, natural fibers that are less likely to irritate the skin. Pay attention to seams and tags, which can be bothersome for some individuals.
 - **Bedding adjustments:** Use soft, breathable bedding materials. Consider weighted blankets or compression sheets if they provide a calming sensory

input for the child.

- **Temperature control:** Maintain a comfortable and consistent temperature in the home. Be mindful of drafts or temperature fluctuations that might be bothersome. During Minnesota's cold winters, ensure heating is consistent without being overly hot and dry.
- **Adapting activities:**
 - **Messy play modifications:** If the child enjoys sensory play but is sensitive to mess, offer controlled messy play activities in designated areas (e.g., water table in the bathroom or playdough on a placemat). Provide tools like spoons or brushes to minimize direct contact.
 - **Food texture adjustments:** Be mindful of food textures during meal preparation. Offer a variety of textures and allow the child to choose what they are comfortable eating. Sometimes, slightly altering the preparation method (e.g., mashing instead of chopping) can make a difference.

6. FOCUS ON TECHNIQUES IMPLEMENTED WITH YOUR CHILD TO DIRECTLY MANAGE SENSORY INPUT. Check with your occupational therapist to get information about what kind of input would be most appropriate for your child:

- **Increasing Stimuli (Sensory Seeking):**
 - **Providing fidget toys:** Offer a variety of fidget toys with different textures (e.g., squishy balls, textured cubes, tangle toys) that the child can use during homework, while watching TV, or in the car to provide tactile input and help with focus.
 - **Creating a movement break routine:** Incorporate regular, short bursts of physical activity throughout the day, such as jumping on a mini trampoline, doing wall push-ups, or having a quick dance party to satisfy movement needs.
Sensory bins: Create engaging sensory bins filled with materials like dried beans, rice, water beads, or kinetic sand, along with scoops and small toys, for tactile exploration and play. These can be themed for different seasons or holidays.
 - **Heavy work activities:** Encourage activities that provide proprioceptive input (deep pressure), such as helping with chores like carrying groceries, pushing a laundry basket, or engaging in rough-and-tumble play (if appropriate and enjoyed).
 - **Oral motor tools:** If the child seeks oral sensory input, provide safe options like chewy tubes, crunchy snacks, or sugar-free gum (with supervision).
- **Decreasing Stimuli (Sensory Avoiding/Sensitive):**
 - **Use of noise-reducing headphones:** Keep a pair of comfortable

noise-reducing headphones readily available for situations that might be overwhelming, such as family gatherings, noisy restaurants, or even during homework time if there are distracting household sounds.

- **Creating a calming corner:** Designate a quiet, dimly lit space with comfortable seating (e.g., beanbag chair, soft blankets) where the child can retreat when feeling overwhelmed. Include calming items like weighted lap pads or soft toys.
- **Visual schedules with "quiet time":** Use visual schedules that explicitly include designated "quiet time" where the child can engage in solitary, low-stimulation activities like reading or drawing.
- **Wearing comfortable clothing:** Ensure the child has access to clothing made of soft, non-irritating fabrics without bothersome tags or seams.
- **Teaching calming techniques:** Work with the child to identify and practice calming strategies they can use when feeling overwhelmed, such as deep breathing exercises, counting, or visualizing a peaceful place (perhaps a scene from a local park they enjoy).

Adapted from:

Pfeiffer B, Coster W, Snethen G, Derstine M, Piller A, Tucker C. *Caregivers' Perspectives on the Sensory Environment and Participation in Daily Activities of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder*. *Am J Occup Ther*. 2017 Jul/Aug;71(4):7104220020p1-7104220028p9.