

Strategies for SCHOOL for students with sensory differences:

USE THESE SUGGESTIONS AS A STARTING POINT FOR YOUR STUDENT. HIGHLIGHT IDEAS THAT FIT THEIR CURRENT NEEDS.

1. Establish and Maintain Routines

Routines and predictability are key. When a child knows what to expect, they feel more secure and are better able to manage sensory input.

- **Daily Schedule:** Following the school's established daily schedule for classes, breaks, lunch, and dismissal. This predictability helps students know what to expect throughout the day.
- **Classroom Routines:** Maintaining consistent routines within the classroom for activities like starting the day (e.g., putting away belongings, checking the schedule), transitions between subjects, and ending the day (e.g., packing up, lining up).
- **Sensory Break Schedule:** If a student has identified sensory needs, incorporating predictable sensory breaks into their school day, either at set times or after specific activities. This could involve using a quiet corner, fidget toys, or engaging in a calming activity.
- **Arrival and Dismissal:** Establishing a consistent routine for arriving at school (e.g., hanging up backpack, going to their desk) and for leaving at the end of the day (e.g., gathering belongings, meeting at a designated spot).
- **Special Events:** Providing advance notice and as much predictability as possible for special events like assemblies, field trips, or changes to the usual schedule. This can help reduce anxiety associated with the unexpected.

Remember that the key is consistency and predictability. When routines are in place, individuals with sensory differences often feel more secure and can better manage sensory input.

2. Give the Child More Control and Choice

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.

Control Over How an Activity is Completed:

- **Choice of Materials:** Instead of dictating exactly what supplies to use, offer options. For a drawing activity, a child could choose between crayons, markers, colored pencils, or even different types of paper. For a building task, they might select from blocks, LEGOs, or recycled materials.

- **Flexible Task Completion:** Allow for different ways to demonstrate understanding. For example, instead of only requiring a written report, a child could choose to create a presentation, a poster, a song, or act out a skit.
- **Pacing and Time Management (within limits):** Where appropriate, let children have some say in how they manage their time within a given lesson. For instance, they might choose to tackle easier parts of an assignment first or spend more time on a section they find challenging.
- **Method of Presentation:** If they need to share their work, offer choices like presenting to the whole class, sharing with a small group, creating a video, or displaying their work.
- **Level of Challenge (differentiated tasks):** Offer different levels of complexity or variations of an assignment that cater to different learning styles and abilities. This allows children to choose a level that feels both achievable and appropriately challenging.
- **Collaboration Options:** When group work is involved, give children some say in who they work with (when feasible and developmentally appropriate) or what roles they take on within the group.

Control Over the Environment in Which it is Completed:

- **Choice of Workspace:** Offer options for where a child can work within the classroom. This could include sitting at a desk, on a cushion on the floor, at a standing desk, or in a quiet corner.
- **Sensory Considerations:** Provide choices that cater to different sensory needs. This might include allowing the use of fidget toys, noise-canceling headphones, or different lighting options (if available and manageable).
- **Arrangement of Personal Space:** Where possible, allow children to have some input into how their desk or personal storage space is organized.
- **Temperature and Ventilation (within reasonable limits):** While not always fully controllable by the child, teachers can be mindful of classroom temperature and ventilation and, where possible, make adjustments based on student feedback.
- **Access to Tools and Resources:** Ensure children know where resources are and can access them independently, fostering a sense of self-reliance and control over their learning tools.
- **Opportunities for Movement Breaks:** Integrate opportunities for movement and allow children some choice in when they take a brief stretch or movement break (within established guidelines).

By implementing these kinds of strategies, you're not just giving children choices; you're fostering their autonomy, self-motivation, and engagement in their learning journey. It helps them feel like active participants rather than passive recipients of education.

3. Use Preparation and Anticipatory Planning

Anticipate the unique needs of the child and prepare the child or other materials and strategies necessary for successful participation (e.g., plan movement breaks, plan jobs in the classroom).

Anticipating Unique Needs and Preparing the Child:

- **Social Stories and Visual Schedules:** For a child who experiences anxiety about transitions or new situations, create social stories that explain what to expect (e.g., "Going to Music Class," "Fire Drill"). Visual schedules can provide a clear and predictable structure for the day or specific activities.
- **Pre-teaching Key Concepts or Vocabulary:** If a child has a learning difficulty or is new to a topic, introduce key vocabulary, concepts, or skills before the lesson. This provides a foundation and increases their confidence during the main instruction.
- **Priming Interests:** If a child is particularly engaged by a certain topic (e.g., dinosaurs), connect upcoming lessons or activities to that interest to increase motivation and participation. For example, a math lesson could involve counting dinosaur eggs.
- **Practicing Transitions:** For children who struggle with changes in activity, practice the transition beforehand. This could involve a verbal warning, a visual cue, or a role-playing scenario.
- **Sensory Preparation:** If a child has sensory sensitivities, prepare them for potentially overwhelming environments (e.g., a noisy assembly) by providing options like noise-canceling headphones or a designated quiet space they can access.
- **Developing Communication Strategies:** For a child with communication challenges, work with them to establish effective ways to express their needs or ask for help (e.g., using picture exchange communication systems (PECS), sign language, or assistive technology).
- **Collaborative Goal Setting:** Involve the child in setting small, achievable goals related to participation or behavior. This fosters ownership and self-awareness.

Preparing Materials and Strategies for Successful Participation:

- **Differentiated Materials:** Have varied materials ready to accommodate different learning styles and abilities. This might include providing graphic organizers, manipulatives, sentence starters, or simplified texts.
- **Modified Instructions:** Anticipate where instructions might be confusing and prepare simplified or visual instructions.
- **Accessible Workspaces:** Ensure the child's workspace is organized and accessible, with necessary tools and materials readily available. Consider factors like lighting, noise levels, and physical accessibility.
- **Pre-arranged Movement Breaks:** For a child who needs frequent movement, proactively schedule short breaks throughout the day or within specific activities. This could involve stretching, walking to deliver a message, or using a wobble cushion.

- **Designated Classroom Jobs:** Plan specific, meaningful classroom jobs that align with a child's strengths and interests. This fosters a sense of responsibility and belonging (e.g., line leader, materials organizer, plant waterer).
- **Visual Supports for Behavior Expectations:** Create visual reminders of classroom rules or expected behaviors.
- **Prepared Positive Reinforcement:** Identify what motivates the child and have small, appropriate reinforcers readily available to acknowledge effort and participation.
- **Communication Plans for Support Staff:** If the child receives support from specialists (e.g., occupational therapist, speech therapist), have clear communication plans in place to ensure consistent strategies are used across settings.
- **Contingency Plans:** Think ahead about potential challenges and have backup plans in place. For example, if a specific technology isn't working, have an alternative activity ready.

By engaging in this kind of thoughtful preparation, educators can proactively address potential barriers and create a more predictable, supportive, and successful learning experience for every child. It demonstrates a commitment to understanding and meeting individual needs.

4. Ensure the Presence of Certain Sensory Factors

Sensory features that are naturally part of the environment or the activity (e.g., movement on the swings, deep touch input from the foam at gymnastics, the feel and resistance of the clay during art, darkness during a video).

- **Classroom jobs with sensory considerations:**
 - **Movement-based jobs:** Assign jobs that involve movement, such as delivering papers, taking attendance to the office, or sharpening pencils. This allows for built-in movement breaks throughout the day, which can be particularly helpful for children who are sensory seekers or need to regulate their energy levels.
 - **Quiet and focused jobs:** For children sensitive to noise or needing focused tasks, offer jobs like organizing materials, tidying shelves, or watering plants. These tasks provide a sense of responsibility in a less stimulating environment.
 - **Sensory material preparation:** Have readily available sensory tools or fidgets that the child can access discreetly when needed, such as a stress ball, a textured pencil grip, or a piece of smooth stone. Ensure the child knows when and how they can use these tools.
- **Environmental adjustments:**
 - **Designated quiet area:** Work with the school to identify or create a designated quiet space in the classroom or a nearby area where the child can go if they feel overwhelmed. This could be a corner with soft pillows, a beanbag chair, or noise-canceling headphones.
 - **Visual schedules:** Implement visual schedules for the day's activities. This helps the child anticipate transitions and understand the sequence of events, reducing anxiety related to the unknown.

- **Seating arrangements:** Consider the child's sensory needs when determining seating. Some children may benefit from sitting near the front for reduced visual distractions, while others might prefer a spot near a wall for a sense of personal space.
- **Preparation for transitions:**
 - **Pre-teaching routines:** Before a new activity or routine, pre-teach the steps involved. This can be done through visual aids, social stories, or verbal explanations.
 - **Advance notice of changes:** Provide advance notice of any changes to the daily schedule, such as a special assembly or a change in classroom location. This allows the child time to mentally prepare and adjust.
 - **Preparing for sensory-rich activities:** If the class is participating in a potentially noisy or messy activity (like an art project with finger paint), discuss strategies beforehand, such as wearing an apron, using tools instead of fingers, or having a designated quiet spot to retreat to afterward.

5. Adapt the Sensory Features of the Environment

Adaptations or modifications to the actual sensory features that are naturally occurring in the environment or the activity (e.g., reducing the noise in the environment, turning down the lights).

Adapting Sensory Features of the Environment:

- **Light:**
 - **Reducing Glare:** Use window coverings (blinds, curtains), apply anti-glare screens to electronic devices, or strategically position the child's desk away from direct sunlight.
 - **Adjusting Light Intensity:** Offer dimmer lighting options in certain areas of the classroom or allow the use of desk lamps to provide more focused, softer light.
 - **Color Considerations:** Be mindful of paint colors and decorations, opting for calmer, less stimulating hues in areas where focus is needed. Some individuals find specific colors more or less calming.
- **Sound:**
 - **Reducing Background Noise:** Use rugs, acoustic panels, or fabric bulletin boards to absorb sound. Establish quiet zones or designated quiet work areas.
 - **Providing Noise-Canceling Headphones:** Allow the use of headphones during independent work or in noisy environments like the cafeteria or assemblies.
 - **Using White Noise or Nature Sounds:** In some cases, a low level of consistent, calming sound can help mask distracting noises.
 - **Establishing Clear Noise Level Expectations:** Teach and reinforce expectations for noise levels during different activities.

- **Touch and Texture:**
 - **Providing Fidget Tools:** Offer quiet, non-distracting fidget toys (e.g., stress balls, textured pencil grips) to help students regulate their sensory input.
 - **Offering Different Seating Options:** Provide alternatives to standard chairs, such as wobble cushions, exercise balls, or beanbag chairs, which can offer movement and tactile input.
 - **Modifying Materials:** Offer art supplies or learning tools with different textures (e.g., smooth versus bumpy playdough, different types of paper).
 - **Allowing Comfort Items:** Where appropriate and not disruptive, allow the use of small, familiar comfort items (e.g., a soft blanket during quiet reading time).
- **Smell:**
 - **Being Mindful of Strong Scents:** Avoid using strong perfumes, air fresheners, or heavily scented cleaning products, as these can be overwhelming for some individuals.
 - **Ensuring Good Ventilation:** Proper airflow can help dissipate strong odors.
 - **Creating Scent-Free Zones:** Designate areas where strong smells are prohibited.
- **Movement (Vestibular and Proprioceptive):**
 - **Integrating Movement Breaks:** Build in opportunities for physical activity throughout the day.
 - **Providing Movement-Based Seating:** As mentioned earlier, options like wobble stools allow for subtle movement.
 - **Incorporating Heavy Work Activities:** Activities that involve pushing, pulling, or lifting (e.g., carrying books, stacking chairs) can be calming and organizing for some students.
 - **Allowing Standing Workstations:** Offer the option to stand while working.

Adapting Sensory Features of the Activity:

- **Modifying Art Activities:**
 - Offer different types of paint (e.g., finger paint vs. watercolor) or clay with varying textures.
 - Provide tools like paintbrushes with long handles for those who dislike getting messy.
 - Allow the use of gloves for tactile-sensitive students.
- **Adjusting Writing Tasks:**
 - Offer different types of paper (e.g., thicker paper, lined paper with different spacing).
 - Provide a variety of writing tools (e.g., different weights of pens, pencils with comfortable grips).

- Reduce the amount of writing required or break it into smaller chunks.
- **Adapting Gross Motor Activities:**
 - Offer modifications to games or sports to reduce the intensity or sensory input (e.g., using a softer ball, playing in a smaller space with fewer participants).
 - Provide visual boundaries or cues for movement activities.
- **Modifying Sensory Exploration Activities:**
 - Introduce new sensory materials gradually and allow the child to control their level of interaction.
 - Offer tools like scoops or tongs for children who are hesitant to touch materials directly.
 - Provide a "clean-up station" nearby.
- **Adjusting Auditory Instructions:**
 - Supplement verbal instructions with visual aids.
 - Break down instructions into smaller, more manageable steps.
 - Allow the child to record instructions to listen to again later.

By thoughtfully considering and adapting the sensory aspects of both the environment and activities, schools can create a more inclusive and comfortable learning space where all students can participate more fully and successfully. It's about understanding individual needs and making small changes that can have a big impact.

6. Implement Sensory Strategies

Use techniques that are implemented with the child to increase (e.g., use of fidgets) or decrease (e.g., wearing noise-reducing headphones) stimuli based on the child's needs and sensory responses to the environment or activity features.

Strategies to Increase Stimuli:

These strategies are often used for children who are sensory seekers or under-responsive to certain types of input.

- **Use of Fidgets for Tactile Input:** Providing a variety of fidget toys (e.g., textured balls, squishy toys, tangle toys) allows children to engage their sense of touch in a focused way, which can help with attention and self-regulation.
- **Weighted Lap Pads or Vests for Proprioceptive Input:** Applying deep pressure through weighted items can be calming and organizing for some children, helping them feel more grounded and focused.
- **Chewable Jewelry for Oral Sensory Input:** For children who seek oral stimulation, providing safe chewable items can meet this need in a less disruptive way than chewing on clothing or pencils.

- **Movement Breaks for Vestibular Input:** Incorporating activities like swinging (if available and appropriate), rocking chairs, or even short bursts of jumping jacks can provide the vestibular input some children need to feel regulated and alert.
- **Vibrating Seat Cushions for Tactile and Vestibular Input:** These can provide subtle movement and tactile stimulation that can help maintain alertness for some students.
- **Strong Flavored or Textured Snacks (when appropriate):** During designated snack times, offering foods with intense flavors or interesting textures can provide heightened oral sensory input.
- **Engaging in Activities with Varied Textures:** Encouraging participation in activities like playing with sand, water beads, or textured paints can provide enriching tactile experiences.

Strategies to Decrease Stimuli:

These strategies are often used for children who are sensory avoiders or over-responsive to certain types of input.

- **Wearing Noise-Reducing Headphones:** As you mentioned, these can significantly reduce auditory input in noisy environments like the cafeteria, hallways, or during group work.
- **Use of Sunglasses Indoors:** For children sensitive to bright lights, wearing tinted glasses or sunglasses can help reduce visual overstimulation.
- **Creating a "Calm Corner" or Sensory Break Space:** Designating a quiet area with reduced lighting, soft textures (like beanbag chairs or blankets), and minimal visual distractions allows children to retreat when feeling overwhelmed.
- **Providing a Visual Barrier:** Using a study carrel or strategically positioning a desk can help minimize visual distractions from the surrounding environment.
- **Wearing Comfortable, Loose-Fitting Clothing:** Avoiding tight or scratchy clothing can reduce tactile discomfort.
- **Using Scent-Free Products:** Ensuring that cleaning supplies, soaps, and other classroom materials are fragrance-free can help reduce olfactory overload.
- **Implementing Predictable Routines and Transitions:** Clear visual schedules and consistent routines can reduce anxiety and sensory overload associated with unpredictability.
- **Breaking Down Tasks into Smaller Steps:** This can reduce the overall sensory and cognitive load of a complex activity.
- **Offering Advance Warnings for Transitions or Noisy Events:** Preparing a child for an upcoming change or potentially loud event can help them mentally prepare and cope better.

The key to effectively implementing sensory strategies is **individualization**. What works well for one child may not be appropriate or helpful for another. It's crucial to:

- **Observe the child's sensory responses.**

- **Collaborate with the child, their family, and any relevant specialists (e.g., occupational therapist).**
- **Introduce strategies gradually and monitor their effectiveness.**
- **Teach the child how and when to use these strategies independently, fostering self-advocacy.**

By thoughtfully and collaboratively implementing these sensory strategies, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive environment where children with diverse sensory needs can learn, participate, and thrive.

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.