

Creating Sensory-Supportive Classrooms: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators

The sensory environment of a classroom plays a powerful role in shaping how young children feel, behave, and learn. When a space is either over- or under-stimulating, it can make it harder for children to regulate their energy, focus their attention, and fully engage with learning experiences.

Each child experiences their sensory world in a unique way. For some, the classroom may feel calm and comforting. For others, it may be busy, loud, or overwhelming. That's why it's important to step back and take a fresh look at your learning environment through a sensory lens.

A sensory-focused classroom audit can help you:

- Reflect on which aspects of your classroom are supporting children's regulation, comfort, and participation.
- Identify practical, achievable ways to create a more sensory-aware and responsive environment for every learner.

Tips for Completing a Classroom Sensory Audit

- Partner with a co-worker for a fresh perspective as you explore the sensory elements of your space.
- Listen to the children in your classroom community. Consider how you can gather their feedback and include their voices in shaping the classroom environment.
- Make it a regular practice. Classrooms are dynamic—spaces shift, and children's sensory needs evolve throughout the year.



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Interoceptive - Basic Body Needs



Access to regulate basic needs

- Provide easy access to restrooms and when in-classroom restrooms aren't available, provide visual supports helping children communicate with teachers when they need to use the facilities. For children who are still toilet-learning, provide frequent prompts to try and use the restroom.
- Provide access to drinking water through individual child water bottles, a drinking fountain, or water cooler. Ensure children can access food, even if they miss the designated meal or snack time.
- Provide materials to support temperature regulation such as blankets, hats, gloves, fans, cool wet cloths, etc.

What are we doing well?

What could we do to increase the sensory comfort?

Proprioceptive & Vestibular - Movement



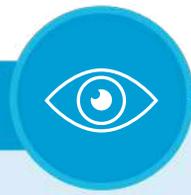
Movement Opportunities Within the Classroom

- Movement is incorporated into the classroom, wherever possible, to support student regulation and engagement in learning. Adapt classroom play centers to include space for sitting, standing, and create a dedicated space for anytime whole-body movement experiences.
- Students are allowed and encouraged to work and play in different positions including standing, kneeling or on their bellies on the floor instead of sitting on their chairs.
- Alternative seating options, like wiggle cushions and wobble chairs are available.

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Visual - Sight



Room Lighting

- Artificial light is used only where necessary.
- Fluorescent lights are checked and changed regularly (to avoid flickering).
- Flickering light coming in through blinds is minimized.
- Position reflective surfaces like whiteboards to minimize reflection/glare.
- Monitor position of sunlight shining in when sun is low.
- Avoid putting displays and posters on windows.

Wall Colors

Colors in the classroom can be over or under stimulating:

- Lots of bright color on the walls, such as red or orange, may be over-stimulating.
- Plain white walls with little color features may be under-stimulating.
- A calm/neutral backdrop with color accents helps to create a balanced level of stimulation. Examples of how to apply this include using accent colors through small area rugs, furnishings, pillows, wall displays and communication boards.
- Different wall colors can differentiate zones within the classroom. For example, a corner of the room painted pale blue stages the cozy corner area.

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Visual Displays

- Visual displays are clear, organized and contained within defined spaces in the classroom.
- Art and learning documentation is displayed in a designated space like on a bulletin board and are updated regularly.
- There is ample empty wall space. Recommended to have a minimum 20-50% of wall space be kept clear.
- Key information is visible from all play areas in the classroom. For example, class expectations and visual schedules.
- Whole class visual schedules are large and visible from a distance.
- To reduce visual clutter, use closed storage for rotation materials and resources.
- The classroom is structured into defined areas for specific activities to give clarity to environmental organization. Examples of areas include cozy area, interest area play centers, whole group areas, eating areas, etc.
- If present, the teachers' desk and area is kept organized and clear of clutter.
- If possible, student belongings (bags, nap blankets, change of clothes, etc) are kept in cubbies or another storage area to increase visual calm and organization.

Seating Options for Visual Stimulation

- Allow and encourage children to sit in ways appropriate for their bodies' needs. Offer visual displays of appropriate sitting styles.
- Provide a variety of work and play surfaces such as individual or small group tables and chairs, standing tables, and options for floor play.
- An individual work/play space in a less stimulating area of the classroom may benefit some students to maintain attention and concentration at specific times. This could include the use of furniture or other visual boundaries.

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Auditory - Sound



Noise Inside the Classroom

- Sounds from classroom equipment (Smartboards, computers) are:
 - At an appropriate volume level.
 - Switched off when not in use.
- Adults are aware of their own voice volume and pitch.
- Make sounds predictable through the use of clear routines, schedules and social stories.
- A voice volume chart can communicate clear expectations for noise levels in the classroom.
- An alternative quiet learning space is available in the classroom.
- Access to calming tools can support students to regulate and manage uncomfortable sensory experiences.
- Noise created from the movement of furniture and of people can be dampened by using carpet floor surfaces, protector pads on chair/table legs and encouraging students to lift their chairs.
- Classroom is fitted with soft furnishings to absorb sound vibrations. This may include acoustic panels, floor mats or felt notice boards.

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Auditory - Sound



Noise Outside the Classroom

- Consider the volume/pitch of the school bell/intercom. Invite students to comment on their sensory comfort with the volume.
- Windows are closed when necessary to avoid outside noise. For example, from street traffic or other students playing outside.
- The acoustics of the gross motor room, cafeteria and hallways are checked and modified. Use of soft furnishings and installing acoustic panels can absorb sound to control noise and can reduce echo.

Loud Noises

- Where possible, students are told in advance if a loud noise or alarm is going to sound.
- A quiet space is available for students who experience auditory sensory discomfort.

Music

- Using music in the classroom can create a regulated atmosphere.
- Music can be used at the beginning of class, during small groups or transitioning between activities.
- For some students, music may be distracting or overwhelming. Determine when music may be helpful for all students by involving them in the decision making.

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Tactile - Touch



Within the Classroom

- Students who experience intense sensory responses to touch are provided with options to be away from high traffic areas to minimize the risk of other students bumping into them.
- Visuals are used to clarify boundaries for personal space where appropriate. For example, use carpet samples or cushions during floor time.
- There is a clear system for lining up for transitions. Some students may prefer to be at the front or the back of the line so they only have one person beside them.

Hallway Transitions

- There are systems in place in hallways to reduce the risk of students bumping into each other. For example, students always walk on the right side of the hallways.

Fidget Items

- Fidget items are available to students who require tactile input to focus.
- A visual guide to using fidgets may support students who wish to access the fidgets while also minimizing distractions for other students who choose not to access them.

Sand/Water/Sensory Play

- Provide a variety of sensory base materials for use in sensory tables.
- Offer tools to accommodate limited tolerance to various tactile stimulation: wet wipes, hand towels, soap & water, hand sanitizer, scoops, tongs, individual sensory bins, etc.

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Olfactory - Smell



Smells Within the Classroom

- Odors from paints, glues and cleaning fluids are minimized.
- Student may experience intense sensory responses to everyday smells in the classroom. For instance perfumes or food. Ventilating the room by opening windows is advised.
- Calming or alerting scents that come from essential oils should be researched and only used in accordance with program health and safety standards

Smells Outside the Classroom

- The impact of outdoor odors (fertilizer, hydrogen sulfide in sprinkler system water, car exhaust, etc) is minimized.
- The impact of odors from the building's kitchen/cafeteria, restrooms and diaper changing areas is minimized.

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