

The Educator's Sensory Toolbox

Erin Wilke, MA, OTR/L

Objectives

- 1- Identify the behaviors in the classroom that may be an indication of sensory dysfunction
- 2- Strategize techniques that may be helpful for a variety of sensory disorders
- 3- Implement mostly no cost (some low cost) ways to support these children and their sensory needs

Sensory Children

- Many autistic children have sensory challenges that make classrooms challenging
- Many teachers who work with autistic children are already aware of this and are making adjustments in their classrooms to support these children
- Using sensory strategies in the classroom should benefit ALL children, and not just autistic children with sensory challenges.
- Movement is critical for ALL children!
- Recess is not optional
- Focus on joy at school- a happy child tries harder and learns more

Sensory-Based Classroom Behaviors

Sensory Over-Responsivity (SOR)

Symptoms

- Does not like others standing close
- Afraid of kids who move quickly
- Difficulty participating in groups
- Struggles to tolerate sights, sounds, smells, and tastes in cafeteria

Strategies

- Keep classroom quiet at times when children must concentrate.
- Allow child to build up tolerance to group work, starting in pairs, then triads.
- Provide movement breaks to help regulate arousal.
- Position child at end of line

Sensory Under-Responsivity (SUR)

Symptoms

- Slouches in chair or against wall
- Difficulty paying attention and answering questions
- Takes extra time to process others' requests

Strategies

- Wake up their bodies with fun, jazzy music, shakes, and wiggles.
- Allow water bottles on their desk with lemon water.

Sensory Craving (SC)

Symptoms

- Difficulty sitting still, may wiggle around incessantly
- May often touch objects and peers
- Difficulty interacting appropriately with peers (may be in their face or space)

Strategies

- Allow movement breaks throughout day.
- Create smaller, less stimulating spaces so child can focus.
- Include regulating routines in your schedule (e.g., yoga pose, deep breathing).

Postural Issues

Symptoms

- Falls out of chair
- Poor muscle tone
- Weak core strength
- Difficulty with fine and gross motor skills

Strategies

- Provide opportunities to work on strengthening exercises.
- Evaluate need for seating adjustments (e.g., ensure feet can touch the floor when sitting).

Dyspraxia (difficulty motor planning)

Symptom

- Difficulty with fine motor tasks (e.g., writing letters, cutting with scissors)
- Challenges with gross motor tasks (e.g., climbing, playing soccer)
- Trouble with sequencing tasks (e.g., craft projects)
- Difficulty generating ideas for play because they have trouble following others' ideas

Strategies

- Break tasks into smaller chunks.
- Encourage children to invent ideas (even if silly).
- Try catching medium-size ball before small ball.

Environmental Factors

- What is your classroom environment?
- What is the overall student behavior in the class?
- What behaviors are typically acceptable in class?
- Do self regulation strategies improve behavior and learning?

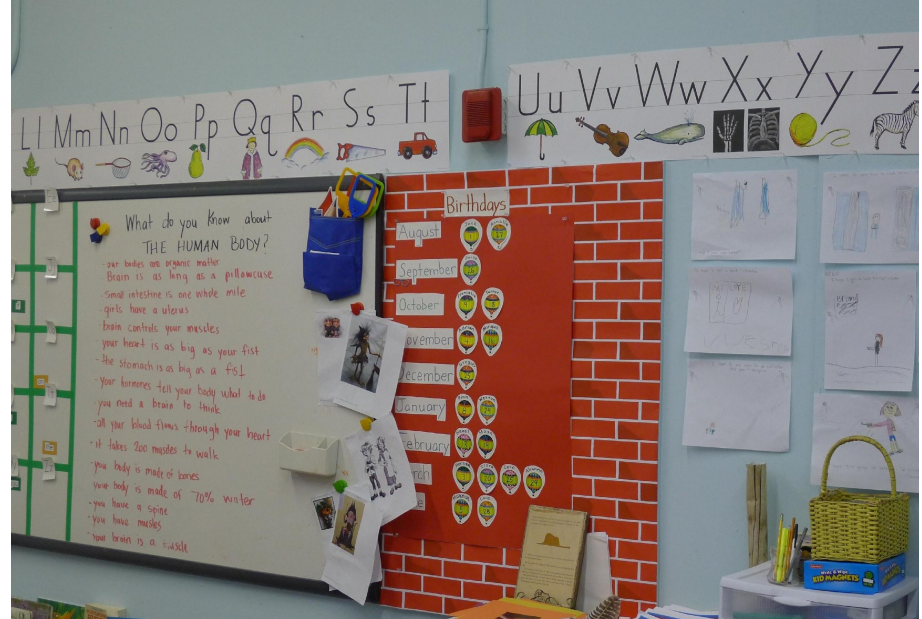
Environmental Modifications

Auditory



Welcome to the acoustically-friendly (left) and acoustically-unfriendly classrooms!
As you compare the rooms, what features either ease or add to the teacher's vocal burden?

Visual

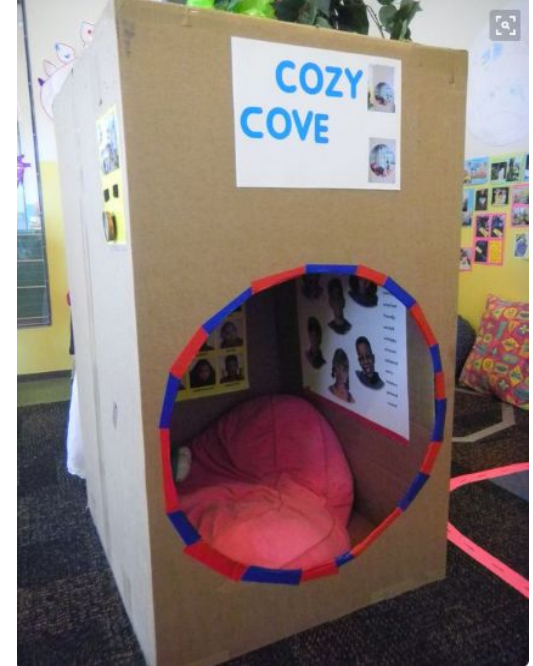


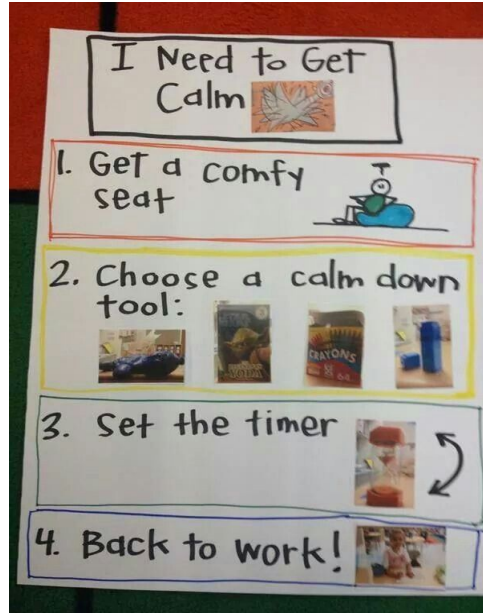
Visual

- Curtains/Tapestries
- Limiting to 1 or 2 color schemes
- Study carrels
- Provide a comfortable retreat area (pillows, bean chairs, blankets, headphones)
- Fidget corner
- Scents

Alerting: Lemon, Cinnamon, Mint

Calming: Lavender, Eucalyptus





Visual

Visual Boundaries

- personal space
- delineate movement breaks/calming space

Visual Schedules

- words, icons, photos
- help with transitions

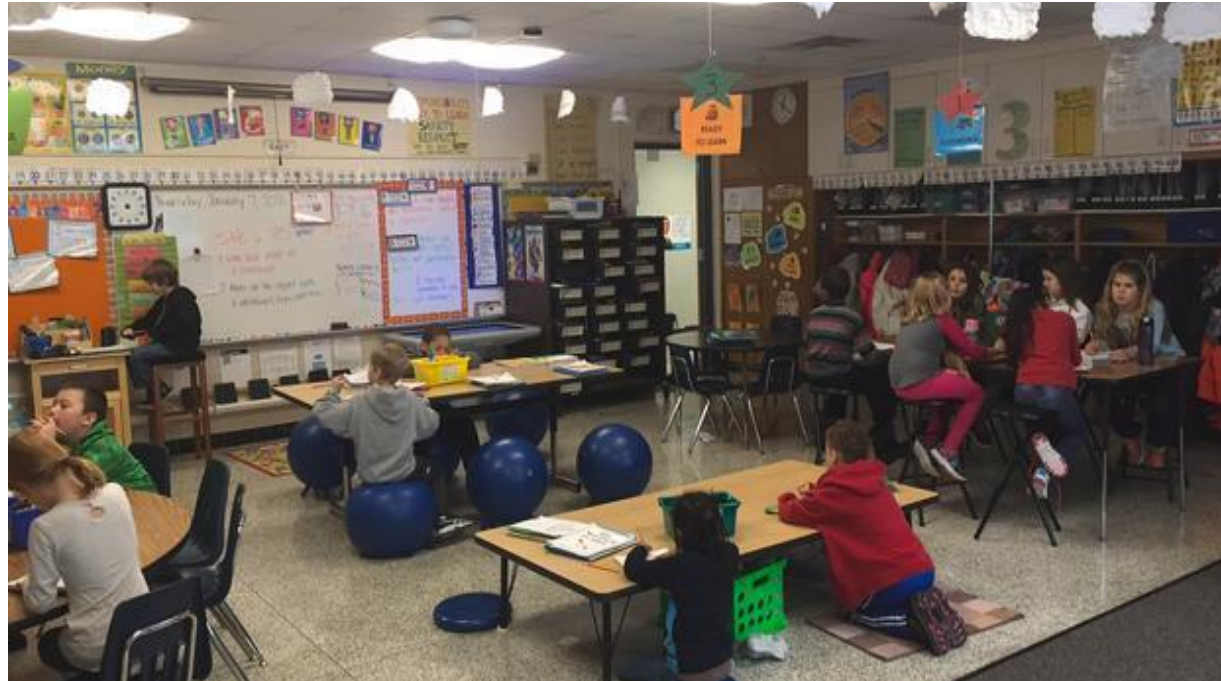
Lighting

- natural or lamp light versus fluorescent

Flexible Seating



Flexible Seating



General Classroom Strategies

"When the body is inactive for 20 minutes or longer there is a decline in neuronal communication." -*Kinesthetic Classroom*, Lengel and Kuczala

- Classroom Yoga (Cosmic Yoga is great)
- Brain Breaks (Go Noodle)
- Have students physically transition from activity by using music with a good beat to march, jump, skip, clap your hands.
- Utilize sensory input throughout activities
 - have student pass around tactile objects relating to the story
 - coordinate body movements with spelling words
- Incorporate tactile activities in free play, such as play dough, a box of beans, box of sand, soft fabrics like fur and silk

General Classroom Strategies

Classroom Jobs

- Passing out/collecting class supplies
- Delivering items to office or other classes
- cleaning
 - sweeping, stacking chairs, wiping tables, taking out trash
- hanging artwork
- watering plants



Sensory Strategies in the Classroom

Sensory strategies should be:

- Structured
- Based on current sensory needs (need input from OT)
- Choice Based (pictures are helpful)
- Monitored for effectiveness
- Possibly implemented within a behavior plan

Thank you!

Erin Wilke OTR/L

Owner at Treehouse Therapy, PLLC

(423) 708-4445

erin@treehousetherapytn.com

www.treehousetherapytn.com