



## Creating a Sensory Friendly Classroom

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As a classroom teacher, have you ever said to yourself, “If I could only get my students to sit in their seats, I know that they could accomplish so much”?

It can be very challenging to work with super smart children who have a difficult time sitting still, focusing, and attending to tasks. You know how much potential your students have; yet you can’t get them to sit still long enough to focus.

Children on the autism spectrum tend to have many sensory needs. There are those who are overwhelmed, and others who are underwhelmed by sensory stimuli. The classroom environment can really be your biggest enemy if it’s not set up in a way that meets your students’ needs.

The good news is, it doesn’t take long or a lot to create a sensory friendly environment that promotes on-task skills, respects your students’ sensory needs, and is also tons of fun.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself, and suggestions to get you and your students on the right track:

1. **When do your students have the most difficult time sitting still?** When do your students seem the most off-task and agitated? When do you find yourself most often saying, “sit down,” “quiet down,” “hands to yourself,” and “do your work?” Write everything down. Take data. You don’t need to create overwhelming, complicated charts and graphs. Just write down what you see. The more you know and take note of, the easier it will be to create a sensory-friendly environment. Observe your students; it’s as simple as that, and absolutely necessary.
2. **Do you play music in your class?** Music can be extremely calming for some children, but that same song may agitate another student. Be aware of the

environment that you create in your classroom. Even though *you* may find classical or spa music relaxing, some of your students may feel like they are actually listening to rock and roll. Many children with auditory sensory challenges report that they tend to hear many different sounds at the same volume. Your voice, the air conditioning humming, pencils scratching on paper, and the music you are playing, may all come in at the same volume. How overwhelming is that?

3. **Do you use scented plug-in candles, or wear a lot of perfume?** Scents can be extremely distracting and overwhelming for some students. The same challenge with playing music in your classroom goes for scents. Smells that you find calming may be stimulating for others. Many perfumes, candles, and plug in air-fresheners also contain harsh chemicals that can really irritate a sensitive person. If you feel like you must use perfume or air freshener in your classroom, try using natural scents like lavender. The best plan though is not to use any scents at all. Another thing to take into consideration is your perfume or cologne; while you may find the smell pleasurable, it may drive your students crazy. Don't take this personally, but rather, respect the needs of those surrounding you.
4. **Does your classroom have fluorescent lights?** People with autism talk often about how absolutely horrible fluorescent lights are. Temple Grandin and Rudy Simone shared how they can actually see and hear the flickering of the lights. If you get only one thing out of this article, this should be it: It is very important to get rid of fluorescents in your classroom. **Use natural light in your classroom whenever possible.**
5. **How long do your students sit for any one lesson or activity?** Many teachers provide various activities throughout the day, so their children don't have to sit in their chairs for more than 15 minutes. This is awesome! Switch things up in your classroom. Create stations for different subjects, so students can transition and move around. Allow students to stand at their desks if they need it, or encourage them to sit on a yoga ball.
6. **How often do your students get to move around?** You should not only pay attention to how long your students' in-seat activities last, but also to how many movement opportunities there are throughout the day. You should incorporate movement all day long. Besides creating stations for your students to move between, you can also provide stretching and dancing breaks. Let your students stand up, jump around, twirl, and then sit back down. Respect their need (and your need) for movement.
7. **Do your students sit very close to each other? Do you observe more challenging behaviors during circle time and floor activities?** Many students with autism do not thrive when sitting near other kids. They do much better

when they have their own personal space. You can put carpet squares on the floor so that each student knows where he or she should sit, or instead of sitting on the floor, perhaps they can sit on chairs. Teach your students that during certain activities, there should be at least one arms-length between them and their friends sitting next to them.

- 8. Do you know what sets your students off and what calms them?** Keep a journal and ongoing list of what activities, sounds, and stimuli trigger each of your students. Also, what successful strategies can be used to calm each student down? This is a great question to ask parents at the beginning of each school year and then again halfway through the year. Children grow and change, and so do their sensory challenges and sensory soothing techniques. Families are the most valuable resource you have, so be sure to communicate with them!
  
- 9. Do you know what occurs in your students' lives before and after school?** Many children experience a tumultuous time even before they step in the door of your classroom. Perhaps they didn't eat breakfast, didn't sleep all night, or maybe they just started a new medication. Talk to families. Ask questions. Be sure you have a communication system set up so that families can share this information with you quickly and easily.
  
- 10. Do you have a safe space set up for your students so that they can calm themselves down?** Classroom space can be very limited, but try to set up an area in your classroom where your students can go to unwind. This can be a desk with a sheet over it, or even a corner with a beanbag and a tent. Be sure to monitor your students in this area to ensure that they are safe. Provide them with calming toys like squeeze balls, fabrics, or calming music (if they find that calming). When you notice your students are over-stimulated and can use a break, encourage them to go to this area.

There are many activities you can create in your classroom to help meet the needs of children with autism and sensory challenges. When you find something that works, be sure to share the strategy with families and caregivers. Also, write down successful and unsuccessful techniques in each child's file, so that the next teacher the following school year knows what works and doesn't work.

**Together, families, educators, and children can create sensory-friendly environments to improve the quality of life for everyone involved!**