

Becoming Sensory Aware:

Structuring the classroom for students with sensory processing challenges

The following suggestions present a potential benefit to a wide spectrum of students with varying sensory processing abilities. This list includes strategies to integrate when structuring instruction and setting up the classroom for your class as a whole, as well as specific techniques to implement with individual students. However, should you have concerns regarding a particular student's ability to successfully function and participate in the school environment, please consult your school occupational therapist and school based team for further recommendations.

To support students with auditory sensitivities, defensiveness, or processing difficulties:

- Be aware of distracting or irritating noises in your classroom including rattling air ducts, squeaky chairs, or humming florescent lights. Work with school maintenance personnel to replace old bulbs or tighten loose squeaky furniture, and position students with auditory processing challenges away from distracting sounds when possible.
- Cover your classroom intercom speaker with fabric to buffer the harsh volume.
- Allow students to use earphones or earplugs to cancel distracting noises during independent work sessions.
- Ensure you have the attention of the class before offering verbal instructions and keep verbal directive simple and concrete.
- Support student's ability to follow multi-step verbal directions by posting a written or picture sequence of tasks.
- Position the student away from the hallway door, windows, pencil sharpener, computer, or other sources of distracting noise.
- Warn the students about upcoming fire drills, suggest that they may cover their ears if needed, and discuss procedures and expectations prior to the alarm.

To support students with tactile sensitivities or defensiveness:

- Avoid unexpected touch, such as placing your hand on the child's shoulder.
- Offer students clearly defined space by using individual carpet squares when gathering for group instruction.
- Allow students with sensitivities to stand at the front or end of the line to minimize contact with other students.
- Clearly mark students' individual workspaces with colored vinyl tape when using work tables or clusters of desks.
- Allow students with sensitivities to sit at the end of a table, or position desks separately in a low traffic part of the classroom to minimize unexpected touch.
- Prior to introducing games involving physical contact, prepare the student by speaking to them individually about what to expect, and what to do if they are uncomfortable.
- Provide opportunities to explore new tactile sensations such as textured finger painting, modeling clay, and hands on science projects.
- Do not force students with severe responses to tactile input to engage in aversive activities. Provide the student with tools to minimize tactile contact, ensure the student has a damp towel available and allow them to wipe their hands when they are ready.

To support students with poor body awareness and motor planning skills:

- Provide "heavy work" activities that involve pushing, pulling, or carrying heavy items.
- Use grease pencils, chalk, or weighted pencils to offer increased resistance and feedback during writing or drawing tasks.
- Break motor activities down to small manageable steps and allow ample time for students to practice new motor skills.
- Offer increased input to the muscles and joints by weighting the students pencil box, lunch sack, and backpack.
- Ensure that choices are offered during physical education, so students may select a preferred activity if another is too daunting or challenging.
- Use a visual marker such as a wall or strip of tape to maintain order when lining up.
- Lead students in group stretching and exercises prior to seatwork to offer helpful sensory input that facilitates an improved awareness of the position of the body in space.
- Provide ruler guides or cardstock windows to focus visual attention when reading.
- Allow extra time to complete written work or reduce the length of assignments for students who struggle with written production.
- Try a variety of pencil grips or place colored tape at the pencil tip to help students grasp writing instruments in an efficient position.
- Ensure the students' desks and chairs are accurately adjusted to allow their feet to rest firmly on the floor with the writing surface at an appropriate height.
- Offer the student alerting and organizing input by gently pressing down on his or her shoulders as you pass their desk.

To support students with visual processing difficulties:

- Use alternative lamp lighting versus overhead fluorescents or hang sheer fabric to reduce the harsh glare and distracting flickering.
- Be aware of sun glare and use blinds or curtains to filter bright sunlight.
- Reduce classroom clutter and store class materials in opaque containers.
- Ensure that desks are positioned to allow students to face the front of the classroom when instruction is given or when copying information from the whiteboard.
- Keep bulletin boards and art displays simple and organized and avoid hanging artwork from the ceiling.
- Use cardboard study carrels to eliminate visual distractions during testing or independent class work.
- Offer alternative types of writing paper, such as highlighted, graphing or raised line paper, to assist with orientation of math computations and writing legibility.
- Provide popsicle sticks or strips of brightly colored paper for students to use as "spacers" when writing.
- Have students use color-coded folders (can match with textbook covers) to keep papers and class work organized.
- Use white board marker that offer high contrast, and consider providing handouts to reduce energy spent copying lengthy notes from the board.
- Provide time each week for students to organize their desks and discard clutter.
- Have students clear their desks of unnecessary items prior to seatwork.