

Sensory 'Friendly' Classroom

To be able to set up a sensory 'friendly' classroom at school, we need to first understand our sensory systems. A total of 8 sensory systems!

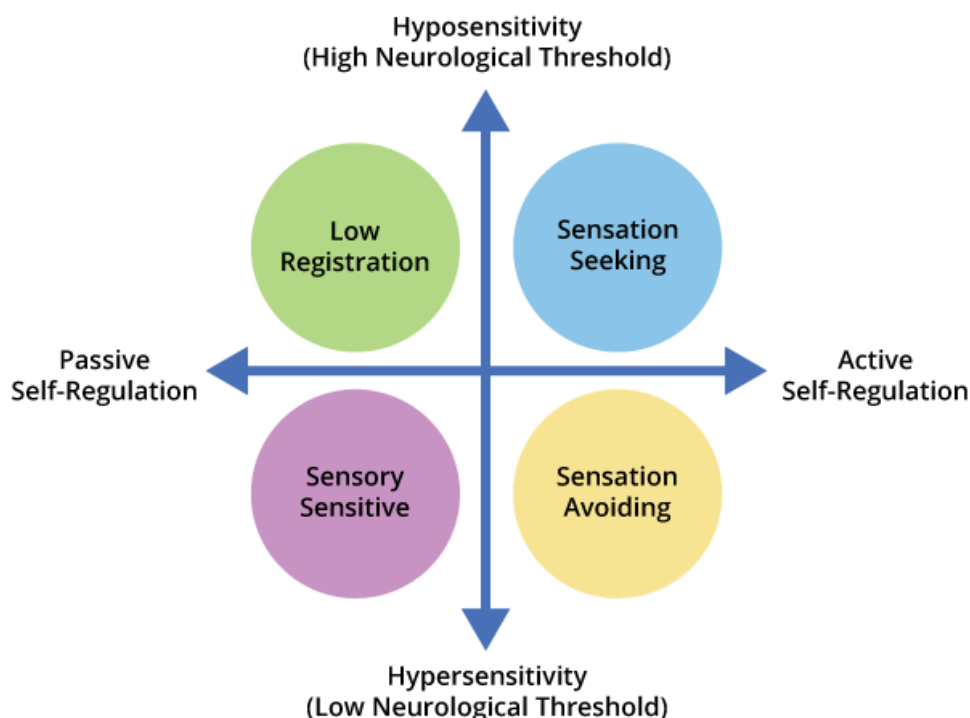


For more information on the 8 sensory systems: [Your 8 Senses | STAR Institute](#)

In everyday life, children will receive various sensory input in the classroom, such as the wall decoration in the corridors, verbal instructions from the teacher, art and craft materials they touched, etc.

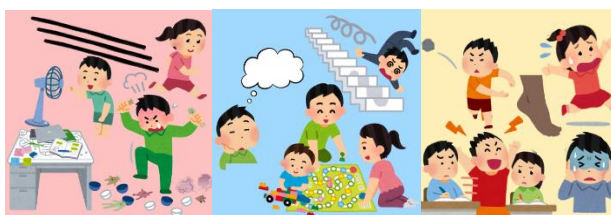
If sensory processing functions typically, children can adapt to all the information coming in. However, if a child/ young person experiences sensory processing challenges, everyday sensations can be unnoticed, uncomfortable, painful, or distracting. It can even trigger children/ young person's fight or flight response. Sensory input from the classroom can impact children's behaviour, ability to learn and functioning and therefore, it is important to adopt a sensory-friendly classroom environment.

You may have children in your classroom who fall under the following 4 sensory quadrants:



There are four types of sensory processing: **low registration**, **sensation seeking**, **sensory sensitive**, and **sensation avoiding**.

1. **Low registration** – These children don't notice various sensory information around them, and they don't try to seek it out. They might seem uninterested, quiet, or unaware of what's happening and often tend to daydream.
2. **Sensation seeking** – These children also miss some sensory information, but they make up for it by actively looking for more. They might be very active, impulsive, restless, frequently touch things or people, or take risks like jumping from high places.
3. **Sensory sensitive** – These children notice and feel overwhelmed by sensory input, but **don't try to escape it**. Instead, they might get easily frustrated, distracted, or uncomfortable in loud, bright, or busy environments.
4. **Sensation avoiding** – These children feel overwhelmed by sensory input and **actively try to escape it**. They might cover their ears, avoid messy activities, or leave noisy areas to feel more comfortable.



To support children/ young people with different sensory needs, setting up a sensory 'friendly' classroom can make a big impact on learning and participation!

How can we make the classroom sensory friendly?

1. Classroom Design

Color scheme & Décor:

- Keeping areas clear where most instructions will take place.
- Consider the lighting in the classroom.
- Ideal to keep the wall relatively empty behind the area where most learning takes place.
- Avoid classroom clutter by providing containers for toys labelled with a picture of items found inside.
- Too many pictures, charts and decorations create visual 'noise'. Visual 'noise' makes it difficult for all students to process other sensory information, such as verbal directions, due to the amount of focus being used to sort through the visual cluster.

Physical arrangements:

- Areas in the classroom, where different sensory needs can be met.
- Sit children who are more easily distracted away from the busier classroom areas and close to the teacher.

Movement Areas:

- Trampoline
- Therapy ball
- Rocking chair

Quiet corner:

Quiet and dark tent/ space which is for students requiring less input.
e.g. Dark tent, blanket over table

Seating options:

- Incorporating flexible seating.
- Seats facing the main instruction area and away from the door/ window/ bin if possible.
- Think about where children are placed/ who they are next to.



WOBBLE CHAIR



STAND UP DESK



ROCKING CHAIR



AIR CUSHION



BEAN BAG



LAP DESK



EXERCISE BAND



THERAPY BALL

Environment:

- Playing background sounds/ white noise during focused work time.
- Low tempo, instrumental, slow music without lyrics.
- Using a low tone of voice.
- Avoid fluorescent lights as much as possible and increase natural light in classes instead.
- Whether that be through windows or time spent outside, sunlight is beneficial to students. Sunlight contains blue light, which has the strongest effect on a person's cognitive performance.

2. Instructional Strategies

Movement breaks:

- Explore sensory preferences.
- Provide heavy work activities.
- Use sensory circuits (first alerting activities and end with a calming activity).
- Incorporate movement activities.
- Movement breaks in the classroom are designed with purpose rather than encouraged to be chaotic wiggles.

3. School activities

Transitions:

- Allow for preparation and time before transitioning (using timers, sand timers, visuals).
- Use transition songs (white noise/ instrumental) as an auditory cue (not lyrics/ loud songs).
- Schedule and routines (consistent visual timetables/ now and next).
- Use transition time as a fun opportunity for a movement break so it becomes part of the activity.

Circle time:

- Keep routine short and consistent (visual schedule/ now and next).
- Consider various seating options.
- Physical arrangement: which children sit next to whom.
- Monitor noise levels (peers, voice, music, whiteboard).
- Offer sensory tools if needed: fidget toys (squishy balls, fidgets, Blu Tack/ Thera putty, bean bags), lap pad (deep pressure), etc.
- Opportunities for movement breaks.

Tabletop activities:

- Consider the physical arrangement.
- Timers to signal the start and end of an activity.
- Activity selections:

(Offer calming input before table-top activities and after unwanted tactile sensations)

- Interactive story telling/ sensory stories.
- Finger writing in trays with sand/ salt/ shaving foam (multisensory approach).
- Coloured markers.
- Pencil grips/ chewable pencil toppers.

Movement time:

- Physical arrangement:
 - Aware of the space
 - Opportunities to move away from others
- Schedule and routine (consistent visual schedule/ timers).
- Noise level: cautious of auditory feedback (use of ear defenders if needed), calming music.
- Activity selections:
 - Heavy work activities in class.
 - Jumping jacks in class.
 - Chores in the classroom such as helping the teacher to hand out books, empty bins, etc.

Snack/ lunch time:

- Physical arrangement
 - Ensure feet are touching the ground at the table.
 - Sit at the end of the table/ separate if the child feels discomfort from others/ food/ sounds.
- Noise level: noise cancelling/ ear defenders.
- Activities modification/ selections:
 - Plate guard.
 - Plates with dividers if there are challenges around different food types touching.
 - Food exploration & modelling outside of mealtimes.
 - Gradual exposure to less preferred foods.

Toilet time:





- Physical arrangement (foot stool for children).
- Noise level: noise cancelling headphones to block out toilets flushing.
- Activity selections:
 - Wiping games
 - Social stories
 - Practice in play
 - Toileting steps visuals/ cards

Play time:

- Sensory exploration using different equipment.
- Activity modifications/ selections:

- Encouraging decision-making between 2 equipment with visual support
- Gradually expand the number of sensory choices with visual support.
- Encourage more independent sensory choices.
- Playing on their level.
- Interrupting play to encourage interaction.
- Modelling play with peers.

Sensory tools/ activities & strategies

	<u>Strategies:</u>	<u>Tools/ Activities:</u>
 SIGHT/ VISION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lights off/ natural light. • Reduce additional visual input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual timetable • Sensory bottles • Bright coloured fidget toys • Lights
 SMELL/ OLFACTORY  TASTE/ GUSTATORY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful of scents in the classroom and perfumes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whistles, straw blowing, chewy tubes, crunchy snacks • Different smell explorations • Cooking • Food exploration: Food exploration visuals
 TOUCH/ TACTILE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own workstation • Desensitize (start with dry textures such as dry rice/ pasta before moving to wet sensations such as shaving foam) • Provide deep pressure before and after the messy play activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Messy trays • Playdough • Fidget toys • Paint • Baking activities • Thera putty • Shaving foam • Sand/ mud

 <p>SOUND/ AUDITORY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quiet corner available • Sound scale (visual) • Reduce the noise, voice, and whiteboard amount. • White noise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of headphones • Listening games • Sound match • Music time • Limit adult talking and use visuals
 <p>BODY POSTION/ PROPRIOCEPTION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole body experiences • Deep pressured input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squeezes • Weighted equipment • TheraBand and Thera putty • Ball squashes • Body compressions • Carrying heavy books/backpack • Climbing • Squirt bottle • Clean white board
 <p>MOVEMENT/ VESTIBULAR</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calming: slow and linear movements • Alerting: fast movements • If spinning, spin in both directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scooter board • Trampoline • Swings • Bounce on a gym ball • Rolling
 <p>INTEROCEPTION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zones of regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interoception experiments • How do I feel? • Storytime

Top tips:

- Remember every child receives and processes sensory input differently.
- Calm, regulated children will function better and exhibit fewer behavioral responses.
- Minimise distractions and interruptions in the environment.
- Going through individual needs in the classroom with the OT is important!
- Provide specific strategies for those who need extra input to enhance their attention in learning.

*These are universal strategies to help children and young people with these common functional concerns. Should you require more specific support, please seek appropriate professional advice.

For more information about local services, please contact: cognus.therapies@cognus.org.uk