

Sensory-friendly classrooms

School can be an overwhelming place for autistic and other neurodivergent children. Below are some tips for making your classroom an easier place to be for children with sensory sensitivities.

- Make a space free of visual clutter. Many classrooms have colourful posters, examples of student work, boards or screens covered in writing and images, etc. all over the walls, which can be overwhelming for children who struggle to process visual input. Having a blank space of wall or a quiet area with bare walls where children can go to get away from sensory input can be really helpful.
- Provide alternatives to messy or sticky activities. Some neurodivergent children find particular textures intolerable, or find too much tactile sensation overwhelming. If possible, find a way for these children to be involved in messy, tactile activities without having to touch paint, dirt, clay, etc. Letting children wear gloves or wash their hands frequently during these activities can also help.
- Keep food, cleaning supplies, and other strong smells to a minimum in the classroom. This could mean using odourless cleaning supplies; advocating for cleaning to be done as soon as school finishes for the day so that the smell can dissipate overnight; finishing hot food or strong-smelling drinks like coffee outside the classroom; or minimising perfumes and other scented personal hygiene products.
- Give children the option to take a break from strong-smelling activities. Many neurodivergent children have a stronger sense of smell than their peers, and being around paint, glue, scented pens, etc. for too long can make them feel dizzy or sick. Being able to go outside, stick their head out a window, or just move to another part of the room away from the smell can make this more tolerable.

- Warn students before fire drills or other loud alarms, including school bells. For students who are sensitive to noise, a school bell or an alarm can be physically painful and/or break their concentration for hours or the rest of the school day. Having a few minutes' warning allows children to block their ears or leave the room before the bell/alarm goes off, letting them stay calmer and have an easier time getting back to work.
- Having a quiet space where students can go for a break from noise, and/or having some silent periods during the school day, can help prevent children who are sensitive to noise from being overwhelmed by the amount of noise in the classroom. (If it's not possible to create a quiet space within the classroom, letting students go outside for a break is also helpful.)
- If students are eating lunch inside, consider having a space where noise-sensitive children can eat away from the noise of a class full of chewing, packet crinkling, slurping, talking, and all the other noises that come with lunchtime.
- Find everything in your classroom that makes noise – can it be replaced with a silent version? Can it be turned off for part of the day? (For example, can a ticking clock be replaced with a clock that doesn't make constant noise? Can computer sound effects or notifications be turned off? Can buzzing florescent lights be turned off when it's light enough outside?)
- For some neurodivergent students, tight or crowded spaces can quickly become unbearable. You may want to think about letting these students move between classes a few minutes early or late to avoid being trapped in a moving crowd, or if your students line up before entering the classroom, placing these students at the front of the line.
- Many neurodivergent children find it difficult or impossible to sit still for too long. Letting these children move around or fidget helps them to pay attention. Being allowed to move or fidget when they need to also helps many neurodivergent children regulate their emotions, reducing the chance that they will become too frustrated or distressed to be in the classroom.

- Socialising can be exhausting and confusing for neurodivergent children. Providing a space where children can take a break from their peers can help to reduce the stress and emotional overload of constant social expectations (this could be a designated space, or just allowing students to sit in the classroom or library during lunch and break times).
- Transitioning between activities can be tricky for neurodivergent children. If transitions are a consistent source of distress or frustration (for you or your students), try allowing more time to switch attention from one task to the next; providing visual reminders of how long an activity will go for or how much time is left before switching; and if possible, allowing long stretches of time for unbroken focus.
- Talk to your students and their parents or caregivers about what might help. Even if a child is too young or doesn't yet have the skills to explain what's upsetting about their environment, talking to them about what it might be is a great way to help the child start learning about identifying their own needs and advocating for them.