inclusionED
supporting diverse learners

PRACTICE BRIEF

Meet students' sensory needs

Summary

Students on the autism spectrum often have specific sensory needs that, when met, can help them self-regulate and engage in tasks.

Making adjustments to accommodate these needs reduces the need for behaviour management and helps students to engage, attend, focus, and self-regulate during class. Adjustments can also significantly benefit all students by creating a more comfortable environment.

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers related to this practice

- 1.1 - physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students
- 1.5 - differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities
- 1.6 - strategies to support full participation of students with disability

For further information, see Australian Professional Standards for Teachers AITSL page

Preparing to Teach

Observe student behaviour

Sensory processing differences can present a variety of challenges for neurodivergent students. These students may have difficulty processing information, paying attention or sitting still for extended periods, writing, responding to questions, keeping organised, and staying regulated.

Students with sensory processing differences may have sensory needs relating to:

- hearing (auditory)
- seeing (visual)
- feeling (tactile, touch, temperature, body awareness)
- smelling (olfactory)
- taste (gustatory)
- vestibular (related to balance/movement)
- interoception (related to internal body signals such as pain and hunger) and
- proprioception (related to awareness of body position)

These needs are highly unique to the individual, and can change depending on the time of day, environment, or current levels of sensory input.

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Some students are:

- hypersensitive: they experience overwhelmingly more sensory input than others, e.g., lights may seem too bright or noises too loud. This can result in sensory avoidance behaviour (trying to get away from this sensory input).
- hyposensitive: they are much less responsive to particular sensations and need more of that sensory stimulus to recognise the sensation and/or feel comfortable, e.g., dislike quiet spaces and prefer listening to music to concentrate. This can result in sensory seeking behaviour (trying to get more sensory input from the environment).

Consult with students, families, and specialists

Sensory needs vary from person to person. Consulting with students, parents/carers, and specialists such as therapists will help you to:

- identify appropriate sensory supports
- gain advice on a range of adjustments and supports.

It works better if:

- the teacher asks for input from the student, parents/carers, and specialists around the student's sensory supports.

It doesn't work if:

- the teacher guesses what sensory support might be useful for the student without consultation
- the teacher removes sensory supports to punish the student.

In the classroom

How do I do it?

Identify students who may benefit from sensory support

- Identify sensory processing differences that may be affecting a student's behaviour, learning, and engagement. Consult with the student, their family, and relevant specialists about what sensory needs the student has, and what support may help them.
- Implement the necessary adjustments.
- Observe the student and review the efficacy of the adjustment, altering if necessary.

Potential adjustments for the classroom

Adjustments for hypersensitive sensory processing include:

- using a filter or light covers, dimmable lights or turning off a bank of lights in the classroom
- allowing students to wear a hat or sunglasses inside if the lights are unable to be changed
- offering noise-cancelling headphones in noisy environments

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- offering a variety of seating options, if students prefer to sit somewhere where they won't be touched
- offering a quiet, dark sensory-free space for the student to self-regulate.

Adjustments for hyposensitive sensory processing include:

- using visual supports to explain verbal directions
- allowing or offering fidget toys, chewies or other sensory tools (note: you can explain that these are a tool to help focus, not a toy to be played with, and ensure that they are not noisy so as to distract others)
- offering headphones so students can listen to music while they work
- create a sensory space with different tactile items

How will I know if it's working?

The student will appear more focused and on task for greater periods of time and demonstrate less frequent challenging behaviours and meltdowns.

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