

A Sensory Life

Sensory Strategies for the Classroom to Support ALL Children!

Written by: Angie Voss, OTR

The need for sensory supports, tools, and strategies in our schools is more important now than ever in history. The significant amount of time children are spending sitting in front of screens is devastating. Not only that, there is an unfortunate trend towards taking away recess, outdoor time, and breaks in our schools for liability reasons and/or as a form of punishment for behavior issues and for not completing school work. This is not the fault of our educators. It is due to the lack of understanding and awareness of the essential need of sensory input for all aspects of daily life. My mission is to help change this. Once there is a greater understanding, change comes next, then comes academic success. ☺

No wonder our children are struggling with academics, attention to task, focus, and self-regulation (mood, emotions, behavior). They are being deprived of the essential and critical sensory nutrition that the brain **MUST** have in order to process, think, thrive, and adapt in a world full of incoming and intense sensory input.

Supporting and helping our children is really quite simple...it may be something as little as a change of seating position, offering stretch breaks, or the use of a fidget tool or oral sensory tool while working. Here are a few different simple and effective ways that you can help and support the children in your classroom.

The sensory ideas listed below are beneficial for **ALL** brains and are best when offered as an option and a choice, not as a requirement. Every brain is different, and every brain needs different types and amounts of sensory input, changing on a minute by minute basis. Setting up the environment with various sensory tools and strategies is the most effective and best way to integrate sensory supports in to the classroom. For example: Replace 4 standard chairs in the classroom with ball chairs, then let the children rotate and choose when they feel they need this tool to help support focus and attention to task. If you find that there is a high demand for using the ball chairs, replace a few more.

I hope you find the following ideas to be useful in your classroom. Please visit my website ASensoryLife.com for further instructions and for equipment and activity suggestions. All of the sensory tools and strategies listed on this handout can be found on the website, including how-to videos, sensory on a budget ideas, and links to purchase sensory items.



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Vestibular Input/Movement

Supports attention to task, focus, cognitive abilities and overall academic achievement

- Recess and outdoor time is just as important as lunch. We all need it, as it is sensory nutrition for the brain. Please do not take away outside time and/or recess as a form of discipline.
- Sitting in a standard chair is actually the least effective way for the brain to learn. The brain needs movement to think. There are many, many options for this:
 - Take regular movement and stretch breaks, every 10-15 minutes. Make it a group activity! Even 1-2 minutes of stretching or jumping in place is enough to give the brain the boost it needs to get right back to work!
 - Replace standard chairs with ball chairs, at least providing 3-4 ball chairs to be used and rotated throughout the day.
 - Offer the option to work standing at the chalkboard or a standing height table.
 - Offer the option to lay on the floor to work or read.
 - Offer the option for use of a rocker/balance board or standing on a BOSU ball in the back of the classroom during teacher instruction and listening activities.
 - If possible, install a cuddle/lycra swing in the classroom to be used throughout the day as needed.
 - Provide a rocking chair or glider chair as an option to use and share.

Proprioception/Heavy Work/Deep Pressure Touch

Supports self-regulation, soothing, organizing, and calming for the brain, improves mood, supports behavior and emotion, decreases the episodes of sensory overload or sensory meltdowns

- Provide a basket with various fidget tools of various texture and resistance, such as stress balls, koosh balls, theraputty, clay, and other objects to pinch, squeeze, and manipulate. Offer these tools for use during listening or sit down classroom work activities.
- Offer the use of weighted lap pads or weighted shoulder wraps.
- Provide vibrating pillows and hand held vibrating gadgets.
- For younger children, provide squish boxes for use throughout the day.



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- Provide body socks for use as a calming sensory retreat and a way to increase the amount of proprioception and deep pressure touch.
- If possible, set up a designated sensory retreat in the classroom such as a small tent with a bean bag chair inside or other soft cozy objects. The goal is to provide a safe place with less sensory input overall.
- Provide resistance bands for tying or wrapping around the legs or arm of a chair to push and pull on with the arms and feet.
- Provide weighted medicine balls for either gentle tossing or for holding and rolling in the lap or over the body.
- Provide a resistance tunnel, best used as a group activity for younger children.

Oral Sensory Needs

Supports self-regulation, attention to task, thinking and processing information, focus, and overall behavior and mood

- Allow for all children to have a water bottle at their desk, preferably a Camelbak® water bottle, as it is spill proof and has a resistive type straw and chewy mouthpiece, which is an excellent sensory tool in itself.
- Offer healthy chewy and crunchy snacks throughout the day.
- Allow for the use of chewing gum, natural and organic is best.
- Encourage deep breathing throughout the day on a regular and frequent basis. Do it together as a class!
- Encourage the use of other oral sensory tools. There are so many effective options on the market now! Even pencils with an oral sensory tool on the end for chewing on! Visit ASensoryLife.com for all sorts of ideas.

Auditory Needs

- Provide noise cancelling headphones. You will likely need a few pairs of them. Keep in mind the child can still hear you for instructional purposes...the headphones are intended to cut out the uncomfortable and sometimes painful “noise” and distracting sounds.
- Offer putty earplugs as an option, as well.
- Allow for the use of an MP3 player with earbuds or headphones during independent work time with a limit to instrumental and calming music.

