

Starting Up a Sensory Room

An area designed for student self-regulation needs a suitable space, specialized equipment, and staff training to be effective

By J. Kapuchuck and Donica Hadley

A sensory room is a space designed to help students regulate their emotions and calm their bodies. Sensory rooms are typically associated with students on the autism spectrum, but they have proven to be helpful for students with other disabilities, such as emotional, language, and learning difficulties, as well as students without documented disabilities. They provide a “safe zone” where students can practice their self-regulation skills.

Sensory rooms usually contain a variety of equipment designed to provide proprioceptive and vestibular input for the student. Proprioception (the ability to know where your body is in space), balance, and spatial orientation are often impaired in students with disabilities, and the

vestibular system of the inner ear is largely responsible for calibrating balance. These students benefit from sensory inputs that help fine-tune their senses, says Dana Mather, physical therapist with Rockingham County (Virginia) Public Schools.

Swings, minitrampolines, balance boards, large balls, compliant surfaces such as mats and ball pits, and compression objects such as “cozy canoes,” body socks, and weighted blankets provide an array of movement opportunities and sensations that aid in regulating the student’s sensory system.

Creating a Sensory Space

Administrators wishing to create a sensory room ideally will have a space

large enough to provide opportunities for students to engage in both movement and calming sensory experiences. Lighting is an essential component to consider; a dimly lit environment calms the visual senses, allowing a more relaxed state of mind.

A calm color palette should also be considered when choosing lighting and equipment. A sensory room should not be a place where the student can become overstimulated, as this is likely counterproductive. Even when students participate in movement activities, they should be active in a calm environment. Some students are able to self-regulate better through movement, while others self-regulate within a calming atmosphere.



The size of the space will determine what equipment goes into the sensory room. Once you decide on a space, you must choose items that are going to be essential to meeting the needs of your students.

Consider how you will get the funds to purchase these items; creating a sensory room can be costly, and grants and outsourced funding from donations might be effective in helping cover costs.

Training Staff

Sarah Kosalka, occupational therapist for Rockingham County Public Schools, recommends enlisting the help of your school’s occupational and physical therapists in creating a sensory room; they are familiar with sensory input equipment. More importantly, they will be able to recommend equipment that the school or district might already have available so that your budget can go further.

Since each piece of equipment might have multiple uses, a therapist can look at the needs of students alongside their educational goals and recommend how to use the equipment in a way that best achieves students’ needs. Depending on the age range of the students in the school, he or she can make age-appropriate recommendations for setting up the equipment for maximal use.

Once the sensory room is created, ask occupational and physical therapists to train staff on the use of various pieces of equipment. Establish guidelines for each activity in order to create a working flow for the sensory room. There will always be new ways to use the equipment based on students’ needs, so multiple training sessions or a question-and-answer session with the staff can be helpful in encouraging the effective use of the room.

Training staff to understand the purpose of the room and how to use it appropriately is important to guaranteeing that the room is, in fact, a

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place to prepare students for learning. Teachers need guidance on how to use the space effectively with a variety of students to feel comfortable using it.

Don’t be surprised to find staff using the sensory room during planning times, lunch breaks, or afterschool hours in an effort to stay balanced or find inner peace. The calming effects of a sensory room are proven to benefit adults, too! Items such as rocking chairs and other comfortable seating options for adults will help your staff maintain a level of equanimity.

Sensory rooms provide a therapeutic environment that is highly beneficial for students and adults alike. Though they are not the norm within typical school settings, their calming benefits are producing positive outcomes for the well-being of students and teachers. Consider creating a sensory room in your school to further meet student needs. 

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