

New Sensa

7 tips for building a successful sensory room in your school

By Maria McDonald

Anyone can reach a breaking point and lose the ability to focus due to overstimulation, writes Richard Restak in his book, *The New Brain: How the Modern Age Is Rewiring Your Mind*. This is especially true among children; a student who “acts out” may be unable to keep up with the demands of a stimulus-filled environment.

Sometimes, a student encounters that stimulus before stepping onto the school bus. Outside of school, for example, a student might have a volatile relationship with a parent or sibling or be losing sleep over a family tragedy. Every student we meet has a story, and each situation impacts their reaction to a variety of factors.

Unable to process sensory stimulation properly, students can often become hyporesponsive or hyperresponsive. They may resort to self-injurious, aggressive, or other unsafe behaviors that interfere with learning and undermine the safety of the school setting. But there is an intervention that can help: the multisensory environment (MSE), or “sensory room.”

A Room of One’s Own

An MSE provides a safe environment for individuals to manage, control, manipulate, intensify, or reduce stimulation as needed to promote healthy responses. And they are gaining popularity in schools across the country.

Specializing in instruction for students requiring special education due to social or emotional behaviors that interfere with learning, PACE West in Gainesville, Virginia, incorporated an MSE into its campus design. The sensory room is a therapeutic space with a variety of equipment that allows students to manage their own behaviors in a calm, safe environment.

PACE West’s MSE encourages students to focus and regulate their behaviors quickly so

that they can return to class ready to learn after an outburst or stressful event. Not only has it helped produce significant declines in behavior referrals and suspensions, but it also has helped increase the time during which students learn in the classroom, positively impacting state standardized testing scores.

Observation shows that students are more relaxed, calm, and communicative after using the sensory room, and they are more ready to learn. The sensory room provides the therapy necessary to allow students to return to the classroom to learn and interact appropriately with others.

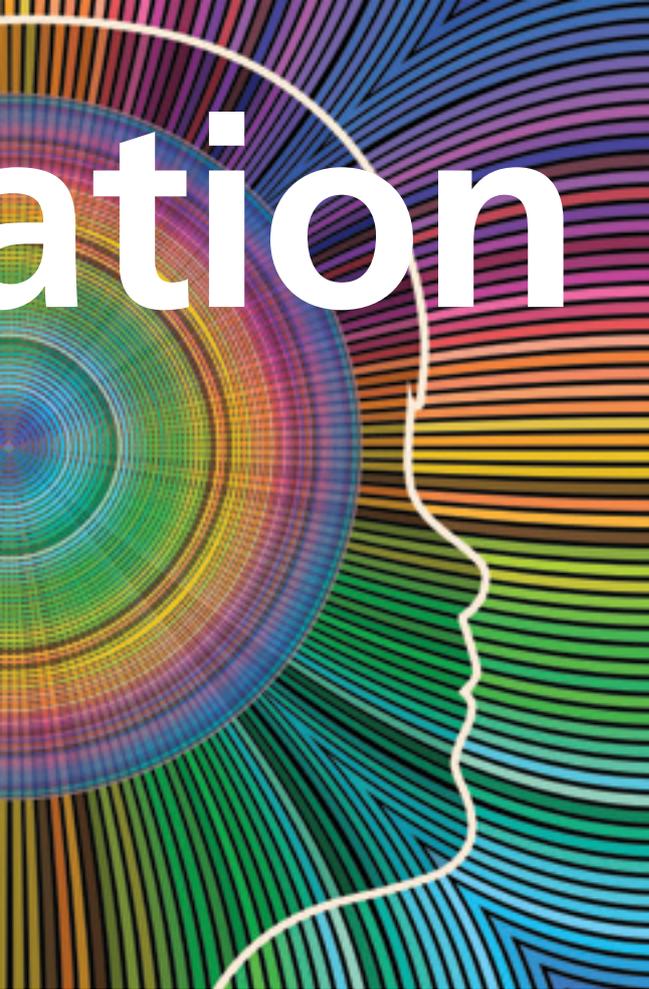
Below are seven tips for designing, developing, and successfully opening an effective sensory room in your school:

1. Assign, label, and promote the space.

Designate and repurpose a space as calming or safe—a calming corner, time-out area, or sensory room. This creates the mindset that there is a safe place to go when behavior is uncontrollable. When students know there is a place they can go to “freak out” (fight or flight), it can foster a sense of safety and calm.

2. Use calming colors and lighting. Instead of painting the walls in vibrant reds and

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yellows to elicit active play, use soft lavenders, greens, and blues. Mute the lighting by placing fabric or plastic covers over the light fixtures.

- 3. Use carpet or mats to cover floors/walls.** These might be carpet remnants, yoga mats, or gym mats; they soften the surfaces and deaden sound.
- 4. Add sensory/therapy room posters.** Posters can be purchased or handmade. Next year, PACE West is adding posters to each classroom in order to implement calming strategies immediately after noticing trigger behaviors.
- 5. Make sensory equipment available.** Start small, and go big if you have the budget. Buy items that are durable and easy to clean. When ordering, seek advice from an occupational therapist. Here is a partial listing of appropriate equipment:
 - *Therapy balls of all shapes, textures, and sizes.* PACE West has a space dedicated to balls that students can use to kick, jump over, squeeze, hug, cry on, punch, and play with.
 - *Body socks.* Made of Lycra, a body sock is a fabric sack that covers the child's body, with an opening for the head. It's

a sensory-based tool used to provide proprioceptive and deep-pressure inputs.

- *Weighted blankets, vests, and stuffed animals.* Students benefit from the stimulation of pressure.
- *Sensory peapod.* This is a favorite sensory item at PACE West that applies deep, even pressure to sensitive areas of the body. Students can gently rock side to side for a "cocooning" calm, and most can get into the pod on their own.
- *Play tents and tunnels.* These provide a place for kids to crawl and use their muscles while providing an intermission space to escape stimuli. Students love them.
- *Sensory swings and spinners.* These offer a kinetic distraction that helps calm students.
- *Sensory bins.* Sensory bins are containers filled with materials selected to stimulate the senses, such as shredded paper, bubble wrap, water beads, sand, and therapy putty.

- 6. Start slowly.** During our first year, PACE West made the sensory room available only to students receiving occupational therapy (OT) services, allowing us to reflect on and implement what works best. The following year, we opened it to all students.

Similarly, our occupational therapist trained only staff with students requiring OT services in sensory strategies the first year, followed by certified staff (teachers and counselors) in the second year, and all staff including teaching assistants in the third year.

- 7. Keep a log.** We have a sign-in log for every student entering the sensory room; they are not allowed in the room alone. A staff member records the student's name, date, time of entry/exit, and the reason. This is important data for the school and student to track.

PACE West's sensory room has had as positive an impact on students with emotional disabilities and ADHD as it has had on autistic students. It is one of our most effective positive behavior interventions and a crucial tool in increasing learning and instructional stamina. 

Maria McDonald is principal of PACE West, Prince William County Schools in Virginia.



SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

A sensory room should be used to reinforce the right behaviors, according to Edutopia's "Sensory Room 101." Instead of automatically sending kids who act out to the MSE, treat a visit to the space as a reward or optional break. Otherwise, you'll be rewarding bad behavior.