Incorporate Sensory Activities and Choices Into the Classroom

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The human brain uses vision, touch, sound, taste, smell, and motion to make sense of the environment and produce a response. Touching a hot stove produces a protective response, such as pulling away the hand. Bright lights may cause a person to squint or move a hand toward the eyes to shield them from the light. Many students with special needs have neurological, biological, and sensory differences that affect how they learn and respond to the environment. The light touch of a T-shirt may feel scratchy or even painful. Strategies that accommodate sensory differences and promote students' unique strengths are essential for success and achievement in the classroom. By using sensory strategies for all students in the classroom, students with specific sensory needs are not singled out. When sensory choices are incorporated into classroom activities and the classroom environment, students can choose what their bodies need in order to continue learning.

1. **Offer a variety of art supplies and materials.** When students with special needs are resistant to using a specific material or texture, their bodies are conveying the message that the stimulus is not tolerated by their nervous system. Offering a variety of materials allows students to choose what is tolerated and begin to desensitize their bodies to the stimulus. Common items, such as cotton balls and cotton swabs, toothbrushes, and your own fingers, make great alternatives to paintbrushes. Art media can also be texturized by adding sand or oatmeal to paint, adding color to corn syrup or glue, or using mud.

2. **Allow student to write on the chalkboard or dry-erase board.** Development of motor skills, such as writing, begin toward the center of the body and develop outward. Writing on a vertical surface, such as a chalkboard or dry-erase board, sends input to the muscles of the upper body. As the upper body muscles become stronger, the distal, fine motor muscles of the hand and fingers can begin to develop.
3. **Allow student to lie on the floor, stand, or sit.** Stabilization at the shoulder is essential for any refined movement of the wrist/hand/fingers, including writing. Lying on the floor or standing and leaning slightly on the writing surface (chalkboard, table) may help stabilize and strengthen the shoulder when writing.

4. **Give student a pen, colored pencil, or marker to write.** Writing is generally not a preferred activity for many students with special needs. Writing can seem more fun and inviting when multicolored pens or scented markers are offered as choices.

5. **Let student sit on a moveable seating surface.** Many students get out of their seats at inappropriate times because their sensory system needs stimulation and constant motion. Placing a Disc-O-Sit® or thick foam wedge in their seats allows them to control the body motion and sensation they need without getting up or disrupting others. Sitting on a large therapy ball also accommodates this need and allows for more intense bouncing and rocking.

6. **Ask student to pass out and pick up materials and papers.** These simple tasks allow for body movement and release of energy through appropriate classroom behavior. If materials are somewhat heavy, as is the case for pencil boxes or books, the sensory system receives input that can help to reorganize the body and prepare the student for learning.

7. **Use textured manipulatives.** Blocks and beads are commonly used when teaching basic concepts, such as colors or one-to-one correspondence. Adhering aluminum foil, puff paint, or sand to materials can turn basic manipulatives into a sensory experience.

8. **Pair verbal directions with visuals.** Classroom instruction tends to be predominantly verbal. Pairing a visual (e.g., a chalkboard or overhead demonstration, sample of a finished work product, display of the textbook or page the students need to refer to) with verbal instruction will help students better understand what they need to learn.

9. **Place materials throughout the room.** Placing materials in high and low places throughout the room or within the student workstation allows for appropriate movement and stimulation. Retrieving materials placed in high or low places allows the student to move prior to the activity and may reduce unnecessary out-of-seat behavior during seatwork.

10. **Play background music.** Many students have hypersensitive hearing and may attend to all sounds in the environment. Playing soft classical music or a nature CD during independent work or free time provides “white noise” and may help students filter out other distracting noises within the classroom, such as papers shuffling, a pencil sharpening, or a zipper zipping.

11. **Allow chewy and crunchy foods during snack time.** Deep pressure when chewing is calming to the sensory system. By contrast, quick, firm touch is
stimulating. Chewy snacks, such as licorice, taffy, or gummy treats, and crunchy snacks, such as pretzels, nuts, or crackers, can be provided as a choice for students to help calm them during a transition time or when introducing a new, more challenging activity.

**Use a visual daily schedule.** Visual representation of the events of the day on a schedule can help all students predict and better follow the daily routine. Routines may be broken down into segments, such as before lunch and after lunch, or into smaller tasks, such as lunch or reading.

**Ask student to carry a basket of items.** Students can return books to the library, permission slips to the office, or materials to the art or physical education teacher. When items are placed in a basket, crate, or on a rolling cart, the student must use larger muscle groups, which provides input to the sensory system and prepares the student for learning. This is often referred to as heavy work by occupational therapists.

**Allow student to take shoes off.** Allow students to take their shoes off during specific, independent activities, such as silent reading time. The feet are very sensitive parts of the body, and many students may enjoy or need the extra touch stimulation of bare feet on the carpet or tile floor.

**Encourage student to do body warm-ups.** Begin each day with morning stretches and warm-ups to wake up students’ bodies. Have students reach for the sky, touch their toes, and twist side to side to send a message to the muscles and the brain that it is time to work. Warm-ups like these can be beneficial throughout the day.

**Turn off the lights.** Fluorescent lighting is used in many schools but can be distracting or even painful for a student with light sensitivity. The humming sound of lights can also be distracting for a student with hearing sensitivity. If the classroom has windows that allow for natural light, turn the lights off for a few classroom activities.

**Use computer programs.** Technology provides almost unlimited resources for teaching children reading, math, and science concepts. Computer programs are visually and auditorally stimulating, as well as predictable. Predictability is important for students with special needs because they know what to expect and how to respond. When using a computer program, students or teachers can adjust the on-screen visual display and sound level to meet each student’s needs. For example, a computer station to review
concepts or introduce new ones provides an alternative to more traditional learning through books and worksheets.

**18. Create sensory stations.** When inclement weather does not allow for outdoor recess, set up sensory stations in the classroom and have students select and rotate through the sensory station of their choice. Stations could incorporate basic concepts, such as opposites, by having rough and soft (sandpaper and rabbit’s foot) or wet and dry (wet and dry sponge) items. Other stations could include an “icky sticky” station (corn syrup, glue), sensory art station (cardboard, wallpaper, and fabric scraps; felt, paint), physical station (Twister®, indoor hopscotch) or relaxation station (beanbag chair, books, soft music).

**19. Encourage the use of air writing.** Air writing uses physical motion to internalize movements and motor planning into the brain. Students can stand and write letters, numbers, or words in the air to practice formation and letter connections. This concept could be incorporated into a spelling review, art drawing project, or basic math facts.

**20. Use textured tracing.** When introducing new shapes, numbers, or letters, have the student trace the figure with his or her finger on a textured surface. Figures can be made out of sandpaper, textured wallpaper, carpet, puff paint, or dried glue. Using a colored dot at the correct starting point will ensure the students learn the proper formation of the figure.

Sensations are a part of every environment we interact within and every activity we are a part of. The presented ideas are a way to enhance or reduce the existing sensations of a task so students can gain maximum benefit and learning from the experience. It is important to remember that every person is different; therefore, sensory needs are different. By offering sensory choices, teachers help students learn what their bodies need in order for them to be most successful and reach their learning potential.

Persons interested in submitting material for *20 Ways To . . .* should contact Robin H. Lock, College of Education, Box 41071, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1701.

**About the Author**

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