

Low Arousal Spaces

Why

Many autistic children, or those with complex communication needs, have differences in their sensory perception from their neurotypical peers. This means some everyday stimuli can be unpleasant or even painful for them. Coping with the sensory demands of the school day contributes to the overall stress and anxiety of the pupil. Providing a space that meets their sensory needs can be beneficial in managing the overall load placed on them throughout the day, thereby reducing their stress and anxiety levels.

How

From the perspective of the pupil with sensory processing differences, schools and classrooms are often busy, noisy, places full of people and unpredictability. Providing a space that reduces some of this input can be valuable in helping them to cope with school. This can be through a quiet corner, perhaps screened off with furniture, a sensory tent, or access to a space adjacent to the classroom. In the playground, a zone may be designated a quiet zone. This may have a no running / shouting rule, and may be adjacent to other play zones.

What

Completing an individual sensory audit should help identify the stimuli that a pupil finds difficult to manage, and those that they seek. Try to match the low arousal space to an individual profile. For example, if the pupil finds bright light difficult, a space that can be darkened may help, for example a dark den.

When

This will be determined initially by the people who know the pupil best. Identifying the signs in their presentation that indicate they need a break is important for individuals, as well as proactively planning time into the day for them to regulate themselves. Finding a mechanism for the pupil to request a break is also helpful. On busy or stressful days the pupil may need more, or longer, sensory breaks.

Sensory tool kit or calm down kit:

Creating a toolkit of materials that are pleasant or calming for the child may help them to regulate themselves. For example, if a child seeks tactile input, perhaps some small tubs of slime or putty may be helpful. Where a child likes visual stimulation, a spinning light or coloured overlays to look through may help. This kit can be kept to hand, and used as and when the child needs it, either in a low arousal space or other space. Some items may be kept on their desk or in their pocket.

Possible sensory equipment:

- **Auditory:**
 - ear defenders,
 - materials that make a pleasing noise for the pupil, such as chimes
 - things that make a repetitive click, such as fidget cubes or pop tubes.

- **Visual:**
 - Things that spin, light up, flash or are patterned.
 - Things that move in a repetitive way.
 - Ability to darken the space by closing blinds or using a tent may also be helpful.
 - Liquid timers or bubble tubes may also be calming.

- **Tactile:**
 - Sensory items such as slime, theraputty, kinetic sand etc.
 - Fluffy or soft materials or toys,
 - stretchy toys such as koosh balls or stress ball.
 - Vibrating items such as a vibrating cushion.
 - A small space to climb in, such as a cardboard box.

- **Taste/smell:**
 - Materials with comforting or soothing scents for the child, for example a scarf with a parents perfume/aftershave on it,
 - scented stationary such as fruity rubbers.

- **Vestibular/proprioception:**
 - Items that provide some light pressure, such as weighted teddies or therabands to stretch and provide some resistance.
 - Please note: Weighted blankets should be used under the guidance of a suitably qualified occupational therapist.
 - A bean bag can create the feeling of being cocooned.