CREATING A MORE sensory-friendly SCHOOL

A Brief Guide with Recommendations



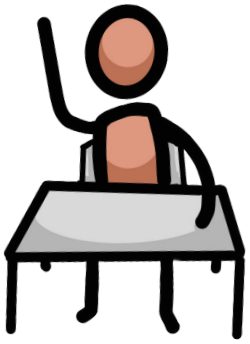
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Why Sensory-Friendly?

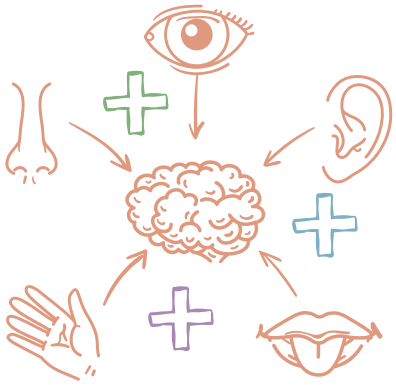
So much is expected of schools. If kids are here to grow their minds, why does cultivating a "sensory-friendly" school matter?

> "Our **BRAINS** don't know anything unless they know it from our **SENSES** ." -Dr. Winnie Dunn



The senses are quite literally the gateway to learning. From our earliest moments and throughout our lifespan, "There is nothing in the intelligence which did not first pass through the senses" (Aristotle).

And it's not just the five we learned about in preschool.



Our EIGHT Senses

If you are drinking a cup of coffee as you read this, your sense of **TASTE** and **SMELL** are at work. Your sense of **TOUCH** (often called the tactile sense) might be enjoying the warmth of the mug in your hand. Perhaps your sense of **HEARING** is picking up the sounds of students in the hall or the buzz of the lights, even as you focus your **SIGHT** on these words.

But there's a lot more going on than that. **Our three hidden senses** play a big role in how we function from moment to moment. Here's a quick peek at **PROPRIOCEPTION**, the **VESTIBULAR** system, and the internal sense called **INTEROCEPTION**.

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PROPRIOCEPTION

[pro-pree-oh-SEP-shun]



Proprioception [pro-pree-oh-sep-shun] is your body's innate sense of its position, movement, and spatial orientation. Without it, you would feel like you were floating away in outer space (not in a fun way!!).

It's what allows you to know you're not going to fall out of your chair, take a sip of your coffee without looking, hold a pencil in a way that you won't break it or drop it, and so much more.

Think of it as your body's internal GPS, constantly providing feedback to your brain about the position and motion of your limbs and joints.

At the heart of proprioception are specialized sensory receptors located in your muscles, tendons, and joints. These receptors detect changes in muscle length, tension, and joint angle, sending signals to your brain that help coordinate movement and spatial awareness.



Lots of swaddling, bouncing, patting, pushing, pulling, jumping, clapping, rough-housing, walking, running, and rolling around help give this important sense the input it needs during a child's development.

This sense is critical for educators to understand because...most kids crave far more "prope" than they get in the modern world.

And without enough proprioceptive input, students' ability to focus, self-regulate, and engage in learning all suffer.

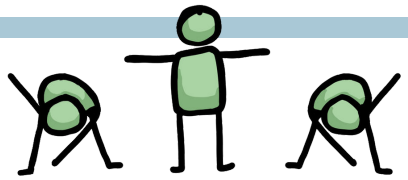
Because this is such a powerhouse for supporting self-regulation, the Sensory Solutions™ Toolkit includes **A Teacher's Guide to Proprioception** to help you share this information with the whole school community.

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VESTIBULAR

[veh-STI-byuh-luhr]



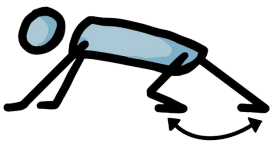
The vestibular [veh-STI-byuh-luhr] sense is responsible for our sense of balance, spatial orientation, and coordination of movement.

Sensory receptors in the inner ear act like a gyroscope, constantly sending signals to the brain about the position and movement of our head (a pretty important part of the body).

This sense is essential for everyday activities like walking, running, paying attention, coordinating hand and eye movements, and even sitting upright.

With its connections throughout the nervous system, our vestibular sense also gives the brain lots of little details that help us feel emotionally stable and physically regulated.

Beginning in utero, babies instinctively seek out experiences that stimulate this sense, whether it's rocking, swinging, or spinning. Crawling is another critical stage for the vestibular system.



Lots of swaying, swinging, crawling, climbing, biking, dancing, and other movements feed this important sense.

These activities not only provide sensory input but also play a vital role in children's physical, cognitive, and emotional development.

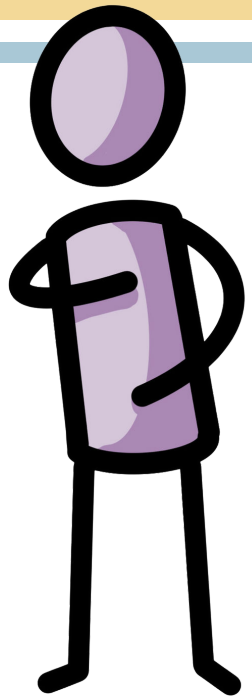
Important note: Because the vestibular sense is intimately linked to our sense of safety and danger, what feels "just right" to one person might feel terrifying to another.

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INTEROCEPTION

[in-tuhr-oh-SEP-shun]



The sensory receptors in our internal organs and skin share important information with the brain all day long, often without us realizing it.

Interoception tells us things about

- Temperature
- Pain
- Basic needs (hungry/full, bathroom needs, etc.)
- Emotional state
- Internal organs (racing heart, upset stomach, etc.)

Every time we are able to pause, breathe, and get curious with ourselves, we strengthen this critical internal sense.

Unfortunately, chronic stress and trauma can mute or intensify this sense. This is important to know because mindful awareness practices *rely* on the interoception "muscle" they are intended to strengthen, similar to doing bicep curls to strengthen your arms.

For students to be learning-ready, all 8 senses have to work together.



IMPORTANT: Sensory-friendly schools are not just for the students! Many teachers are struggling with sensory overload on a daily basis.

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Simple Sensory Tips

While far from exhaustive, this section offers a few strategies that tend to be helpful for all of our sensational senses.

Use gentle lighting.

Along with the benefits visually, the buzz of fluorescent lights may be an irritant under the surface for students and staff alike.



Reduce distracting noises.

Put tennis balls on chair legs or fabric on the walls.



Prioritize recess.

Don't take it away. Find ways to get out more! Instead of a movie, how about extra time on the playground or heading outside for a walk?

Take brain breaks regularly.



Incorporate big muscle groups and physical activity to support the hidden senses. The brain needs movement to grow! There are countless ways to incorporate movement into the school day, just remember to keep it playful and fun. Find more ideas in the **Sensational Resources and Activities** section of this toolkit.

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Provide sensory-rich experiences to help learning "stick."

Go for hands-on experiences over worksheets and screens when possible. This is especially important for the younger grades, those with trauma histories, and many neurodiverse students.





Be predictable.

Healthy routines and predictable environments free kids up from spending precious mental energy on hypervigilance and worrying about what will happen next.



Provide visual schedules and prompts.

Use a visual timer or interchangeable prompts on the board. A strong magnet can hold a sheet protector full of the prompts you use regularly.



Use physical gestures.

Help students understand and retain instructions by miming what is expected or creating fun physical cues for classroom routines.

Whenever you get more than one sense involved in instruction and expectations, you increase the likelihood that students with varied learning styles and sensory needs will be successful.

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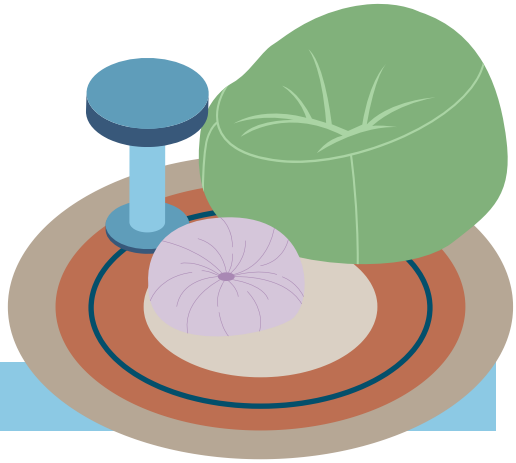
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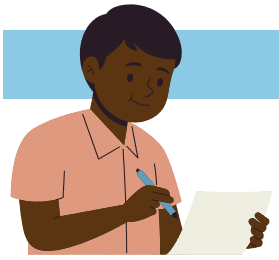
Send signals of safety and connection.

Get down to a student's level when trying to get attention. A gentle hand on the shoulder or other safe touch can be especially helpful for kids with explorer brains who might need a little extra support to go with the group plan.

Offer flexible seating.

Sitting, standing, wobble cushions, laying down during reading time, resistance bands on chair legs, and seats built for a little rocking can make a huge difference in students' ability to attend to a task.





Reflect!

Help students' check in on how their chosen learning tools are working.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Sensory Solutions™ Toolkit includes several simple options to support student and staff reflection.
Take note of the impact of a student's chosen tool on both individual and whole-class learning. Use the **Let's Reflect** forms on the next two pages to discuss what's working and what plans need revised.



> When we help students understand what their senses need, we are literally helping them grow their brains.
>
> – Jessica Sinarski



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Let's Reflect

Working together with your student, reflect on their learning tool.

Student Name _____

Staff Name _____ Date _____

My learning tool was:

Think about each question, then circle 👍 or 👎



I was safe



I was learning

This tool helped me





This tool worked for my classmates

Staff Observations _____

_____

_____

_____

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Let's Reflect

Take turns filling out this form, paying attention to how this tool impacted learning in the classroom.

Student Name: _____

Staff Name: _____ Date: _____

My learning tool was:

I was safe: Yes / No

I was learning: Yes / No

This tool helped me: Yes / No

This tool worked for my classmates: Yes / No

I also noticed. . .

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Staff Observations:

Used it safely? Yes / No

Able to focus/learn? Yes / No

Seemed to help? Yes / No

Did this tool disrupt classmates? Yes / No

Notes: _____

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