Sensory-Strong Classrooms

An overview

Deb Hopper
www.lifeskills4kids.com.au
JOIN US!

Join the growing number of teachers, home school parents and health professionals creating sensory strong learning environments at home and school.

Join the 20 Day Classroom Detox and support and empower your students to learn to their best ability.

yes, tell me how!

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It should come as no surprise that we all need to feel comfortable and connected to our physical environment. And it is our sensory processing abilities that make it all possible. In the classroom setting, helping children who struggle with sensory processing issues to feel safe and connected is the first step to improving their learning experience, and indeed, the learning experience of all your students.

If you have a class of 30 students, studies have shown that there could be as many as 5 children in your class who are not engaged, not focused and not keeping up with the rest of the class group because the sensory demands of the classroom affect them. You can probably point to which ones they are. They fidget, they're distracted, they can’t focus on simple instructions. They disrupt the whole class and take you away from the task of teaching.

This short report will explore the ways in which you can help students with sensory processing issues to achieve maximum benefit from their classroom learning experience by highlighting simple strategies for making changes to your classroom environment.
Sensory processing is the means by which signals and inputs from the world around us travel to our brain, are interpreted, and our responses delivered. Though we face myriad sensory inputs from our environment every minute of the day, most of us are adept at filtering out the less important stimuli and responding appropriately to the more important ones. Most of us, but not all. Some children, especially those on the autism spectrum, really struggle with the interpretation of the world around them because of the demands of so many sensory inputs.

Our senses are critical for understanding the world around us, the space we occupy, and making the appropriate response to the external environment in which we find ourselves. For children with sensory processing issues, the signals from their surroundings become confused or corrupted, making it difficult to respond appropriately to sensory input information.

This can include visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, vestibular and proprioceptive information. The responses of these children can be hyper- or hyposensitive – causing them to either overreact or underreact to their environmental inputs.
Identifying Sensory Processing Issues

In the classroom environment, the correct interpretation of and response to sensory inputs has a significant impact on the learning experience. Because children with sensory processing issues process information received from the senses differently, it can affect not only how they move and learn, but also how they behave, how they play and make friends, and especially how they feel about themselves.[1] If children struggle to process even basic information received by their senses, there is less room for working on tasks that require higher levels of understanding, such as those expected of them in the classroom.
Children who experience sensory processing issues may behave in one or more of the following ways:

- They constantly touch things, including other children, or conversely, struggle to hold things, such as their pencil, or a pair of scissors
- They may avoid touch of any kind and dislike crowds, such as they face in the playground
- They might chew their pencils, or their uniform when they are trying to concentrate
- They are confused by written words on the page and don’t know what to do first or where to begin tasks
- They hate bright lights
- They like to make noises and experiment with sounds
- They don’t respond well to verbal instructions
- They cover their ears when they hear loud noises
- They hear noises that others don’t, or are distracted by background noise, such as traffic
- They find smells attractive and sniff their books or equipment, or they may be repulsed by strong smells, such as perfume
- They like to move a lot, or maybe not at all
All the reactions listed above, and many others, indicate that a child may be having difficulty with sensory processing. Once you recognise these behaviours, it is easier to understand why and how their learning experience is impacted. But there are many small changes that can be introduced into the classroom to alleviate these issues and thus, make the classroom environment a safer place for children having problems interpreting sensory inputs.

The benefits of adapting the classroom environment to accommodate different modes of learning cannot be underestimated. A study by staff at the University of Salford [2] concluded that when addressing formal learning, the overwhelming focus should be at the classroom level. The changes introduced do not need to be huge, but the approach should be holistic, addressing seven significant design parameters. These include light, temperature, air quality, colour, complexity, ownership, and flexibility.

While the first four of these are self-explanatory, the others bear further clarification. Complexity refers to the level of visual stimulation within the room, but it is unclear whether more or less is better, since children who struggle with visual sensory processing may be more distracted by complex spaces.[3]
Ownership relates to personalisation of a space, and the way in which an individual develops their identity and sense of self-worth. It has been argued that intimate and personalised spaces are better for absorbing, memorising and recalling information. [4] In other words, if children have a personal connection with the classroom space, they are more likely to perform better.

Flexibility refers to the availability of breakout spaces, learning spaces designed specifically with different learning modes in mind, the floor plan of the classroom, and wall displays. These are all items that can be changed without major reconstruction work within the room, but they are pivotal in catering for different learning styles and age groups.
Obviously, there is not a lot you can do about the size and shape of an existing classroom, or where it is sited in relation to external noise factors, such as corridors, the school canteen or road traffic. However, internally there are many strategies which can help you lessen the impact of sensory inputs.

Some significant things to consider may include the following:

- The seating arrangements within the space
- The position of the teacher when giving instructions and the ability of the students to clearly hear what the teacher is saying
Identifying Sensory Processing Issues

- The noise levels when children are getting up from their desks and moving about the room
- The flow of traffic within the room
- The amount of carpeting on the floor
- The noise level of student chatter during group work
- The natural light entering the room
- The amount of fluorescent light
- The coverings, or lack of, on the windows
- The colour of the walls
- The availability of soft furnishings and relaxation areas
- The amount of visual ‘busy-ness’ provided by posters or student artwork displayed on the walls
Benefits You Can Expect

Even small changes in some of the areas described above can bring about change in your students’ ability to deal with sensory inputs. You may see improvements in the following areas:

- Attention & focus
- Self-regulation and more appropriate responses
- Posture
- More regulated emotional & behavioural responses
- Increased engagement, interaction and development of play skills
- Increased learning opportunities
The Life Skills 4 Kids booklet, School Environment Sensory Checklist, is an excellent resource which introduces fresh ideas on how to improve the classroom experience for all students. It includes a 5-page checklist to help you quickly evaluate your classroom from a sensory perspective. Through a series of detailed questions about your current learning environment, it will guide you to a safer, more inclusive classroom that encourages participation and facilitates learning.

The School Environment Sensory Checklist is available for purchase here.
At Life Skills 4 Kids, we are passionate about helping parents and teachers of children with sensory processing issues to create a safer, more inclusive environment in which their children and students are encouraged to learn.

With this in mind, we have created an online course, specifically designed to address the issues confronting teachers in the classroom. This is our 20-Day Classroom Detox course. Once enrolled, you will receive a daily ‘tip’ delivered to your nominated email address each week day for four weeks. These tips provide invaluable suggestions on how you can improve the classroom environment in small ways that will have big impact.
You will also be provided with access to a curriculum that addresses the following:

- How to identify potential environmental issues
- Solutions that provide a structure from which you can problem solve potential classroom environment issues
- Pictorial and case study examples that make these strategies easy to grasp

To cater for different learning styles, the course content is delivered in different modes from day to day and include:

- Written introductions each day to get you started
- Videos that step you through the processes described
- Transcripts of the video – for those who like to skim read
- A printable workbook to help you work through your task of the day
- Strategies and ideas you can apply immediately in your classroom
Over 20 days, you will explore the following topics:

- Your Classroom's Visual Baseline
- Glare
- Visual Busy-ness & Eye Fatigue
- Lighting
- The Just Right Kids Model
- Auditory Factors
- Fidgety Fingers
- Calming Techniques
- Oral Factors
- Seating and Desk Audit
- Movement
- Muscle Activities
- Retreat Areas
- Playgrounds

If you have found this brochure helpful, please visit our webpage to learn more at

www.lifeskills4kids.com.au
References and extra reading

[1] Sensory Meltdowns vs Behaviour Meltdowns. Do you know the difference? http://bit.ly/2wR0gu0


More information on our 20-Day Classroom Detox course can be found at the link below: