



Sensory Strategies to Support the Mental Health of Students with Special Education Needs

Each student has a 'sensory profile' that reflects preferences in how we interact with internal and external stimuli. In fact, we all do! We may 'seek', or we may 'avoid', specific sensory experiences which can impact mood, behaviour, mental health, and sense of well-being.

Did you know?

There are eight sensory systems that help us interpret our internal and external environments:

1. Visual (sight)
2. Auditory (hearing)
3. Tactile (touch)
4. Olfactory (smell)
5. Gustatory (taste)
6. Vestibular (movement)
7. Proprioceptive (awareness of body in space)
8. Interoceptive (sense of internal organs)

Students with special education needs may present with a range of sensory processing needs which may be identified on their learning plans.

Universal strategies for sensory and movement activities can help promote learning and well-being for all students.

Students' sensory needs may change throughout the day, depending on the demands of their environment. When there is a disconnect between sensory processing preferences and the demands of the environment, students may experience stress and have difficulty engaging in learning activities, communicating and connecting with others. When a student's sensory needs are unmet, it can deplete their energy which may lead to a lack of focus, withdrawal, irritability, and exhaustion, which may contribute to poor mental health.

When sensory systems are well supported it can help bolster successful participation in learning and social activities. Further, understanding and accommodating a student's sensory needs can help to affirm their identity, making them feel welcome, cared for, and supported in the learning environment. When sensory needs are met it can increase a student's ability to focus and engage in learning and can support mental health and well-being.



Tier one strategies for sensory and movement activities, while necessary for some students with special education needs, help promote learning and well-being for all.

The following sensory strategies can help promote mentally healthy learning environments and support students to learn and be well.

Be curious about a student's sensory needs

- ▶ **Observe and notice in your students:**
 - What sensory experiences do they seek out?
 - What sensory experiences do they avoid?
 - What sensory experiences help them engage in the learning environment, and which experiences interfere with engagement?
 - Where are they comfortable working in the learning environment?
 - Which transitions (between activities, lessons or learning spaces) go well, and which are difficult?
- ▶ **Use check-in strategies (both verbal and visual) to connect and help students tune in to how they are feeling and what they need**
- ▶ **Be curious about what a student may be telling us through their behaviour. Why this? Why now?**

Here are some simple tools that educators have co-developed with School Mental Health Ontario that can be used to enhance these strategies:

[Grab and Go Mood Meter](#)

[Daily Greetings](#)

[Self-Advocacy Cards](#)

[Would You Rather?](#)

Co-create a learning environment that includes a variety of sensory options that can accommodate all types of learners

- ▶ Provide differentiated instruction in multiple ways to support auditory, visual, tactile, and vestibular learning.
- ▶ Offer options for students to change positions to complete their work (e.g., using various seating options, standing, tall kneeling, bike desk, etc.).
- ▶ Provide learning opportunities using different modalities such as books, whiteboard, slides, music, visuals, manipulatives.
- ▶ Provide opportunities to be outdoors and engage with sensory experiences in nature.
- ▶ Reduce sound with floor mats, hush-ups on chairs, use of headphones, soft music.
- ▶ Adjust lighting to meet student needs; use natural light where possible.
- ▶ Reduce screen time and build in breaks from screens, when possible, for students with assistive technology.



- ▶ Reduce visual clutter on walls and screens; organize materials in bins and store away unused materials; use high contrast visuals for students with low vision.
- ▶ Co-create designated spaces for quiet, conferencing, and noisy activity.
- ▶ Co-create a movement station and integrate opportunities for movement as part of the learning.
- ▶ Support students to create their own sensory bins and/ or select fidgets to support a variety of sensory needs (tactile, visual, olfactory, vestibular) that are safe, age-appropriate, and developmentally appropriate.
- ▶ Seek student input and feedback, monitor, and adjust sensory spaces and activities as needed.
- ▶ Consult with parent(s)/caregiver(s) about the sensory experiences their child seeks and avoids. Be curious about what works at home to reduce stress, avoid sensory overload, and meet sensory needs.

Here are some simple tools that educators have co-developed with School Mental Health Ontario that can be used to enhance these strategies:

[Calming Spaces](#)

[Calming Boxes](#)

[Paying Attention](#)

Be proactive and include opportunities for regulating sensory experiences throughout the day

- ▶ Sensory breaks and opportunities for movement are necessary for some and good for all. They should not be earned as a reward, or removed when learners experience difficulty, but rather be deemed as a proactive, protective strategy to bolster well-being.
- ▶ Sensory breaks and movement activities are most effective when they are tailored to the needs of the class or specific learners. Incorporate activities or movement that your learners find calming or energizing and provide choice, alternatives, and modifications so that all students benefit.
- ▶ Doing the sensory or movement activity with students is a great way to help build connection and community within the group.
- ▶ Movement activities can be differentiated to meet a student's range of motion and can be done seated, standing, or on the move.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for students to contribute ideas for movement activities and lead the group.
- ▶ Provide choice and autonomy during the school day to allow students to meet their individual sensory needs and be better available for learning.
- ▶ Encourage students to choose an activity such as movement, stretch, and breathing breaks during transitions before beginning a new task.
- ▶ Co-develop routines and work with students to determine appropriate cues to support transitions so that expectations are predictable and well understood (e.g., visual schedules, visual timers, auditory cues and reminders, transition songs, tidy up routines). Provide advanced notice when schedules and routines change.



Including **movement activities** as part of the learning gets students moving and provides sensory input that may help either calm or energize them. Physical activity during a movement break boosts the blood flow and oxygen to the brain, enhancing learning, memory, and mood. Daily physical activity and movement is not just helpful for our bodies, it is also a protective factor for our mental health.

Sensory spaces are designated spaces within a learning environment that are designed to meet the sensory needs of students or groups of students. Examples of a sensory space include a calm corner, a virtual sensory room, a sensory bin, a movement chair, or a desk with items that provide sensory input. The space and the tools within the area are selected to meet the individual sensory needs of the students who are accessing these spaces. **Sensory breaks** help prevent sensory fatigue and promote well-being.

Here are some simple tools that educators have co-developed with School Mental Health Ontario that can be used to enhance these strategies:

Two-Minute Mindfulness	Visualization and Body Scan	Virtual Field Trip 1 Breathing Strategies K-12	Virtual Field Trip 2 Muscle Relaxation
Tense and Relax video	Body Scan Visualization Exercise Video	Breathing and Noticing	Forest Visualization
Mindfulness with Belly Breathing	Grounding Techniques Social Media Bundles	Secondary Posters [provide secondary examples for breathing exercises, muscle relaxation and stretching]	Social Media Bundles

Sensory strategies can help students to manage stress, enhance engagement, and bolster well-being. As an educator, your differentiated and thoughtful approach to supporting every student makes a significant difference in how a student with special education needs experiences the learning environment. By modelling a range of strategies, and offering several associated tools, you are promoting the mental health of all students, preventing sensory fatigue, and bolstering strategies for students with special education needs. If you require any support to implement these strategies or have concerns about the sensory needs of a specific student, please consult with an Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist.

This resource was developed and co-created with the school-board occupational therapy and physiotherapy departments of the Toronto District School Board, York Catholic District School Board, and York Region District School board in collaboration with SMH-ON. School-board hired OT/PT departments foster an embedded and integrated understanding of universal design learning and differentiated instruction through collaborative school-board experiences; this affords opportunities and curated recommendations that may be seamlessly interwoven into curriculum and school environments.

