



Designing A Sensory Resource Room

by Jennifer Davis

Imagine you are driving down the freeway at a comfortable speed. Suddenly you hear a very loud BANG! and the car in front of you starts swerving and braking. Once you have the situation under control you notice your heart is pounding, your knees are weak, it feels like your blood is racing through your veins and your breathing is fast. Before the near accident, you were receiving sensory input at a moderate pace and you felt 'in control' of your environment and yourself. Even without realizing it, the sound of the road, the ways things looked at the speed you were going, the feeling of moving along at that speed, your perception of personal space were all 'familiar'. Then an unexpected event entered the picture and your senses immediately went into overdrive. Recovery took a few seconds, or perhaps a few minutes, depending on how you perceived the threat of the event to yourself and your safety. **WELCOME TO THE SENSORY WORLD!**

The scenario described above is just an inkling of the many sensory struggles faced by individuals with autism on a daily basis. No matter where they fall on the autism spectrum, individuals can have difficulty dealing with seeing, hearing, taste, touch, smell and proprioception – where their bodies 'fit' in space. Their senses can be hyper (accentuated) or hypo (less responsive), and can markedly interfere with a person's ability to communicate, maintain appropriate behaviors and connect with his/her world.

Simple tasks that are easy and enjoyable to us are full of sensory pitfalls to these individuals. Breakfast is a good example. Many individuals who have problems with their sense of touch gag on slimy foods like eggs and oatmeal. Crunchy or hard items may be too painful to eat. They may not like the feel of food in their mouth at all. Food may smell awful to individuals who have a heightened sense of smell, and individuals who have sensitive hearing may not like the sound of food crunching as they eat it.

Getting dressed can have many similar issues. Wearing clothing can be painful to an individual with tactile sensitivity. Different fabrics or new fabrics can feel intolerable. Heavy shoes can interfere with the sense of balance. Clothing that crinkles or is shiny can be distracting and make an autistic person lose focus on what s/he is doing.

Then there's the bus ride to school. Individuals riding a bus often make loud, unpredictable noises that can be frightening to the individual with autism. Just getting on the bus can be problematic to a child with problems related to the sense of movement and space (proprioception). The bus probably starts moving before the child is seated and s/he may be thrown off balance by the twists and turns along the route.

By the time a person with autism has had breakfast, gotten dressed and taken the bus to school he has already had to deal with so many sensory integration challenges that it is no surprise that his ability to remain calm and focus on academics is severely compromised. Parents and schools can accommodate the sensory needs of individuals with autism by creating a simple "Sensory Safe Haven." A Sensory Safe Haven is a place to go that is easy on the senses, and even a little bit fun. It is not necessarily a place for learning as much as it is a place to "reintegrate" or come back to one's self, to distress and regain composure. The idea of a Sensory Safe Haven can easily be adapted to a variety of spaces and budgets. A child's room, a bathroom, a corner in the back of a classroom are all places that can work. Designing a sensory space is relatively easy; it just takes a little detective work, some imagination and a little manpower.



STEP ONE: LOOK AT YOUR SPACE: WHAT'S AVAILABLE AND IS IT SENSORY-FRIENDLY?

At Karlins Center we have a small sensory area created in the corner of one room and we also have an entire room dedicated to be a safe-haven. Look at the areas you are willing to commit to this purpose. Is there underutilized space in your classroom? What about rearranging furniture? Are there places at home your child already likes to spend time in that could be enhanced? If there is a specific item you already know you want to include in the sensory area - such as a swing, you're going to need the space to accommodate it.

Look for a place that's a little bit out of the way. Our in-room sensory areas are not by windows as we felt the glare, the temperature changes and the outside distractions might be over-stimulating and defeat our purpose. Since one of our goals was to give students a place to get away from loud noises and unpredictable individuals, we selected a quiet area away from the high activity centers of our program. Many autistic persons are sensitive to smells; that ruled out areas close to the lunchroom or the craft area, for example. We removed everything from the room and started from the

floor up. There may be items in your area that are usable: a nice soft carpet, walls that are already a soothing color, a cushy bean bag chair, etc. Look at things the person with autism already likes and is comforted by and incorporate them into your plan. In our research, we found that soothing wall colors, subdued lighting and an uncluttered environment were a few of the basic 'building blocks' when designing a sensory room. While we equate the color yellow with sunshine and warmth, many individuals with autism have negative reactions to the color. It pays to do some research ahead of time.



STEP TWO: LOOK AT THE INDIVIDUALS YOU WANT TO SERVE: WHAT ARE THEIR SENSORY NEEDS?

Start looking at the individual's behaviors with sensory integration in mind. If you plan to serve multiple students, it might be a good idea to put together a sensory needs chart before planning your room. What are their problems and what sort of sensory environment do they already seek out? For example: At the Karlins Center we have an individual who is tactile defensive; touch is painful for her and she does not like to touch various items. We also have an individual with an under-developed sense of touch. She likes to touch things all the time to get the sensory input she needs. Both of these behaviors may interfere with these students' ability to accomplish their daily personal or

academic goals and sensory integration can be used effectively to help them. For example, we may use hand lotion or brushing or different textures to help the person adjust to touching various items. For the hyposensitive student we may use items like putty and weighted balls to give the person extra sensory input. We have noticed that individuals who like to be hugged a lot may benefit from a weighted vest or weighted blanket.

It's a good idea to involve an Occupational Therapist when designing your sensory safe haven. They can provide you with surveys to fill out on your individuals to help you evaluate their sensory integration needs. If you don't have an OT available, start researching. There is a wealth of information available online; a good place to start is at www.autism.org. Read articles about sensory difficulties written by people with autism such as Donna Williams and Temple Grandin. These will give you a first person account of what it really

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feels like to live daily with sensory issues, and may help you identify specific sensory needs in the individuals you serve. How you put together a sensory safe haven will be different if you are serving one individual verses serving ten. For a group you might explore their common likes and dislikes. This can help you design around a theme that they will all be open to experiencing. Creating a space for one person is a little less complicated. You can really focus on what helps this one child relax and destress.

Our small sensory area at Karlins Center was created for one male student. He gets a little overloaded by the noise where he is working and occasionally needs a place to go and relax for a while. We created a space in the corner of our gym where he can take a break when needed.

Our larger classroom was created as a space everyone could enjoy. We use it not only as a sensory safe haven, but also from time to time for group meetings or for group movies for our students. We have several individuals who love the water, love to go swimming, like watching fish at the aquarium and enjoy watching movies like "Free Willy" that contain a lot of water scenes. These shared interests naturally suggested to us that an ocean theme might work well for our sensory room, so we began looking for sensory items that had a water or fish look or were related to either. We wanted to give people a sense of stepping into the ocean and away from whatever stress or noise that was overwhelming them. We also wanted to use this room for Sensory Integration therapy with people in the morning.



STEP THREE: LOOK AT YOUR BUDGET: WHAT CAN YOU AFFORD TO SPEND?

Our small sensory area is very low budget and our sensory classroom is higher budget. You can create a great space either way. Start by making a list of items you must have, and items you'd like to have. Are there lower cost alternatives? In our gym space we have a massage mat individuals can lay or sit on at a cost of about forty dollars. In our classroom we have a massage rocker recliner, at a cost of over a thousand dollars.

This is also a time to consider fundraising for the sensory space, grant proposals and individuals who may be willing to donate their time and talents. At Karlins Center we started saving money through recycling cans, and used it to purchase paint for a mural. Two students and a teacher from a local high school donated several hours to paint our ocean mural, and an electrician donated his time to set up the lighting. There may be many individuals or groups who are willing to help out once they understand your need.



STEP FOUR: EXPLORE WHAT'S AVAILABLE

Once you have identified your individuals' sensory integration needs and outlined the items you'd like to include

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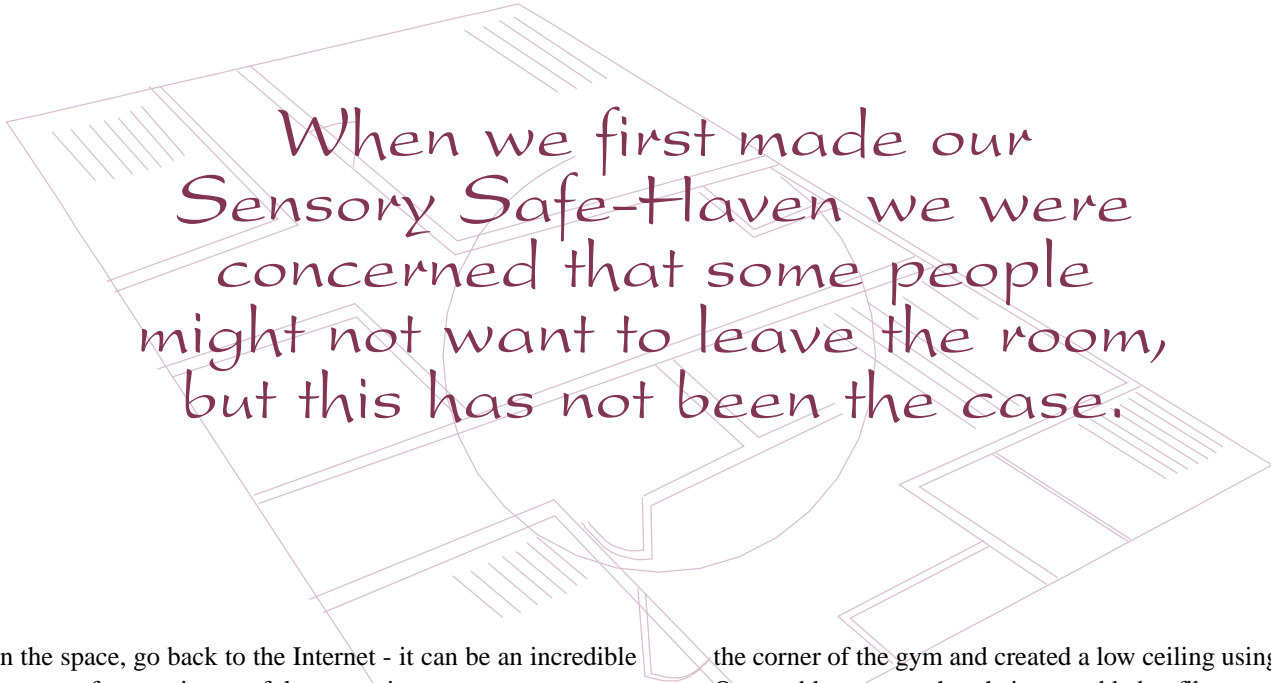
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When we first made our
Sensory Safe-Haven we were
concerned that some people
might not want to leave the room,
but this has not been the case.

in the space, go back to the Internet - it can be an incredible resource for creative, useful sensory items.

Ebay has a store called A Special Toolbox where you can find many low-priced tactile, visual play items. www.Playawaytoy.com has a great swing that can be installed in a doorway. www.Sensorycomfort.com, www.southpawenterprises.com and www.therapyshoppe.com all have an incredible assortment of sensory integration items at reasonable prices. A simple keyword search on Google or Yahoo will bring lots of other options for you to consider. Start shopping around your local area with "sensory integration eyes". As an example, let's consider a child who loves to take baths, uses this to help him relax and as his parent, you want to enhance this experience for him at home. When you are out shopping you might want to scout for different textures that might be fun. A sponge, a luffah or a bath brush could be a way of adding different sensations. Aromatherapy can be used in a bath by adding different oils. You might want to look at nightlights or fiber optic lights that could give your bathroom a soft glow. How about playing music or 'environmental sounds' that your child enjoys? A huge bath blanket fresh out of the dryer can be a nice way to end the experience. With just a little imagination and a couple of hours time, you've created an enjoyable get away for your autistic child.



STEP FIVE: PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Our first venture into setting up a sensory safe haven at Karlans Center was for one specific individual, who kept getting overloaded while working. He would often get up and leave his workstation in search of a place to relax. We saw a need and decided to create a space for him. His work area is near the gym. We put a donated rocker/easy chair in

the corner of the gym and created a low ceiling using sheets. On a table next to the chair we added a fiber optic light, which creates a soft glow and also slowly turns and changes colors. As this person really likes phone books, we have several of them available for him to read. This is a simple place for him to go and relax and he uses it frequently. He is now calmer while he's working as he knows he can take a break whenever he needs one. An additional benefit is that he is getting better at recognizing when he needs to take a break, before he gets too upset.

Our sensory classroom was much more complicated. We had six students we thought would benefit from a sensory safe haven and were able to find a room we could use specifically for this purpose. To help fund the project we started saving and crushing recyclable cans. When we had about \$200.00 saved, we found the local teacher and students who painted a wonderful ocean scene with dolphins, fish and plant life. They even used a special paint on selected areas that glows when lit with a black light. A local electrician donated his time and wiring to install the lights. When they are lit it feels very much like stepping into the ocean and our students enjoy the subdued lighting and finding it soothing.

Once the walls were painted and the 'structural' work was done, we looked at our space and thought about what kind of seating we wanted. It needed to be comfortable and washable. We selected a great leather corner couch, which we accented with pillows of all sorts of textures and colors, and the rocker/recliner massage chair. It has different settings for different types of massage depending on individual preference.

Because we had previously decided that we wanted to use the room for different activities, we designed it so that it would be versatile enough that we could hold an occasional group in there, and yet be relatively uncluttered so as not to be over-stimulating.

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In the back of the room we added a bookshelf and filled it with magazines. There is also a desk in the back with a computer and space for drawing. We added a small TV and VCR, which we use not only for relaxation videos, but also for the occasional movie group.

As finishing touches, we have a fish tank against the wall opposite the mural. This not only accentuates the mural, but adds a soft glow and an interesting visual scene. The sound of the running water is soothing. In one corner we have a tube light filled with water that bubbles and changes colors. We have a couple of fiber optic lights that rotate and change colors too. On one side of the room we have a fan that blows on a windsock shaped like a fish with a tail that spins around. To keep clutter at a minimum, we added a treasure chest-type trunk in which we keep all our smaller sensory integration items.

When we first made our Sensory Safe-Haven we were concerned that some people might not want to leave the room, but this has not been the case. Conversely, we have one individual who tends to self-isolate quite a bit. By using the sensory room for group movies this individual is learning to tolerate other people a bit more and is now sometimes able to stay for the whole group session.

We have individuals who start the day in our sensory room receiving sensory integration therapy or simply watching the fish and then moving on to the rest of the day. The room helps them relax and recenter themselves after their van ride in. One young man with Asperger's comes in every morning for sensory brushing. He knows where his brushes are and if a staff person is not there on time, he will read who's on the schedule and go find him or her.

Our Sensory Safe Haven is still a work in progress; we are learning how to use and take full advantage of it to help our center participants. One of the most exciting results we have noticed to date is individuals with autism learning to recognize their own sensory needs and initiating requests to get these needs met. This will ultimately lead to increased independence and better management of their sensory needs.

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