

## Creating a Supportive Environment

This review discusses things that you can do to structure an environment throughout the home, in a way that supports a child with autism. Many individuals with autism have trouble processing information they receive from the five senses – things that they see, taste, hear, smell and touch. This means that things that do not bother people without autism can be processed differently by the brain of someone with autism and cause distress and confusion. Often, individuals with autism hear everything that is going on around them, and cannot filter the sounds, and may hear sounds significantly louder than others do. They may find certain lighting very disturbing and be very uncomfortable wearing certain types of materials. Because many individuals with autism are unable to communicate their feelings or what they are experiencing verbally, their caregiver may not notice something that may be causing them distress.

There are a number of things you can do to ensure that your child's home environment supports their unique needs. The suggestions that follow can help create an environment that is soothing and can be applied to a child's bedroom, play space or even the whole house. Please remember, that each individual is unique, and therefore these suggestions need to be discussed and evaluated by your child's occupational therapist. Each child may react differently to the changes you make.

The goal is to create an environment:

- That is predictable and manageable
- Reduces potentially overwhelming stimuli
- Encourages positive social interactions and opportunities to communicate

### Visuals:

Bright lights, colors, objects, pictures and decorations may work well for typical children, but can often be overwhelming for a child with autism. Therefore, some suggestions to consider throughout the home include:

- Choosing pastels or soothing, muted colors for wall paint,
- Reducing items that make the room too busy such as many bright decorations and objects from walls and surfaces,
- Changing fluorescent lighting to natural lighting or incandescent lighting,
- Changing light fixtures to create a "soft" light.

### Sounds and Smells:

Loud sounds or continuous low noise can make a child with autism uncomfortable and even overwhelmed due to how they process sensory information. Smells can have a similar effect on some children. Suggestions to help reduce their discomfort can include:

- Removing continuous noises such as a loud fan, air conditioner or the low hum of other appliances,
- Minimizing other sounds that may be distracting, such as leaving a television on for extended periods,
- Do not use room fragrances or strong perfumes in a closed room,
- For strong food smells, use an exhaust fan and/or an open window to help dissipate the smells,
- Creating "quiet time" for a child by having periods where there is very little noise to distract them,
- White noise at bed time can be very helpful for some children who have a harder time falling asleep,
- Create a quiet room/tent/corner a child can use.

### Room Organization:

You can organize a space to support a child's communication skills and interests. Some ideas that you may want to consider include:

- Putting preferred objects and toys out of reach, but within view, so a child can practice asking for them and communicating their needs,

- Having a bin for toys and bringing out only a few toys at a time. This will encourage a child to ask for what they want and will also keep their interest in their toys,
- Ensuring a child's safety by putting heavy, glass, dangerous objects out of reach and away from view,
- Using visuals/icons for certain tasks, food items etc. to help a child communicate more effectively with you. This will also promote independence and help to reduce a child's frustration if they have limited verbal language.

### Creating a Sensory Corner:

A sensory corner is a space you create for a child to explore their senses through specific music, lighting, objects, etc. Creating this setting can be therapeutic and beneficial. It is important to note that sensory corners needs to be tailored to each child's unique needs and is something your occupational therapist can help you create. Something that may be therapeutic for one child, may be distracting for another. You may want to consider some of the following suggestions:

- For movement, rocking horses or even a bean bag chair might work well,
- For visual inputs you could use a play tent or color cubes, lighted toys, lava lamps,
- For sounds, a music player, musical toys,
- For touch, you could include textured balls, play dough, electric hand massagers, sifting bins and different types of materials.

### Things to NOT Have in a Room:

Here are suggestions for things to avoid as far as possible when setting up a space for a child with autism.

- Many toys strewn about in a disorganized fashion,
- Things that discourage social interactions such as a TV,
- Breakable objects,
- Things that make loud sounds,
- Things that make a room too busy,
- Strong smells such as home fragrances.

We hope you have enjoyed reviewing these ideas to create a supportive environment for your child. Your child's occupational therapist can review these options with you and help customize a room for your child. For more suggestions, please visit [Sensory Room](#).