

CENTRE FOR AUTISM MIDDLETOWN

Setting Up A Calm Room



Before planning the setup of a calm area or sensory room it is recommended you attend training on sensory processing for an overview on the sensory systems and general strategies which help to address sensory needs in students with Autism and sensory processing differences.

A full list of Middletown Centre for Autism's training schedule can be found on our website. www.middletownautim.com
Specific advice for individual students from your local Occupational Therapy service is also recommended.



A calm area is most effective when it has minimal distractions and resources. Too many resources can often make students feel even more overwhelmed and then has the opposite effect from calming.

The main points to consider in a calm area are:

- Limit visual stimulation, minimise the amount of information on display boards,
- Ensure there are blinds on any windows as the student may want to close the blinds to avoid others looking in or to reduce the visual stimulation. You will need to check how this fits in with your Child Protection policy.
- If possible, a dimmer switch would be useful as bright lighting can be over stimulating.

There are resources which can help to calm the student; the following should be considered according to the specific sensory needs and preferences of the individual. If a number of students are using the area these items should be stored in a box or cupboard and only taken out for the individual who needs them.



• **Therapy ball/gym ball:**

Bouncing or rocking on a therapy ball is very calming. Some students may also like to lie on the floor while you roll the ball over their back using firm pressure.

- Soft comfortable **seating** such as a bean bag or large pillows, a quilt or blanket to wrap up in for deep pressure input.



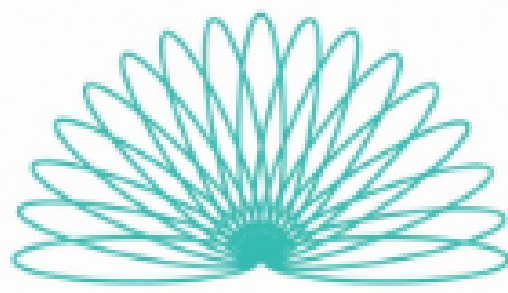
- **Music** - Access to an iPod or headphones linked to a CD player/computer or a box of **fidget toys** or stress balls.

- **Weights/resistance items:** Lifting weights (e.g. a small set of dumbbells) or using resistance equipment (e.g. Lycra bands) provides deep input to the muscles which is often calming.



- **Blowing activities:** Blow football (blowing a piece of cotton wool on a table with straws) or blowing bubbles in a tray of water with fairy liquid helps to regulate some of our students. Blowing into a kazoo or a party blower may also help (as long as there isn't a noise sensitive student in the room at the same time).

Other anxiety management techniques which do not require any resources may also be carried out in the calm area. For example, slow breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation.



Setting Up A Sensory Room

The suggestions below are general recommendations. As pupils have not been individually assessed, specific recommendations based on their needs cannot be provided. All resources should therefore be used with caution.



Some key points to consider when using sensory resources:

- Supervise pupils at all times when using these resources.
- Observe pupils and immediately stop activity if they show negative physiological signs such as sweating, becoming very pale or having a flushed face, dilated pupils, nausea, dizziness, complaining of headache or tiredness.
- Short, frequent times spent using each piece of equipment will be more effective than spending long periods using one resource.
- Let the pupil lead their time in the sensory room. They will know what resources they find calming/regulating.
- Provide a visual "Stop" prompt so the pupils can request when they want to stop an activity.
- If possible, request assessment by an OT who could then draw up individualised sensory programmes for each pupil.
- After the resources are purchased, staff should receive training in appropriate use of equipment.
- All resources should be stored safely, especially therapy balls and peanut rolls.

Useful Stuff

- Therapy/gym balls of varying sizes. Pupils should be able to sit on the ball with feet firmly on the floor.
- Peanut rolls of varying sizes. Again, pupils should be able to sit on the peanut roll with feet firmly on the floor.
- Therapy balls/peanut rolls with different textures.
- Tunnel.
- Beanbags/ beanbag chairs.
- Mats (i.e. PE Mats) to be used when child is on therapy balls, peanut rolls etc.
- Weighted blankets. It is very important that you follow the guidelines on the blanket re. what weight should be used depending on the weight of the child. It is safest to keep the blanket over the lower half of the body as they can affect breathing, especially in pupils with low muscle tone or conditions which affect breathing. However, some pupils like them over the whole body, so observe the pupil closely and limit time spent using the blanket.
- Other weighted items e.g. weighted lap pads, weighted balls.
- Theraband (of varying resistance)
- Theraputty
- Fidget items
- Boxes containing different textures
- Containers of aromatherapy oils
- Black out tent
- Dance sack
- Ipad (or similar) with speakers and/or headphones for calming music
- Balance/wobble cushions
- Balance board
- Spinning cone
- Spinning chair (Spinning chairs with hoods to pull over are available from IKEA.)
- Rocking chair
- Ear defenders

Additional items

1. **Scooter board (and ramp):** Scooter boards are excellent but you need space, so they will be better used in the PE hall/gym. Ramps are expensive and not essential, but bring benefits. Using a scooter board on carpet increases the resistance which is more regulating for some students. If using one, you will need crash mats against the end wall.
2. **Ball pools:** These can be expensive, and take up a lot of space. They can also be distracting in the room if you are trying to direct the pupil to other activities. However, they can be very regulating for some pupils.
3. **Trampolines:** Small ones (with handles) do not take up too much space but need to be stored safely when not in use. It is essential to have mats around it, and ensure the pupils do not jump for too long as this can sometimes cause them to become over-excited and disengaged.
4. **Swings:** These are usually only found in Sensory Integration rooms. They can be very calming, but movement input can be over-stimulating so they are best used with OT advice.
5. **A walrus or a dolphin mat is a large inflatable mat** which is a specialised piece of equipment and would be best used with advice from an OT for each child using it.
6. **Chin-up bar:** Hanging from a bar (in the way a child hangs from monkey bars) can be regulating for some children. This could be attached to a door frame.