

SENSORY SMARTS FOR SCHOOL

20 strategies for sensitive kids...

BY LINDSEY BIEL, OTR/L

A new school year represents a fresh start with new faces, places, school supplies, clothing, and expectations. Even if it's a familiar school that your child attends year-round, there are inevitable changes your sensitive child may need help getting used to.

At the same time, your child's school will likely need an update or at least a refresher on what helps and what doesn't. While many strategies and accommodations can easily be implemented informally with understanding school staff, others may need to be negotiated and added to the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).

HERE ARE 20 SENSORY SMART STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER:

1. While some children enjoy getting new school outfits, new clothing can be stressful for sensitive kids who crave predictability and familiarity. Of course it's fine to start the new school year in well-worn, comfortable clothing, but there will come a time when they need to be replaced. Go to stores at off-peak hours or shop online. Let your child choose between acceptable options. Check for itchy labels, seams, and stray threads and buy only if these can be removed. Wash clothing multiple times to get rid of irritating sizing and chemicals and to pre-condition clothing. Use a dye-free,

perfume-free detergent unless you know your child loves the scent of a certain detergent. Be sure to check out sensory friendly clothing manufacturers such as Hanes (tagfree line) and Hanna Andersson. Clothing companies like Teres Kids (tereskids.com) and Soft (softclothing.net) specialize in sensory-friendly clothing for supersensitive kids, including cute, high-quality shirts, dresses, pants, and skirts. Soft and SmartKnit (smartknitkids.com) offer soft seamless underwear and socks.

2. When shopping for new shoes, desensitize feet before trying on new shoes by giving your child a deep pressure foot massage or therapeutic deep touch pressure brushing with joint compressions as taught by your occupational therapist. Bring socks you know your child tolerates and try on different types of shoes to find acceptable ones. For example, if you need special occasion shoes and your child can't bear leather shoes, try a dressier sneaker or moccasins. Crocs and Ugg-type shearling-lined boots are often well-tolerated, but provide poor arch support and while comfortable, may interfere with

gross motor activities like running and climbing. Well-fitting sneakers or lightweight hiking boots with good arch support are generally best. If your child insists on wearing regular shoes or sneakers during bad weather, purchase galoshes that fit right over them.

- 3. If your child's school requires a uniform**, this may be a route toward wearing something other than sweatpants or the road to daily meltdown. If need be, discuss ways you can acceptably modify the school's dress code with the school, e.g., your child may be able to wear a neat white polo shirt rather than a button-down dress shirt.
- 4. Transitioning to new weather can be hard for a sensitive child.** As the weather cools, try layering rather than switching right away to heavier clothing. The tee-shirt your son adores can be worn under a warmer over-shirt. Go to outdoors stores and check brands such as Patagonia and Columbia which use thinner technical fabrics that add warmth without the bulk. If your child dislikes wearing a hat, try earmuffs or a headband that covers the ears. Lined gloves may be more tolerable than knit gloves or mittens.
- 5. Last year's school supplies may still be quite usable at the start of the new school year too.** Be sure to have your child use any new school supplies before school starts



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so everything is familiar. You don't want your child to be distracted by a cool new pencil case when you want him to be adjusting to a new classroom. Your child might like textured writing tools such as velveteen pencils (gpencil.com) or grippy colored pencils like Faber-Castell GRIP Colored EcoPencils. Be sure to stock up on fresh molded pencil grips if your child uses one to correct her grasp (thepencilgrip.com). Also consider investing in a slantboard (pfot.com) to improve position for the hands, neck, shoulders, and eyes. Look for one with a rubberized bottom, a clip to hold work in place, and a plastic overlay that provides a pleasant writing surface and prevents pencil slippage. You can make your own slantboard with a 3-4" loose-leaf binder held in place with duct tape though the premade ones generally work better.

6. **If your child gets overstimulated in noisy environments** like the playground, gym class, and cafeteria consider providing noise-reducing headphones, earplugs, or earmuffs for use during these times. You will need to train your older child how to use these or ask a school staff member for assistance if your child is younger or unable to handle this independently.
7. **Ask for advance warning for fire drills if your child has extreme behavioral reactions** that interfere with learning. While the goal is to promote safety during an actual emergency, if your child absolutely freaks out during fire alarms, it's best to prepare by practicing using ear protection and behaving in a calm, safe way. If possible, ask the school to lower the volume on a computerized alarm system, or add foam insulation to speakers for the old-fashioned kind.
8. **If the gym teacher's shrill whistle upsets your child**, ask the teacher to turn the lights on and off in the gymnasium to get attention rather than blow on the whistle.

9. **If eating is an issue for an older child who is expected to eat in a busy cafeteria**, work with the school to develop a "lunch club." Lunch clubs are small groups of children who eat in an alternate location such as the therapy room, library, or office with an understanding school staff member or a parent volunteer.
10. **If your child is distracted by ambient noise**, ask her to be seated near the teacher and away from a noisy hallway or outside windows.
11. **If your child is distressed by casual bumps and touches**, ask that he be positioned at the end of line and head of a table to avoid unexpected touch.
12. **If your child is always "on the go,"** explore ways to incorporate movement into classroom routines in a way that does not interfere with learning. A hand fidget tool like a Tangle or squeeze ball, oral comfort like a water bottle with a sports top, or inflatable seat cushion may enable your child to get a small amount of movement that helps her to focus.
13. **Let the school know if your child will participate more happily in art projects** if he uses materials such as a paintbrush rather than finger paints and a glue stick rather than regular glue.
14. **If your child struggles to listen and look simultaneously**, explain this and why your child should be allowed to avoid eye contact when speaking or listening to instructions. If necessary, eye contact can be worked on as a separate goal when the child is not struggling to process new information.
15. **If your child is struggling with skills such as reading, writing, scissoring, beading, throwing and catching a ball**, get an exam from a developmental optometrist. You can find one in your area by

entering your zip code into the "Find a Doctor" directory at COVD.org. Make sure the school knows that your child is entitled to wear prescription eyewear, including colored or prism lenses and sunglasses.

16. **If your child is sensitive to fluorescent lighting** (which some people can see and hear as it flickers and can cause headaches), ask the school to turn off the overhead lights and use an incandescent floor lamp. If this is possible, ask that they install inexpensive diffusers such as the Classroom Light Filters easily found online.
17. **Request frequent movement breaks** if your child is a sensory seeker or a student who needs to move in order to stay alert and regulated. Breaks typically are 5-10 minutes every 60-90 minutes. Recess or outdoor time should never be taken away as punishment for any student.
18. **Help your child to meet oral needs appropriately.** Work with the school to figure out if it's okay for him to drink water as needed to hydrate and self-regulate; eat a healthy snack or chew gum at specified intervals to maintain focus; use an oral comfort tool such as a Kids Companion chewy, Chewy Wristband, or a similar tool. (funandfunction.com).
19. **If your child is chemically sensitive or smell sensitive**, you can insist that the school use non-toxic, unscented cleaning supplies.
20. **To help school staff recognize the connection between sensory issues and classroom behaviors**, consider downloading the Schools Checklist from the "Working with Schools" page at www.sensorysmarts.com. It is designed to help school staff rethink students' behavior from a sensory standpoint. ◀

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **For more practical tips on advocating for your child at school please refer to *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*** www.sensorysmarts.com.