

## OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY HANDOUT

### Environmental Considerations for Children with Sensory Issues

Because of difficulties processing sensory information, many students are not able to tune out extraneous environmental stimuli. Different student's vary greatly in which types of stimuli cannot be ignored, and which types of stimuli are distorted. Because of these wide variations, a simple checklist would not work.

What are presented here are ideas of things which *may* cause problems for some of these children. A thorough environmental analysis should take these often overlooked areas into consideration.

#### Visual-

- Is the lighting is too bright or shining directly into the child's eyes.
- The flicker of fluorescent lighting or computer monitors may be bothersome.
- Look at what is in the child's usual line of view, is it visually overstimulating (i.e. too bright, too cluttered)?
- Keep visual tasks and work area clear, neat, and meaningful.
- Some children will miss important visual cues because of competing visual input.
- Does the child need to process some or all of his/her work in a separate calm area?
- Are there too many things or people in the visual field between the child and the teacher?
- Is there a quiet area that is darker than the general environment and visually calming to withdraw to for calming purposes?

#### Auditory-

Is the noise level too high? The child may need to work in a quieter area to decrease stimulation. (Just how loud and disorganizing is *your* lunch room?)

- Would white noise help? (Headphones by themselves or with accompanying soft sounds, such as ocean or nature music, classical or new age music)
- Is the child too near to fans, heaters, discussion groups?
- Why do the bells need to be that loud? Put a muffler on it. You may need to take extra precautions for fire alarms. The hypersensitive child with autism may need to be absent or leave immediately.
- The hypersensitive child may need to be warned or protected from unexpected loud noises such as bells and alarms.

- Rhythm is often tolerated better than loud speech.
- Try adding a carpet to absorb noise, or place slit tennis balls under the chair legs.
- Some children don't hear their name called when attending to distracting background noise, others make continuous sounds to try to block out the background noise.
- Are excess noises muffled in the quiet area? Use room dividers, carpeting, blankets, and other soft, sound absorbing textures.

### **Tactile**

- Note reactions to hard and soft materials.
- Observe differences due to temperature of items (metals are colder).
- The child may avoid different textures. If the child does not tolerate play-dough, glue, fingerpaint, mud, and other goopy textures these may need to be introduced very gradually.
- If the child will only hold items with his/her fingertips, tactile hand desensitization may need to precede activities. Handling things from a "feelie box", brushing the hands, or starting with a deep lotion hand massage are examples.
- A hard chair may feel cold to the child, if so, use a pad or cushion.
- Provide a variety of textured materials and objects in the quiet area.
- Is the child's clothing well tolerated? Transitions, including seasonal changes in clothing, may need to be slow and gradual. Don't fuss over long sleeve vs. short sleeve. It may be necessary to allow the child to leave on coat/jacket until ready to have it off.
- Have the child be first or last in line if lightly bumping or touching peers is irritating.
- The sound or feel of water may be irritating or scary.
- Do not create mealtime issues. If the child refuses certain textures, it shouldn't be forced.

### **Vestibular-**

- Is the child fearful of heights, stairs, ladders on slides? If so, beware of stands or stairs with no back (you can see through to behind them), as they are more threatening.
- Plan an alternative route if a child is not ready to use an escalator or an elevator.
- Children who are fearful of heights or movement may react with fear on playgrounds. often, remaining on the periphery and watching others may help. The child may need to very gradually explore a playground area, in isolation, at a quiet time of the day.
- Some children will crave movement and seek the feeling of heights and swings. Assess safety factors (balance and grip on swing). Generally, the child who craves these sensations can handle them.

Please feel free to contact your occupational therapist with questions or concerns. If you are not sure who to ask, call the phone number on the top of page one and ask to talk to an OT who can help you.