

Sensory Supports in the Classroom: A Comprehensive, Ready-to-Use Guide

Actionable strategies organized by sensory need with tools you can implement tomorrow

Purpose and Notes

This guide is designed to help educators recognize and respond to students' sensory needs by matching observable behaviors with practical, low-barrier classroom supports.

While not a substitute for an occupational therapy (OT) evaluation, the strategies outlined here can strengthen access, self-regulation, and engagement for all learners.

These strategies are meant to be flexible, preventative supports that can be embedded into everyday classroom practice, not just reactive measures when students are dysregulated.

It is important to remember that every student processes sensory input differently; what calms one student may overwhelm another. For this reason, educators should approach sensory supports with curiosity, flexibility, and collaboration.

Input from families, occupational therapists, and related service providers is essential for tailoring strategies to individual needs, especially when formal sensory processing challenges have been identified.

At the same time, many supports listed here can benefit all students, making them excellent tools for universal design and inclusive practice.

Ultimately, the goal is not to “fix” a behavior but to create conditions where students can access learning, feel safe, and participate meaningfully.

When sensory supports are used with intention, they help students build independence, self-awareness, and the ability to advocate for what they need.

Universal Principles for Sensory Supports

The following guiding principles can help ensure that sensory strategies are purposeful, inclusive, and effective across classroom settings:

Offer choices without stigma.

Provide a range of options (e.g., fidgets, seating choices, movement breaks) so that students can self-select what helps them regulate. Emphasize that different learners need different tools, and frame all supports as strategies for success rather than special privileges.

Embed brief, predictable movement.

Build natural “reset” points into the day, such as stretch breaks, standing activities, or movement-based transitions. Predictability matters: when students know these opportunities are built into the schedule, they are less likely to seek unstructured or disruptive movement on their own.

Teach, model, and practice tool use.

Simply handing a student a sensory tool is not enough. Students need explicit instruction on how, when, and where to use it. Practice during calm moments, model correct use, and set clear boundaries so the tool enhances focus rather than becoming a distraction.

Normalize supports through universal access.

Whenever possible, introduce sensory strategies at the classroom level (e.g., everyone has access to a wiggle cushion or water break) before individualizing. This reduces stigma and fosters a culture where self-regulation is seen as part of learning, not as something “extra” or “special.”

Monitor and adjust based on data.

Collect simple, informal data – such as frequency counts, brief notes on student engagement, or check-ins with the student – to track whether a support is helping. If a tool or strategy is not making a difference, adjust the approach rather than continuing out of habit. Sensory supports should always have a purpose tied to access, engagement, or regulation.

Coordinate with the student’s team.

Maintain ongoing communication with occupational therapists, related service providers, and

families to ensure consistency across settings. Educators should share classroom observations and data, which can guide formal evaluations and more specialized interventions when needed.

Quick Match Table: Sensory Need to Indicators and Strategies

Sensory Need	Observable Indicators	Low-Intensity Strategies	Cautions and Notes
Proprioceptive <i>body awareness</i>	Seeks pressure or heavy work, pushes into furniture, chews on clothing, crashes into peers or floor	Chair push ups, wall push ups, carry book bins, push a cart, use weighted pencil, resistance bands on chair legs	Avoid unsafe crashing. Provide structured heavy work with clear start and end.
Vestibular <i>movement</i>	Constant motion, rocking, difficulty sitting for instruction, bumps into objects	Movement breaks every 15 to 30 minutes, stand and stretch, errand walks, sit-stand option, wobble cushion used w/ expectation	Introduce gradually to prevent overarousal. Ensure safety when using dynamic seating.
Tactile <i>touch</i>	Avoids messy work, overreacts to light touch, or constantly touches items and peers	Offer tools for messy tasks, wipes nearby, fidget with defined rules, personal workspace boundary, textured alternatives	Teach boundaries for fidgets. Avoid items that create noise or visual distraction.
Auditory <i>sound</i>	Covers ears, startles easily, distracted by hallway noise or chatter	Quiet corner, headphones for independent work, soft classroom sound cues, visual signals instead of loud prompts	Avoid all-day headphone use. Plan weaning and teach coping strategies.
Visual <i>sight</i>	Overwhelmed by busy walls, distracted by movement, seeks dark or low light	Reduce visual clutter in work zone, use folders or study carrel, consistent visual schedule, high-contrast handouts	Avoid overly dim lighting that reduces alertness. Keep safety signage visible.
Oral <i>seeking or avoiding</i>	Chews sleeves, pencils, seeks gum or crunchy foods, difficulty with oral motor regulation	Chewelry or chew pencil toppers, scheduled water sips, crunchy snack breaks if permitted	Follow school policies on food and choking precautions. Keep items clean.
Olfactory <i>smell</i>	Strong reactions to scents, avoids cafeterias or art rooms with odors	Unscented classroom supplies, seat away from strong odors, allow brief fresh air break when possible	Avoid scented sprays. Consider allergies and asthma plans.

Interoception <i>internal body cues</i>	Difficulty noticing hunger, bathroom needs, fatigue, or anxiety	Visual break menu, check-in chart for feelings & energy levels, scheduled breaks	Coordinate with family and nurse for health-related plans.
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Proprioceptive Strategy Bank - heavy work and pressure input

- Chair push ups 10 to 15 reps, 2 to 3 sets
- Wall push ups or isometric press 20 seconds
- Resistance band foot press on chair legs during independent work
- Carry or stack books, move crates, push mail cart with supervision
- Clasp hands and pull gently for isometric input for 10 seconds

Vestibular Strategy Bank - movement and orientation

- Stand to answer, then sit to write to reset attention
- Micro breaks: reach high, touch toes, cross body taps for 30 to 60 seconds
- Errand walk with purpose: deliver notes or materials to office or another class
- Seated figure-eight ankle movements or chair rotations with limits set
- Line transitions that include slow marching or heel to toe walking

Tactile Strategy Bank - touch and texture

- Choice of writing tools and grips to reduce tactile fatigue
- Glove or tool for messy projects like glue or paint
- Desk mat with subtle texture for fidgeting
- Calming object in pocket with classroom rules about use
- Teach personal space using floor spots or desk boundaries

Auditory Strategy Bank - sound management

- Teach hand signals for common requests to reduce verbal noise
- Use visual timers and cue cards instead of attention-getting claps
- Noise meter posted with levels for different activities
- Soft ear covers or headphones during independent work only

Visual Strategy Bank - visual load and focus

- Declutter immediate work zone, keep anchor charts purposeful
- Use colored line guides or index cards to track reading
- Study carrel or privacy folder during tests
- Consistent left to right visual schedules with icons
- Reduce transitions on slides, avoid busy animations

Oral Strategy Bank - regulation through mouth input

- Water bottle with straw kept at desk
- Chew-safe pencil toppers with teacher approval
- Crunchy or cold snack breaks if allowed by policy
- Blow through straw to move a cotton ball race as a quick alerting task
- Oral motor warm ups with SLP guidance when appropriate

Interoception Strategy Bank - noticing body cues

- Daily check-in chart: energy level, feelings, readiness
- Teach and practice two calming strategies and two alerting strategies
- Scheduled restroom and hydration routines
- Mindful minute after recess to reset breathing and heart rate
- Use first-then cards to connect body needs to task

Integrating Supports Without Stigma

- Introduce tools to the whole class as options, not rewards or punishments.
- Use neutral language: We have tools that help our brains and bodies learn.
- Teach routines for getting and returning tools quickly and quietly.

- Rotate jobs that include sensory tasks like passing heavy bins so it feels normal.
- Allow opt in and opt out to honor student autonomy.

Sensory Break Menu - Choice Board

Category	1 to 2 minutes	3 to 5 minutes	5 to 10 minutes
Heavy Work	Chair push ups, desk press, squeeze a therapy ball	Carry book bin to library and back, wall push ups around the room	Organize supply crates or move carts with supervision
Movement	Stretch sequence, cross body taps, doorway pec stretch	Walk one lap to office and back with pass, slow marching in hall	Outdoor walk on designated route with staff approval
Calming Input	Box breathing 4-4-4-4, hand on belly breathing	Mindful minute with quiet visual, progressive muscle relaxation quick scan	Read quietly in low stimulation space, dimmed lights if safe
Focusing Tools	Get water sip, fidget for 60 seconds	Visual timer set and plan next 3 steps	Short task switch: deliver materials, then return to task

Classroom Sensory Toolkit Checklist:

- Quiet corner or reduced stimulation workspace available
- Visual schedule posted and referenced in instruction
- Routine movement breaks embedded in plans
- At least two fidget types with use expectations taught
- Headphones available for independent work tasks
- Study carrels or privacy folders for focus tasks
- Water access and routine hydration reminders
- System for borrowing and returning tools
- Data log to note tool use and impact

Simple Data Tools to Monitor Effectiveness:

- Tally on-task intervals before and after a support is introduced
- 1 to 5 self rating by student for regulation before and after a break
- ABC snapshot once per week for problem times of day
- Weekly review to keep, adjust, or replace supports

Common Pitfalls and Safety Notes

- Allowing tools to become rewards or punishments rather than supports
- Using headphones all day which can reduce tolerance for normal classroom noise
- Providing dynamic seating without clear expectations for posture and safety
- Skipping instruction on how to use tools which leads to misuse
- Not cleaning shared tools regularly

Action Starter: Try Tomorrow

- Choose one strategy from the Quick Match Table and add it to tomorrow's lesson plan
- Teach the class a 90 second movement break and practice it twice tomorrow
- Set up a small quiet corner with a timer and a visual break menu