The Neurodivergent Classroom

Sensory processing at a Glance

Sensory sensitivity means distressing reactions to sounds, light, touch, smells or several kinds of input at once. It can make the school day a lot harder.



What you may notice in class

- Noise makes them flinch, fidget, pull back or go quiet.
- Bright light or lots of pictures clearly distract them.
- Tight clothes, crowds or touch feel uncomfortable.
- Avoids certain smells or foods.
- Recess and group work, with input from all sides, are especially hard.
- After busy, noisy stretches they seem worn out.
- Reactions differ by day, place or situation.
- For younger kids, recess, craft materials and loud transitions are especially hard. (elementary school)
- For older students, labs, school events and crowded hallways are especially hard. (middle and high school)

Strengths

- Can point out exactly what's getting in the way.
- Can help choose adjustments that work.
- Notices barriers in the room that others miss.
- Can use a clear signal to find relief.
- Learns and joins in more easily in the right setting.

What helps

- Ask what's hard for them and what helps.
- Turn down noise, light, color or crowding.
- Offer a visual schedule and announce changes early.
- Agree on a quieter spot for short breaks.
- Plan for recess, transitions and school events too.
- Check each change together and adjust as needed.
- Never use a quiet place as a punishment.
- Don't introduce tools without a clear purpose.
- Look for barriers across the whole school day.
- With younger kids, give early warning of loud transitions and new materials. (elementary school)
- With older students, plan quieter routes, workspaces and event options. (middle and high school)

What tends not to help

- Expecting them to just tough out distressing input.
- Making "they'll get used to it" a classroom goal.
- Cluttering a quiet space with materials.
- Using one adjustment for everyone, whatever the situation.

Words that carry

"What's hard right now? What would help?"

"Let's change one thing and see if it helps."

"You can go to the quiet spot we agreed on."

"It's going to get loud. Let's get ready together." (elementary school)

"You can pick a quieter option for the event." (middle and high school)

Where to find support

National Autistic Society: Sensory differences autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/sensory-differences/sensory-differences/all-audiences
Practical guidance on sensory differences from a UK charity.

inclusionED: Meeting students' sensory needs inclusioned.edu.au/practices/meet-students-sensory-needs
Free, evidence-informed classroom practices from Australia.

Understood.org: Sensory processing understood.org/en/articles/understanding-sensory-processing-issues
Clear explanations for teachers and families.

Local support
An occupational therapist or your school's special education team can help plan adjustments. Autism and ADHD associations in many countries cover sensory needs too.

More in the Teacher Portal: neurodivergentclassroom.com/teacher-portal/sensory-processing/

Sources: WHO: Autism fact sheet · Carter et al.: Sensory over-responsivity in elementary school children · NICE guideline CG170: Autism in under 19s, support and management · ASHA: Classroom acoustics