

EDUCATOR TIP SHEET:

WV Autism Training Center

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Creating Sensory and Regulation Supports for Students with ASD

Supporting students with autism through sensory and movement-based tools can make a tremendous difference in attention, regulation, and emotional wellbeing. Movement breaks, sensory bins, and structured self-regulation spaces help reduce stress, improve focus, and teach lifelong coping skills.

Below are practical ways to design and use sensory supports in classrooms or therapy spaces.

CALMING CORNER

A calming corner is a safe, quiet space in the classroom where students can self-regulate, calm down, and re-center when feeling overwhelmed.

Materials

- **Soft seating:** Bean bag, floor cushions, small rug
- **Lighting:** Soft lamp or string lights
- **Calming tools:**
 - Fidget toys
 - Stress balls
 - Noise-canceling headphones
 - Breathing cards or visual guides
 - Sensory bins (see “how to” below)
- **Visuals:**
 - Posters with calming strategies
 - Emotion charts
 - Affirmation cards

Setup

- **Choose a quiet, low-traffic area** in the classroom (near a wall or reading nook).
- **Use visual boundaries** to define the space:
 - *Budget tip:* Use a bookshelf, cabinet, **small rug**, curtain, or even masking tape on the floor.
- **Add comfortable seating:**
 - *Budget tip:* Use a **bean bag, floor cushion, or folded blanket/pillow.**
- **Incorporate calming visuals:**
 - Soft colors, low lighting (like a lamp), or posters with calming imagery.
 - *Budget tip:* Print free **calming posters** from websites like Teachers Pay Teachers. Model or lead students during the use of the calming posters.



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- **Include sensory/calming tools:**
 - Fidget toys, stress balls, textured fabric, or sensory bottles.
 - *Budget tip:* DIY items (e.g., rice in a bottle,).
- **Post clear visuals or directions:**
 - Use picture cards or steps for calming down (deep breathing, counting to 10, etc.).
 - *Budget tip:* Make your own with **laminated index cards** or **printed visuals**.
- **Use a timer** (optional):
 - Helps students understand how long they'll be in the space.
 - *Budget tip:* Use a **kitchen timer** or a **free timer app** on an old phone/tablet or if your county provides a white board or Promethean use the built-in timer.

SENSORY WALK

A path that provides sensory input through movement, helping students regulate their bodies and focus.

Setup:

- **Identify a hallway or open floor space** (preferably outside the classroom or along a wall).
- **Design a path with varied movements:**
 - Examples: Hop on one foot, stomp, spin, tiptoe, wall push-ups, balance beam walk.
- **Use floor decals or tape to mark activities:**
 - *Budget tip:* Use **colored painter's tape** or **vinyl** to create shapes, lines, or arrows.
 - You can also **print and laminate movement icons** (e.g., frog jump, arm circles).
- **Include wall activities** (optional):
 - Handprints for wall push-ups, breathing prompts, or matching colors/textures.
 - *Budget tip:* Use **laminated printables** taped to the wall or repurpose materials from other centers.
- **Incorporate textures and sensory feedback:**
 - Bubble wrap to walk on, felt strips, textured mats.
 - *Budget tip:* Repurpose items from home or dollar stores.
- **Add a visual sequence of movements:**
 - Helps students follow independently.
 - *Budget tip:* Create a step-by-step visual with clipart or photos and laminate it.
- **Ensure it's durable and easy to clean.**

MOVEMENT BREAK POSTER

A movement break poster gives students a visual reminder to pause, stretch, and regulate their bodies throughout the day. It's quick to make, easy to use, and can be tailored to your classroom's needs.

Planning Your Poster:

- **Identify your audience.** A poster for elementary students might include cartoon images and bright colors, while one for teens or older students might use sleek, minimal icons and more neutral tones.
- **Choose a Theme.** Catchy titles can grab attention and make movement breaks feel fun and natural. Try:
 - “Brain Boost Breaks”
 - “Stretch & Shine”
 - “Move It to Improve It”
 - “Regulate and Reset”
 - “Focus Flow”
- **Design Tips:**
 - Keep the poster clean and visually accessible.
 - Use bright, energizing colors like orange, green, and blue to encourage engagement.
 - Include simple illustrations—stick figures, icons, or photos showing each movement.
 - Use large fonts and concise text so students can follow easily without needing to read paragraphs.
 - Add arrows or numbered steps to help guide sequencing for visual learners.
- **Include movement ideas.** Offer 5–10 options that can be done in 1–2 minutes, requiring no special equipment.
 - Jumping Jacks – 30 seconds
 - Arm Circles – 10 each direction
 - Toe Touches – 10 reps
 - March in Place – 1 minute
 - Wall Sit – 30 seconds
 - Dance Party – 1 song
 - Balance on One Foot – 20 seconds each side
 - Shoulder Shrugs – 10 reps
 - Shake It Out – 15 seconds
 - Deep Breathing with Arm Raises – 5 slow breaths
- **Extras to Make It Interactive:**
 - Add a **QR Code** linking to a short demo video or music playlist for movement breaks.
 - Include **timer reminders** such as “Try a 2-minute break every 30 minutes.”
 - Feature a **motivational quote** like “Movement is medicine.” or “Regulate to elevate.”
 - Post next to a **visual timer** or **schedule board** so students know when to use it.

SETTING UP A REGULATION STATION

In addition to movement and sensory bins, create a small **regulation station**—a designated spot where students can go when they need a break. The regulation station can be in addition to the calming corner or incorporated into the calming corner.

What to Include:

- A soft chair, beanbag, or floor cushion
- Noise-reducing headphones
- Weighted lap pad or small weighted items
- Visuals of calming strategies (breathing posters, emotion charts)
- A small sand timer or visual timer
- Fidget tools (stress balls, putty, tangles)
- Calm lighting such as a lamp or salt light

How to Use It:

- Teach students when and how to use the space proactively, not as punishment.
- Offer short, structured breaks (3–5 minutes) to help students return to learning.
- Pair with **emotional vocabulary visuals** so students can communicate how they feel and what they need.

Tips:

- Use a **visual timer** to help students know when to return
- Teach students how and when to use the space
- Keep it **clutter-free** and consistent
- *Budget Tip:* Repurpose what you already have: an old pillow becomes a seat cushion, a thrifted lamp provides calm light, and printable visuals from sites like *Teachers Pay Teachers* can replace expensive posters. You can even DIY a weighted lap pad using a small pillowcase filled with rice or beans sewn shut.

CREATING A SENSORY BIN

A sensory bin offers hands-on tactile input that can calm an overwhelmed student or boost focus before a learning task. The purpose is to provide structured sensory input that helps students self-regulate, explore textures, and improve focus through touch and play.

Materials:

- Choose a sturdy plastic bin with a lid and fill it with safe, engaging materials that appeal to multiple senses:
- *Tactile:* Kinetic sand, dry rice, beans, water beads, pom-poms, fabric scraps, playdough
- *Visual:* Brightly colored objects; glitter bottles; marbles; small, themed toys
- *Auditory:* Crinkly paper, bells, shakers, small scoops that make soft sounds
- *Tools:* Scoops, tweezers, cups, funnels, sifters, spoons

Tips for Success:

- Rotate content monthly to keep interest high.
- Create themed bins: “Fall Leaves,” “Ocean Animals,” “Snow and Ice,” “Construction Zone.”

- Clearly **label the bin** and **review rules**: wash hands before and after, use gently, and keep materials in the bin.
- Pair sensory bins with visual cue cards showing what's inside or how to use the tools appropriately.
- Keep wipes or a towel nearby for easy cleanup.

Expansion Ideas:

- Add calming scents (lavender, vanilla) or sound buttons to stimulate other senses.
- Provide “task cards” for students to follow (e.g., “Find 5 red objects” or “Scoop and pour for 2 minutes”).
- Include emotion regulation prompts: “While you play, take three deep breaths” or “Describe how the texture feels.”
- *Budget Tip*: Save money by using household or classroom items: dry pasta, cotton balls, or fabric scraps work beautifully. Ask for donations from families, use seasonal clearance items, or visit local dollar stores for themed fillers and small tools.

CLOSING ENCOURAGEMENT

Building sensory and regulation supports doesn't require expensive materials—just intention, empathy, and creativity. By integrating movement, sensory play, and calm-down options, educators can create environments where every learner feels safe, regulated, and ready to learn.

