

EDUCATOR TIP SHEET:

WV Autism Training Center

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How To Set up an Autism-Friendly Elementary Classroom

Setting up an autism-friendly classroom environment is about far more than adding sensory tools or visual aids. It's about designing a space and routine that support sensory needs, communication styles, and emotional regulation for all students. When a classroom feels calm, predictable, and inclusive, every child benefits—especially those on the autism spectrum.

ENVIRONMENT & LAYOUT

- **Calm Colors:** Use soft, neutral tones to reduce visual overstimulation.
- **Defined Spaces:** Create clear zones for different activities by using furniture placement, rugs, or tape. (e.g., reading corner, sensory area, quiet zone).
- **Minimize Clutter:** Keep decorations minimal and organized to avoid distractions.
- **Lighting:** Use natural light when possible; avoid flickering fluorescent lights.
- **Sound Dampening:** Add rugs, curtains, or acoustic panels to reduce echo and noise in the classroom.

SENSORY SUPPORTS

- **Sensory Corner:** Include items like noise-canceling headphones, weighted lap pads, fidget tools, tactile boards, and soft seating.
- **Seating:** Offer options like bean bags, wobble stools, standing desks, bands on chairs, sensory stickers for desk, station seating.
- **Visual Schedules:** Use picture-based daily schedules to provide structure and predictability.
- **Movement Break Stations:** Designate a small area for jumping, stretching, or yoga poses.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

- **Visual Aids:** Use visual timers, and emotion charts. Consider consulting with the Speech Language Pathologist for systems such as AAC Augmentative and Alternative Communication or PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System.)
- **Clear Instructions:** Break tasks into small steps with visual and verbal cues.
- **Quiet Signal System:** Implement non-verbal cues (e.g., hand signals, colored cards) for transitions or attention.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

- **Calm Down Area:** A quiet space with calming tools (e.g., soft lighting, sensory bottles, breathing visuals).
- **Feelings Check-In:** Use emotion thermometers or charts to help students identify and express feelings.
- **Routine & Consistency:** Maintain predictable routines and prepare students for changes in advance.

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

- **Social Narratives:** Use personalized stories to teach social norms and expectations.
- **Peer Buddies:** Pair students for support and inclusion during group activities.
- **Choice Boards:** Allow students to choose tasks or activities to foster autonomy.

STAFF TRAINING & COLLABORATION

- **Professional Development:** Seek professional development to learn more about autism awareness, sensory processing, and behavior strategies.
- **Collaboration:** Work with occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and families to support students on the autism spectrum in and outside of the classroom.

CLOSING ENCOURAGEMENT

An autism-friendly classroom doesn't just help students with autism; it benefits every learner. Structure, clarity, and respect are universal supports that build a stronger, calmer learning environment for all.