

Keeping Calm in the Classroom:

Suggestions for regulating students' anxiety, activity levels & facilitating attention

When a student is stressed, or over-stimulated/flooded with sensory input, or under alert and seeking out additional input, the student then has difficulty with hearing what others say and difficulty focusing. The following are ideas to support students in the classroom. Please consult your Occupational Therapist for individualized support for your student.

Regulation Management Strategies

- Understand the student's sensory processing/emotional regulation
- Provide interpersonal supports
- Structure routines to address sensory needs
- Structure the environment
- Use calming co-regulation strategies and/or teach self-regulation strategies
- Use sensory tools/sensory diet

Interpersonal Supports

- Recognize early signs of dysregulation and offer support
- Use a quieter voice
- Decrease level and amount of language
- Be sensitive to child's emotion and pace
- Offer breaks
- Use visuals, if appropriate

Routines

- Establish predictable, consistent routines, such as the student's arrival routine, to ease anxiety
- Consider establishing predictable, consistent schedules for personal care needs into each day, where the routine occurs at the same time each day
- Consider incorporating a calming strategy or tool consistently during a routine, such as playing a favorite slow song, or providing deep pressure shoulder "squishes"

Visual Supports

- Visual support enhance a student's understanding and increase their ability to predict
- Incorporate visual schedules, or object schedule for students with visual impairments, to pair with verbal cues of what is coming next
- Consider in-task schedules to stay on task, daily class schedules and weekly/monthly calendars

Environment

- Consider Internal Environment – such as the feeling of discomfort from sitting too long
- Consider individual stressors and triggers in the external environment that the student may be sensitive to, such as loud noises, crowds, bright lights or scents
- When possible, make adaptations for your student, such as have their back to window, have a cotton swab to smell of a preferred scent, offer noise reducing headphones or headphones with preferred music, find a quiet space to focus, or cover fluorescent lights with light tissue
- Reduce visual clutter on tables/walls/rooms
- Provide a cozy enclosed space that may be dark, such as a small tent to reduce input
- Avoid visual and auditory stimulation that is not necessary, such as turning off the radio or TV
- Paint walls soft, pastel colours, if possible

Mutual Regulation Strategies – helping to calm the student when upset or anxious

- Use a calm, quiet voice
- Say less, use few words and make comments that acknowledge the upset
- Use firm but gentle pressure touch, such as a hand squeeze
- Model deep breaths
- Move to a calm, quiet space
- Stay close, but give the student time and space

Self-Regulation Strategies

- Deep breaths, such as smell the flower/blow out the candle, or finger breathing
- Count to self or use calming self-talk
- Calming scripts or scales, such as 5 Point Scale
- Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, meditation and yoga, quiet space
- Programs/Curriculum to consider exploring with your school Occupational Therapist include: Zones of Regulation, Zone 'In, The Alert Program: How Does Your Engine Run?, MindUp curriculum and other mindfulness programs
- Sensory Diet customized by your student's school Occupational Therapist

Quick Fix Calming Tools/Strategies

- Sit under a big, heavy blanket
- Hands on head and press down
- Tuck legs up and squeezing
- Deep pressure massage
- Slow rocking e.g. rocking chair
- Give themselves a hug
- Lavender scents on a cotton swab
- Squeeze and relax a small fidget toy
- Squeeze and relax face and/or hands
- Snuggle into a small space
- Suck yogurt/thick smoothie or milkshake through straw

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- Bear hug
- Small water feature
- Small wind chimes, musical chimes, slow changing light toys

Longer Lasting Calming Tools/Strategies

- Allow chill out time, prior to homework in a daily routine
- Encourage active recess activities and avoid restricting or limiting recess time
- Swimming
- Put on a heavy coat or heavy blanket over the shoulders as part of chill out time
- Have a corner in the classroom with favourite sensory activities to go to at any time
- Participate in class stretching or movement breaks between subjects or activities
- Help with moving furniture e.g. pushing chairs – relocating plant pots
- Water classroom plants or the school garden with water cans or 2 liter pop bottle
- Help with heavy manual tasks in the garden e.g. digging
- Run errands around the school. Carrying heavy items can have a calming effect, so try having the student return a stack of books to the library, or pull larger items in a wagon
- Erase and/or wash the white board, classroom tables or desks
- Tack projects to a board with a rubber mallet
- Try alternative positions during work times, such as standing or kneeling at a table or lying on the floor, propped on elbows
- Walk to/from school (with backpack on)

“Fidgets” & Other Methods to Facilitate Improved Focus

- Tie theraband or tubing to desk or chair legs for “heavy work” while sitting.
- Remind student to use “readiness exercises” or Take Five exercises to warm up before quiet seatwork or to encourage self-calming when needed (see handout www.InclusionOutreach.ca)
- Use alternative seating such as therapy balls, t-stools, and sissel seat cushions, for students with adequate core strength and stability.
- Place a heavy item such as a weighted lap pad in a student’s lap to provide calming deep pressure.
- Consider allowing students to use “fidgets” such as squeeze balls, koosh balls, hair elastics, Silly Putty, or stretch toys during listening activities.
- Allow students to chew sugar-free gum or short lengths of refrigerator tubing attached to their pencil end for calming oral motor input.
- Have students keep sports water bottles at their desks to alert their body with a cool drink.
- Speak with your school occupational therapist regarding other calming strategies for specific students, such as the use of weighted vests, pressure garments, weighted shoulder wraps and individually designed sensory breaks.

Reference: Making Sense of Sensory Behaviour: A Practical Approach for Home and Carers. Falkirk Council Children’s Services.