



Creating Sensory-Friendly Classrooms

Imagine sitting in a classroom, where the walls are splashed with bright colours with an almost painful vibrancy. Above, the fluorescent lights buzzing incessantly, making it impossible to focus. Through the door you hear the clattering of lockers and muffled conversation which you find impossible to filter out. You start to feel your head throbbing, your muscles are tense and your mind goes blank. You begin to feel panicked and upset and you just want to escape. This is how some children with sensory processing difficulties feel and the classroom environment can be overwhelming.

Our sensory systems—sight, sound, touch, taste, smell and movement, continuously send information to our brains, helping us understand and interact with our surroundings. We all process sensory information differently. For some, with significant sensory processing difficulties some environments can be too stimulating, overwhelming and even distressing, which can make it difficult for students to engage, focus and participate in classroom activities.

As therapists and educators understanding the impact of sensory environments on learning and well-being is crucial. By taking time to reflect on how students experience and making thoughtful adjustments, we can create spaces that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

Sensory audits are a really useful tool for identifying and analysing sensory input in the school environment. A good place to start is by looking at the physical environment. Here are some key elements to think about:

- **Use natural colours** : Swap brightly coloured displays for natural and pale colours and tones.
- **Reduce clutter**: Consider how much visual information is on walls, especially at the front of the classroom. Keep surfaces of furniture clear.
- **Adjustable lighting**: If able use natural light instead of overhead fluorescents. Use dimmer switches so that lighting levels can be changed. Installation of black out blinds to cover windows, doors and corridors to reduce visual input if needed.

The SEN team and class teachers at Firs Primary have worked hard to made adaptations to classrooms. They have been successful in creating calm and relaxing classrooms to support students' well-being and learning. They are already seeing positive results:

Our positive classroom environment is enabling us to build emotional and social connections between children and teachers, making them feel comfortable, respected and valued. It has also encouraged collaboration amongst peers while providing an atmosphere conducive to learning.



Students have also been happy to share their thoughts on the new classroom layout:

'The colours of the displays are calm and relaxing'

'The music helps me feel calm, concentrate and produce good work'



'I find it easier to concentrate in here because it's calm and not too bright'

'Natural colours and lighting are soothing'

Creating sensory-friendly classrooms will have positive impact on all students and are a great investment in staff and children's well-being. Even the smallest of changes can make the biggest difference.



Exploring Interoception - Our 8th Sensory System



As awareness around sensory processing differences is increasing, you may or may not have come across the sensory term interoception! Interoception is our 8th sensory system which allows us to feel and interpret sensations within our bodies, such as thirst, hunger, the need to go to the toilet and when we are in pain. Not only is this sensory system important to help us understand bodily signals to enable us to respond to achieve homeostasis, it also allows us to interpret other sensations which are linked to our affective emotions such as excitement, comfort, anxiety, and tiredness to name a few.

Interoceptive awareness is essential to enable individuals to identify internal sensations and understand what they mean, in order for them to put in place effective strategies. E.g., a growling stomach can be interpreted as hunger, therefore our response would be to eat. The sensation of bubbling or butterflies in the stomach could indicate anxiety, therefore we may respond by completing breathing exercises or use a hand-held fidget.

Individuals with interoceptive awareness differences can experience strong, dampened down or distorted bodily sensations. This can have a huge impact on their ability to identify, label and regulate their own emotions, as well as identifying and understanding the emotions of others. Interoceptive differences are often present in individuals who have a diagnosis of ASC, ADHD, OCD, anxiety and sensory processing differences, with diagnosed adults using cognitive strategies to understand bodily signals.

At WMSLT, both our OT's and SALT's have been exploring the interoceptive curriculum, which has been developed by Kelly Mahler, an occupational therapist based in America.

The curriculum works through a series of lesson plans aimed at developing the ability to notice bodily sensations through play based experiments, make the connection to the sensation meaning and identifying the action required to support regulation. Developing interoceptive awareness is a slow process, however drawing attention to bodily sensations through mindfulness techniques can support this process.

Why not have a go at some of these body sensation experiments :



Describe the different sensations you may feel with your hands, such as hot, warm, cold and then test these sensations out through experiments. Experiments can include putting your hands in warm and cold water.



Think about the sensations you feel within your mouth. Test this out by having a drink (hot and cold), eating a crunchy snack, sucking in a mint.



Describe your breathing, is it slow, steady or fast. Test this out by running on the spot / or completing star jumps, followed by a mindfulness breathing exercise.

When completing mindfulness activities, remember everyone interprets bodily sensations differently, therefore descriptor words can vary (there is no right or wrong answer!).

If you would like to find out more about interoception and activities to support, speak directly with your school therapist.

Find us on Social Media!



@WMISLT2



@wm_sl_t_ot



@West Midlands Speech
and Language Therapy





Shine A Light Award



This term's OT 'Shine A Light' award goes to....

This term's nominees from our WMSLT therapists are...

- Kelly Wilkes - Yardley
- Emma Such - Bournville Village Primary

Your work with the children is much appreciated, thank you for everything you do to support the children on our caseloads.

Jayne Sturridge at Firs Primary!

"Jayne is an absolute super star. She works tirelessly for the students she supports and is fantastically efficient. Jayne consistently promotes the value of occupational therapy and incorporates therapeutic activities into the school routines and activities. Thank you Jayne for all your hard work and support."



Jayne, thank you for all your hard work. You have won some resources for your school!

Our OT Team is growing!

We are very excited to be welcoming Siobhan McTiernan, senior occupational therapist to our team here at WMSLT in September. As our team grows so does our capacity to provide OT support into more schools. **Please get in contact for further information on the services we are able to offer.**

SaLT Resource of the Term - Penguin Peril!

Our Speech and Language Team have been using the 'Penguin Peril' game to support different therapies this half term. It's a great way to get those repetitions of target sounds in during speech sound therapy. The number of hits it takes to remove the ice-blocks is the number of times the child has to practice their target sound/word!



Check out our social media for videos of how to use this game in your therapies!

Raksha Bandhan



Raksha Bandhan is a Hindu festival which celebrates sibling bonds with sisters tying sacred threads, or "rakhis," on brothers' wrists, symbolizing protection. It is celebrated across many cultures. This year it falls on 19th August - schools could honor this tradition towards the end of July through rakhi-making sessions, fostering creativity, and sharing sibling stories to appreciate love and familial ties.

Strategy Spotlight

Incorporate mindfulness into lessons!

As yoga in schools is becoming increasingly popular, why not try adding in a little bit of interoceptive mindfulness questions when students are holding their poses, zoning in on particular body parts! E.g. "How do your arms and hands feel when holding the downward dog position?"