

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ADVICE FOR MAKING CLASS COMFORTABLE

The aim of this handout is to share evidence-based research to support making classrooms more comfortable for all children, not just those with neurodevelopmental differences. This information is the research undertaken by Sharon Morris, Occupational Therapist with Highland Council.

### Key messages:

1. To consider the school environment right at the very beginning – before a child has even set foot in the classroom. This can help avoid making any big changes as the school year progresses.
2. A whole class approach can suit many children within the classroom, thus capturing children who have unidentified needs. The following approaches can benefit all children. Many autistic adults have advocated for background support being built into initial designs (Milton 2017 and Fletcher-Watson et al, 2019).
3. Small change, big impact. Small changes to the environment can have a significant impact on learning (Barratt et al 2015) and comfort (Castellon 2020, Honeybourne 2018, Hopper (2017)

### Visual

- Research carried out within mainstream classrooms suggests that having 50-80% of the classroom wall free from visual stimulus improved learning outcomes (Barrett et al. 2015). Other research, again with mainstream classes, suggests potential benefits of even less visuals (Fisher et 2014).
- Maximising natural light into class is an important factor, therefore avoid/minimise visuals on windows (Barrett et al 2015).
- Daily Visual timetables can be helpful for the whole class. The adult can refer to them regularly throughout the day and to illustrate upcoming activities. It is important to encourage class interaction with the timetable including stating when an activity is complete ticking this off or removing as the day goes on. Separate timetables can be used for morning and afternoon.
- In secondary school setting visual supports could include displaying and referring aims of the lesson and criteria for success (Morris, 2020).
- Research suggests that in high school whole class timetables have some benefits over individual supports for example autistic high school pupils report that they often reject individually targeted support even though it may be useful

(Cunningham 2020). However, on some occasions a individualised timetable may be preferred / indicated ideally alongside the whole class timetable.

- There can be benefits in offering resource to others/all pupils in class rather than making these exclusive to children with identified needs (Morris 2020).

### **Movement**

- Regular movement breaks promote better concentration and attention. Again, a whole class approach can be used. Children who require more movement breaks can be given additional movement tasks to complete e.g., handing out resources such as books in class.
- A primary school within Highland took a whole school approach to movement breaks. Every 50 minutes, the whole school went outside for 10 minutes to play, starting with one day per week. A teacher noted that noise in the classroom naturally reduced after each break outside.
- Further information on movement activities can be found in Occupational Therapy Leaflet “Understanding your senses” that can be obtained by emailing [childrens.otservice@highland.gov.uk](mailto:childrens.otservice@highland.gov.uk)

### **Sound**

- Building in silent and/or quiet activities to the daily routine can support children who experience sound sensitivity. The developmental level of the child/class needs to be considered and the length of time the children can stay silent can be extended on as the year progresses.
- Silent and/or quiet activity ideas include tabletop games, reading, miming in pairs, colouring, noughts and crosses, putting on a silent timer and asking children to stand up when they have counted time is up, group games such as The giants keys <https://www.teachingideas.co.uk/time-fillers/the-giants-keys>
- Put away technology that isn't in use and turn off whiteboard/SMART board. If children are sensitive to sound, they can hear the buzzing noise of technology which can impact on their concentration and learning (Bogdashina, Olga, 2010)
- Further information / ideas re sound and activities can be found in Occupational Therapy Leaflet Sound sensitivity – can be obtained by emailing [childrens.otservice@highland.gov.uk](mailto:childrens.otservice@highland.gov.uk)

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