

# THE SENSORY CHILD & CLASSROOM

Harnessing the sensory system to get  
the most out of every child

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## The Sensory System: the basis for all early learning

As an infant and throughout the early years, a child learns primarily through their senses. Without developed language skills, cognitive reasoning, self-regulation and other important skills that help us process and function in the world, a young child's nervous system receives input from the senses - sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch - and two lesser known senses: vestibular and proprioception. Some little ones have a high tolerance for sensory stimuli, and other children have a much lower threshold for how much stimuli they can comfortably process. Adapting our teaching style to how children learn is the key to bringing out the best in every child.

## The 4 Sensory Personalities



### Social butterfly

The social butterfly is curious, alert and loves interacting with others. Their limitless energy is lots of fun but equally as exhausting. The social butterfly does not like solitary activities & can be impulsive.



### Slow to warm up

The slow to warm up child likes routine & predictability. They take a while to adapt to change and can be shy, withdrawn and anxious. When they're in a familiar space they can be the life of the party.



### Sensitive

Sensitive little ones are easily overstimulated. Noise, bright lights, colours and busy environments make them anxious & grumpy. They are at their best in calm, predictable surroundings.



### Settled

A settled child is relaxed and laid back. They are typically easy to please but not always as motivated to try new things. They sometimes need to be encouraged to learn & participate in activities.

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## Creating a Sensory-Friendly Classroom

Your classroom is also called 'the third teacher' because the right physical environment can ignite learning (in combination with the relationship with parents and teachers). How your classroom is set up and decorated can have completely different effects on children with different sensory personalities. Here are the 6 influences to consider when creating a sensory-friendly classroom:

### Lighting

Opt for natural light as far as possible. If you can't replace fluorescent lighting, experiment with different types of bulbs and/or safely cover lights that are over stimulating.

### Colour

Red, orange & yellow inspire activity whereas blues and greens are calming. Choose neutral colour schemes for communal spaces and colour in different 'corners' i.e. blue for the reading corner.

### Seating

Have a variety of seating options in addition to the right size tables and chairs, like cushions & bean bags. Children who 'can't sit still' may not have spatial awareness or posture control & need seating support.

### Noise

Noise is inevitable but while some children might find it fun, others will be frazzled by noise. Create a quiet space with noise cancelling headphones to help sensitive children regulate.

### Organisation

Clutter & disorganisation might not bother some children, but it's a challenge for others. Keep your space organised with as few obstacles and distractions as possible.

### Sensory retreat

Create a little oasis for sensitive little ones when they're feeling over stimulated. Use cushions or bean bags as seating, noise cancelling headphones, picture books, weighted objects & muted colours.

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The sensory system is probably one of the most underutilized tools in ECD. By acknowledging that young children learn primarily through their senses and adapting to those sensory needs, we are enabling a powerful paradigm shift in early education.

- Meg Faure, OT & Sensory Specialist

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Page 2