Inclusive Community: Exploring The Benefits of Sensory Friendly Environments
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Background:
Sensory friendly environments support inclusivity for children with autism and their families. Environmental barriers often cause an unpleasant experience for children who experience sensory processing disorders. Occupational therapy practitioners have a role in collaborating with teachers for modifications in the classroom and advocating for sensory friendly events within the community to promote engagement in childhood occupations.

What is Autism?
Autism is a complicated neurodevelopmental disorder in which children typically have social interaction and communication impairments as well as restricted interests, activities, and play skills. (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2015)

Why Are Sensory Friendly Environments Important?
- Promotes occupational engagement
- Less stressful for families
- Allows children with autism and their families to engage in social activities that are meaningful
- Increases occupational performance in activities & tasks

Encourages positive play and social experiences for children & families

Environmental Modifications
- Dimming lights
- Creating designated space for sensory breaks
- Removing visual distractions
- Encouraging use of sensory friendly kit
- Placing child in optimal space that promotes focus and minimal distraction

Examples: In the Classroom
A study by Mills & Chapparo (2017) explored modifying the classroom environment/tasks with strategies such as: Environment Task
- Use of headphones to reduce sensory input • Use of visual schedules
- Changes to noise level and classroom lighting • Opportunity for movement breaks and exercise
Results demonstrated a positive impact on students’ ability and concentration which improved their occupational performance within the classroom setting

Examples: In the Community
Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) can help children & families find and access sensory-friendly events in the community as well as collaborate with community partners to create more sensory-friendly and inclusive opportunities for engagement
- Sensory Friendly Sundays
- Sesame Place- first theme park to be qualified as a “Certified Autism Center”
- KidZooU (Philadelphia Zoo)- child-centric exhibit that uses the Universal Design concept to offer an inclusive, enriching experience for children
- Franklin Institute- exhibit features are modified to reduce sensory stimulation
- Autism Eats- Pennsylvania- private room, buffet style or family style, prepay

References

Sensory Processing Disorder
- It is estimated that 80% of children with autism have sensory processing problems
- Children with autism have difficulty tolerating extra sensory stimulation which affects the child’s social participation in activities.
- Sensory processing problems explain why children with autism may not like noise, being touched, or the feel of certain clothing. (AOTA, 2015)

Environmental Barriers Affecting Occupational Roles
A child’s success in role performance can be inhibited by barriers within the environment. Sensory stressors in the environment include:

- Noise Level
- Lighting
- Smells
- Visual Stimulation
- Smells
- Crowds
- Physical Setup of Environment

OT’s Role in Sensory Friendly Environments
- Educating people in the community of what autism and sensory processing disorders are and how to create sensory friendly environments/events
- Provide modifications to increase a pleasant family experience
- Collaboration with family, teachers, and interdisciplinary team
- Present appropriate tools and strategies that support inclusivity for the autism community by helping them meet their needs.

(AOTA, 2015)