

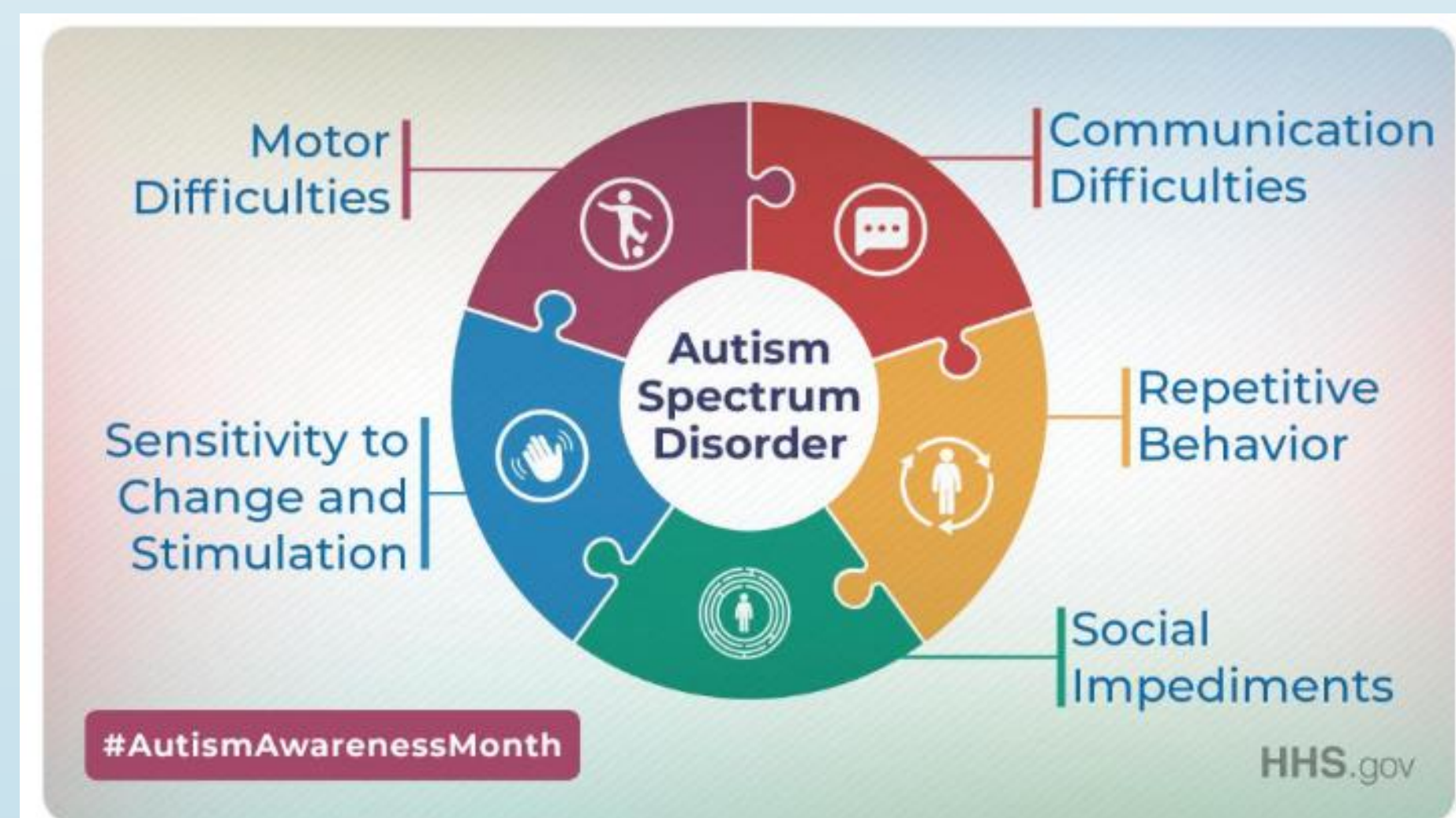
Background:

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)



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

(Juarez et al., 2014)

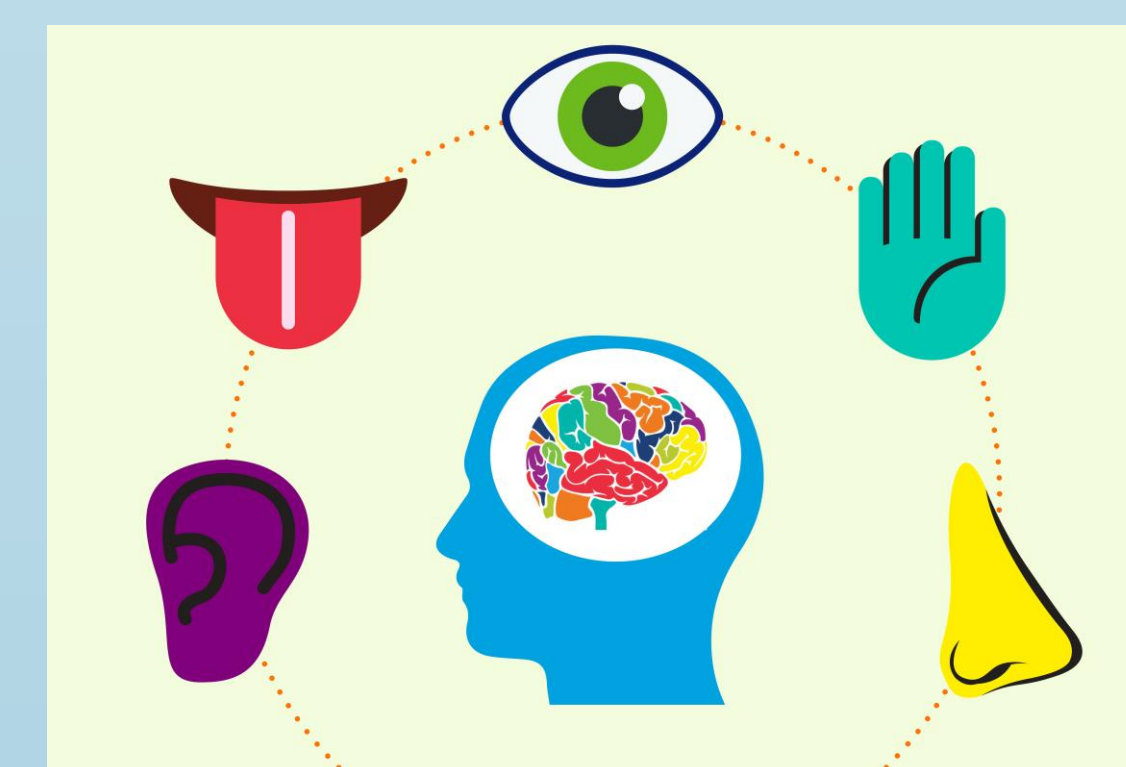
Why Are Sensory Friendly Environments Important?

- ❖ 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



<https://momentousinstitute.org/blog/making-sense-of-sensory-processing>

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)

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

(Sheehan, 2016; Visit Philadelphia, 2019)

References

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