

## Supportive Sensory Environments Dos and Don'ts

The sensory environment is a significant predictor of mental health difficulties for autistic people. Positive sensory environments have been associated with increased concentration and decreased feelings of distress and overwhelm. We considered these principles when creating our Magic Space mobile sensory unit. This Dos and Don'ts guide is designed to help you create sensory environments which support the mental health of autistic individuals.

### Dos:

- Try to create an environment which has predictable sensory stimuli, and where changes will occur, notice is provided where possible.
- Work with the individuals you support to identify which sensory inputs they struggle with and work together to determine potential solutions. For example, if someone you work with finds your perfume overpowering, you could avoid wearing it when supporting them.
- Support individuals to plan how they will self-regulate if they experience sensory overwhelm. This may encompass stimming, returning to a quiet, safe space or wearing noise cancelling headphones or ear defenders.
- Ensure that individuals always have access to a quiet and calm environment where possible. It is useful if this is a designated 'chill out' space where they can go if they are overwhelmed.
- Think about ways that you can reduce harsh sounds such as having rugs instead of hard floors and including sound-absorbing panels. You could also think about how to reduce external noise, for example through avoiding unnecessary loud equipment such as a fan and providing soundproofing if possible.
- Ensure that lights have a dimmer switch so they can be turned down if the lights are too harsh. Alternatively, you could introduce other types of lighting such as

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fairy lights or lamps so the main light does not need to be on. If this is not possible, you could provide sunglasses to reduce the strain of the lights.

- Consider that individuals will also get sensory input from things they touch, so help individuals to choose bedding, towels and clothing that are not problematic.
- Provide alternatives to noisy items such as handdryers where possible (e.g. by providing paper towels)
- Consider how a room may provide different sensory input at different times of day, and think about how this can be mitigated e.g. through having blackout blinds.

### Don'ts:

- Presume that the same sensory environment is supportive for all autistic people. Each autistic individual will have different sensory triggers and preferences, so where possible, a personalised approach should be adopted.
- Use fluorescent lighting if possible, as it can be distressing for some autistic individuals.
- Have too many items in a space, as clutter can be distressing and also cause sensory overwhelm.
- Use too many brightly coloured objects. Stick with a single colour palette if possible and try to use neutral colours when decorating.
- Have rooms which flow into each other, if possible, as this will mean that sensory inputs are more likely to mingle together and become overwhelming.
- Include items with repetitive sounds e.g. clocks ticking as these may be irritating.

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