

Setting Up Your Sensory Break Room

One of the most important parts of inclusive ministry is having an area for students to visit when they feel overwhelmed. This is especially significant for students who have disabilities, such as autism. Often we concentrate on making a quiet space, but in reality many students need a place to move around and seek out sensory input. Therefore, the best sensory break areas meet the needs of both sensory avoiders and sensory seekers.

Here is what you may want to include:

The Basics

- Cushioning Floor Mat
- Sound Absorbing Panels
- Glider
- Foam Furniture: Bean Bag Chair, Crash Pad, or Other

For Sensory Avoiders

- Soft Lighting
- Weighted Stuffed Animals
- Sensory Box or Open Tent
- Books, Drawing Supplies, Calm Music
- Keep music and video volume low.
- Avoid strong fragrances.

For Sensory Seekers

- Fidgets (Large enough to not be a choking hazard)
- Sensory Floor Tiles or Wall Panels
- Mini Trampoline
- Yoga Balls
- Therapy Swing
- Other Large Movement toys like Sit and Spin, Balance Boards, and More

Tips for Creating a Smaller Break Space

- Create a space using screenflex, room dividers, or book shelves.
- Make sure that the area feels like a different environment.
- Add basic items.
- Take an inventory of your students's needs and choose which type of items meet those needs.

Sensory Break Room Guidelines

One of the most important parts of disability ministry is having a break room for students who are overwhelmed. The most important part of these break rooms is knowing how to use them. Check out these four guidelines to help your room be a success.

1. Determine the Purpose of the Room

- Who is the room for? Is it for everyone, or only for children within your disability ministry?
- Is the room for short breaks, the entire service, or either depending on the child?

2. Safety First

- Set a policy that no child will be alone in the break room, and no child will be alone with only one other person in the break room.
- If using a separate room, create a two volunteer policy. If the area is in a corner of a classroom, make sure that all areas can be seen by others in the room.
- Sometimes children who are feeling overwhelmed will elope (run away). Look for places that may be easy to slip out of and find a way to make these safer.

3. Manage Expectations

- Create a familiar routine when using the room. Communicate the routine with all of your team members to promote consistency.
- Preparing for transitions will make returning the child to class much easier. Use both verbal and visual prompts to communicate that the break will be ending soon. Visual timers are especially helpful.

4. Be Flexible

- Understand that disability ministry is unpredictable. Use your best judgement and be willing to make exceptions if needed (except for any safety policies).
- Remember, it is still OK to have boundaries too.