

Soft Play Room: Sensory Regulation at School

What is Sensory Regulation?

Regulation is a complex skill involving thoughts, emotions, sensations, environments and tasks. In this page, we are focusing on Sensory regulation. This means, how the body responds to information through the senses, and what sensory information can be used purposeful to help with regulation.

What is a soft play room?

A soft play room is a place within a school, which has padded surfaces, often soft shapes and balls, climbing ramps, nets and a slide. Inside a sensory room, a child will experience sensory input through:

- **Touch:** feeling the texture of the materials.
- **Movement:** the feeling of falling, jumping, rolling, sliding down.
- **Muscles:** deep pressure through the muscles when crashing, pushing, pulling, landing.
- **Sound:** because it is an enclosed room, there is often less noise than larger school spaces, this can help those who find loud noises overwhelming.
- **Lights:** usually the lighting can be less bright, or controlled by a switch, which can help students who are sensitive to bright lights.

Why use a soft play room for Regulation?

These types of sensory input can help some students with sensory needs to feel regulated, that means calm and alert, in their energy levels.

Quiet and small spaces that reduce sensory overload are beneficial for helping children with autism to remain calm (Shimokura, Reiko ; Yanagiawa, Kaname ; Sasaki, Shinko, 2023)

How to Use a Soft Play Room for Sensory Regulation:



It is essential there is a clear goal when using a soft play room for sensory regulation.

These rooms are not a 'one size fits all' approach for regulation. For some students the specific sensory input of the soft play room can be overstimulating and not help them to regulate.

1. **Identify the student's sensory needs.**

Other information on our Sensory Zone webpage can help with this. Plot their sensory needs, sensitivities and energy levels on a worksheet, and gather information.



2. **Consider if the soft play room would help them, based on their sensory needs. Ask:**

- Do they generally seem to move to help calm themselves down?
 - Do they enjoy deep pressure input from crashing and climbing?
 - Are they sensitive to noise/lights?
- Having some time in reduced stimulus area can allow the sensory system to 'reset' and return to learning.

3. **Identify the time of day, and environment/activity that appears to cause challenge for their sensory needs.**



Is there another approach you could take to help them engage in their routine or activity, such as providing purposeful movement e.g. errands, or in-class movement breaks?

4. Identify the GOAL of using the sensory room



Here we only focus on goals related to sensory regulation, there are many other goals (see resources at end of handout). Sensory Regulation Goal examples are:



To gain movement and deep pressure input through play for their body, to help their energy levels reach 'calm-alert' so that they can return to the class activity.



To gain movement sensory input through play with a peer, to develop a friendship while they are in a calm-alert energy level.



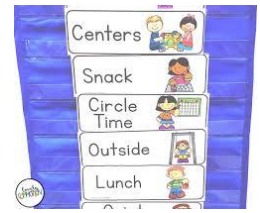
For non-verbal students, staff may identify a goal *to use a soft play room as a 'sensory break', if they are showing signs of sensory over-arousal, such as holding hands over their ears, making loud repeated vocalisations, to give them time away from other noise/lights so they can be supported to regulate.*



Some students will generally use the playground for breaks, however during wet or very cold weather, the soft play room can be a great alternative to provide daily, needed movement sensory experiences for children who rely on movement to feel regulated.

How to use a soft-play room for Sensory Regulation with a Student:

Identify the *time* of day the room will be used for that student, ideally before a learning activity so they are prepared to re-engage in learning after regulating.



Communicate about using the soft play room such as through a picture visual within a now/next strategy.

For some students e.g. who typically return from lunch quite heightened or enter class late often and heightened, the soft play room can be a space they use in their routine, *transitioning* back into class.

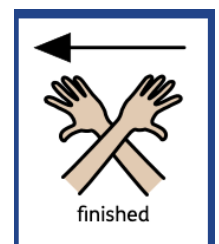
Ways to Play in the Sensory Room for Regulation:

Sensory Regulation is best achieved through predictable, rhythmic sensory input that is contained, and matched with breathing. Purposeful movement, that has breaks/pauses helps much more than 'wild' running. Ideas include:

- Row row your boat rocking
- Repetitive games like 1,2,3 jump!
- Rolling/passing heavy items too and fro e.g. gym ball.
- Collecting items with exertion e.g. staff hide bean bags to be collected into a bucket.



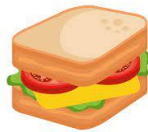
How to finish: Offer a drink to encourage deep breathing. Prompt the student before they transition with an object of reference for verbal or visual cues on the next activity. Ensure the next activity is motivating. A finished song, timer, or countdown can help.



How long to have a Soft Play Session?

- It is important to have structure to the soft play session, free play can often become overstimulating for students.
- Try following the structure of the *Get Set for Learning* group the OT Team provide training on: **Alerting** (fast paced exciting play), **Organizing** (purposeful, focused play such as throwing and catching), and **Calming** (with lower lighting, deep breathing and soft music).
- Watch for signs of the student being overstimulated, such as flushed cheeks, inability to listen, unstructured running.
- Songs & turn taking games helpfully add structure, and stop-gaps to play, such as ball games, relays, and singing.

Approaches to Environments & Activities used for Regulation:



When an activity, or environment, serves a function of contributing to a students' regulation, it must be considered a standard practice of their day. This could be equated to food for biological regulation, the sensory inputs received from time in the room are an important part of a student's sensory regulation. It is essential sensory inputs in this form, are never used as a reward or consequence.

This is different for typically developing students who have achieved skills in self and sensory regulation. For these students, soft play may be fun and can be appropriately used as a reward or restricted as a consequence.

Sensory needs are foundational to functioning, and it is important they are supported regardless of how the student is 'behaving'.

Resources:

For information on other reasons soft play rooms can be used, including body awareness, problem solving, coordination, resilience, social skills:

- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk/parenting-wiki/soft-play>
- <https://classroomdirect.co.uk/blogs/blog/the-benefits-of-classroom-soft-play-in-uk-schools>

Research:

- Spatial organisation of "therapeutic" spaces for autistic children in special schools: lessons learnt from the United Kingdom experience. Shimokura, Reiko ; Yanagiawa, Kaname ; Sasaki, Shinko. *Journal of Asian architecture and building engineering*, 2023, Vol.22 (2), p.620-634