

Creating Safe Sensory Spaces in Your Church

What is a sensory-friendly space? This is a place where children, youth, and even adults can go when in need of a place to calm down or work off energy to help us regain equilibrium. Usually started for children on the autism spectrum, many of us (including dementia ministries participants) benefit from a place to get away from the bustle, sights, smells, and sounds of a busy church environment.



What kinds of spaces can we use? Options include a corner of the classroom, sanctuary or fellowship hall, a quiet hallway, or a room set aside for this. Large churches may need more than one such space. If you can't dedicate space for a corner start with fidget bags and headphones.

How should we equip our sensory spaces?

- **Décor** – Use pleasant, soothing colors. Pick a faith-based theme. Allow room to move around. Create a quiet corner using a fabric tent or soft fort structure.
- **Lighting** – Natural light is best. Find alternatives to fluorescent lights. Tiny LED lights are fine.
- **Sound** – Avoid noisy locations. Use carpet or other soft surfaces to absorb sound.
- **Storage** – Secure open shelves and arrange to not tempt climbers. Include lockable space.
- **Seating** – Offer bean bag chairs, floor pillows, exercise balls, and soft rockers.
- **Sensory objects:** what you select depends on the purpose and use of the room. If this is to be a quiet space, pick calming options. If you want to provide all types of input and have the space, add use brighter colors and add equipment for bouncing, swinging, rolling, sliding, and pushing.
 - **Touch** – squeeze balls, tactile wall, textured objects, puzzles (e.g. tangles), plastic coils, prayer beads, shells, plush toys, tactile books, interlocking blocks, stretch figures.
 - **Movement** -swing, mini-trampoline, open vinyl barrel, spin seat, rocker board.
 - **Pressure** – weighted pads or blankets, inflated ball for rolling, resistance exercise bands.
 - **Visual** – sensory calming bottles, bright fabric swatches, pinwheels, fiber optics.
 - **Sound** – noise-dampening headphones, calming music, nature sounds, pleasant musical toys, soft wind chimes, auditory sensory bottles (e.g. using rice), rain stick.

How can we make our sensory spaces safe?

- **Appropriate use** – Ask parents to suggest what works best for their child and signs to watch for indicating a break is needed. Never force use – sensory activities should be fun! Monitor for distress, dizziness, overheating and stop use if seen. Watch for positive effects too!
- **Supervision** - All volunteers must be trained in Safe Sanctuaries guidelines as well as in ministry-specific procedures. There must be two unrelated adults supervising, with the participants visible when using the space. An alternative: parents use the space with their own children.
- **Cleaning** – COVID has taught us that sanitation is a top priority. All materials should be washable or spray sanitizable. Cleaning procedures should be posted and followed! Provide hand wipes at the door, and cleaning products available yet out of children's reach.
- **Item selection** – For safety, pick non-toxic items without flashing lights, sharp corners, or small pieces that might be swallowed. Objects shouldn't injure if tossed. Check often for breakage.