

Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

Creating an Autism-Friendly Environment at Home

by Dani Kinsley, OTR/L

Autism is a neurodiverse way of experiencing, thinking about, and responding to the world that often presents in a variety of different ways. Receiving an autism diagnosis can be an empowering event for an individual or even the whole family unit, but many caregivers may experience stress as they learn to navigate how to best meet the needs of their Autistic family member. Most Autistic individuals also have sensory processing issues which may make finding places of comfort and refuge challenging. Here are some ways to embrace your family member's neurodiversity by creating an autism-friendly home environment.



Karen Wang has an Autistic son and is a contributing blog author for the non-profit Friendship Circle of Michigan (friendshipcircle.org). In her article, "Autistic Home Decorating: Make Your Home Autism Friendly," she offers suggestions for creating a home environment where everyone can thrive when stimulating, special interests, and sensory integration become a huge part of family life. In creating an autism-friendly environment in your home, Ms. Wang advises parents to establish a:

Sensory Environment

- Provide varying spaces where opportunities for movement, stimulation, and lack of stimulation are okay.
- Install soft lighting or use natural lighting, which is better for mood and attention than artificial lighting. Fluorescent lighting can be particularly overstimulating for individuals with sensory sensitivities.
- Place pillows on soft furniture and quilts on walls to absorb and soften sounds.

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- Learn about autism from the experts: Autistic adults. There are many resources online (blogs, social media groups, advocacy groups, podcasts, etc.), in the community, and in print (such as books by authors on the spectrum) that can help caregivers learn more about the experiences of their Autistic family member.
- Help siblings, caregivers, or other family members learn how to best communicate with and relate to their Autistic loved one. Learn about and respect the Autistic individual's interests and needs in a way that helps to build and strengthen relationships through shared experiences.
- Celebrate the strengths and accomplishments of all family members. Help the Autistic individual develop a positive Autistic identity while also acknowledging the challenges that they (and other family members) may encounter. Be mindful that typically-developing siblings may sometimes feel overshadowed by the needs of the Autistic family member.
- Create a safe and welcoming home environment.

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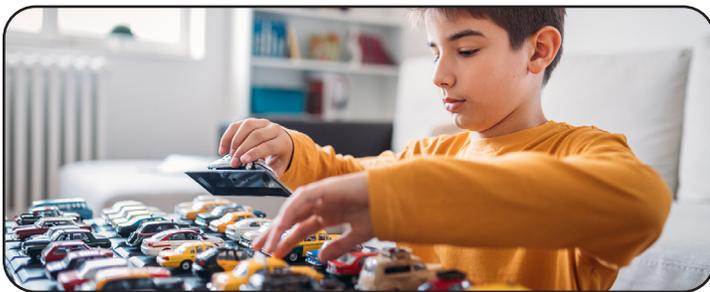
(Sensory Environment continued...)



- Paint walls with colors associated with mood. For example, some shades of blue may help with creativity and calmness. Areas filled with bright colors and loud, stimulating activities (toys, TVs, etc.) can be alerting and at times overstimulating. Providing another area with blank walls, soft colors, soft textures, and quiet activities such as books or puzzles may help promote focus and relaxation.



- Make space for vestibular (balance) and proprioceptive (body awareness and position) exercises. Any type of movement stimulates the vestibular receptors, but spinning, swinging, and hanging upside down provide the most intense, longest-lasting input. Proprioceptive input (sensations from joints, muscles, and connective tissues that lead to body awareness) includes lifting, pushing, and pulling heavy objects, including one's own weight. Consult your child's Occupational Therapist for vestibular and proprioceptive activities appropriate for your child's individual needs.



Work Space



- Establish an area devoted to your child's pursuit of special interests. In several of her books, including *Thinking in Pictures* and *The Way I See It*, author Temple Grandin (an Autistic adult, noted author, and esteemed lecturer) advises parents to use these special interest areas to steer individuals on the spectrum toward personal, academic, or career goals.

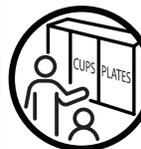
Space to Honor Special Interests, Talents, and Achievements



- Honor your Autistic family member's interests by encouraging lively discussions one-on-one or during family time to help foster language development and strengthen relationships.
- Display photos, drawings, school work, and other recognitions of all family members in order to celebrate everyone's achievements.



Space & Time for Building Life Skills



- Many Autistic individuals may struggle with the executive functioning skills required to easily learn self-care or daily life skills. Break down tasks into simple steps so your child can learn them over time. Provide modifications such as step-by-step visuals, simplify tasks, and create predictable routines.
- Label and re-arrange cupboards, shelving, and closets to make items accessible as your child learns to communicate or meet his/her own needs. Teach age-appropriate daily living tasks: clean up after him/herself, wash dishes and laundry, keep track of his/her own schedule, etc.
- Include your child in as many age-appropriate family and community-based activities as possible to help build adaptive social skills. Teach your child how to ask for help, communicate needs and wants, recognize the importance of consent, and self-advocate for sensory needs and adaptations when possible.

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Space for Eating



- Keep your dining area free of clutter and distractions (including electronics) so your child can focus on the meal. Relaxing instrumental music or soft lighting can also help to provide a calm and enjoyable dining atmosphere. Use the dining area only for eating.



- Avoid pressuring your child into eating. Provide at least one preferred or “safe” food for restrictive eaters alongside new or unfamiliar options. Model trying new foods and encourage everyone to take at least a small serving of each food on his/her plate, even if the food is non-preferred. If you are concerned about your child’s eating habits, ask for a referral to a feeding therapist (usually a specially-trained speech-language pathologist or occupational therapist).



- Keep conversation light and cheerful during meals. If possible, use this time to bond and connect as a family.



Space for Rest

Insomnia and night-waking are hot topics in the autism community. You may want to:



- Use blackout curtains.



- Paint the bedroom a neutral or dark color. Avoid overstimulating décor or artwork which may affect the individual’s ability to fall asleep.



- Use a lightly weighted blanket.



- Use a white noise machine.



- Buy a mattress that doesn’t bounce and jiggle (latex or memory foam), and use a box spring with no bed frame.

- Use body pillows to encourage tummy or side sleeping, which can help alleviate tossing and turning (visit your child’s doctor if you suspect nighttime indigestion or certain types of breathing problems).

- Use the bedroom only for sleep to help your child associate this room with rest. Decrease clutter and toys in the room for this reason.

- Limit the use of electronics after sunset. Keep bedrooms “screen-free.”

- Spend active time outdoors during the day, and take a walk outside at dusk to boost natural melatonin levels in the body.



Resources:

<http://www.educationandbehavior.com/classroom-for-students-with-autism/>

<http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/04/10/autistic-home-decorating-make-your-home-autism-friendly/>

<http://nationalautismnetwork.com/blog/1/entry-211-creating-a-sensory-friendly-home-environment-for-children-on-theautism-spectrum/>

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