Sensory-Friendly Events

Many young children attend experiences and events in their community. While theaters, festivals, and parties provide opportunities for learning, fun, and friendship, they can be overwhelming for some.

Understanding How Senses Impact Experiences

The five commonly known senses are hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. While everyone experiences senses differently, here are some examples of contrasting high- and low-intensity experiences.

- Listening to announcements through a speaker system vs. listening to a quiet voice
- Watching flashing lights in a holiday display vs. viewing a painting with neutral tones
- Smelling a freshly painted room vs. smelling the familiar scents of your bedroom
- Tasting a lemon vs. tasting a piece of plain bread
- Touching wet, gooey slime vs. touching a soft blanket

Considering the Sensory Experience of Events

Some experiences are full of sensory input, such as a children's concert with flashing, colorful lights; a thumping bass line that can be felt through the floor; and music amplified by speakers throughout the room. Add in some sour candy and a room tightly packed with people and all five senses are fully engaged. This can make an experience overwhelming for some children.

Creating Sensory-Friendly Events

Creating a sensory-friendly event can often be accomplished by "toning down" the sensory input of an experience. Here are some strategies:

- Lower the volume of music; lower the bass on speaker settings
- Provide consistent dim or natural lighting; avoid bright, flashing, or fluorescent lights
- Ensure the environment is free of strong scents, such as cleaning products, air fresheners, or certain foods
- Offer foods with mild flavor and a pleasant and easy texture for eating (e.g., pretzels); avoid strong flavors or extremes, such as very sour or spicy foods
- Limit the attendance so people don't feel cramped or have to wait in long lines
- Don't use paper wristbands or nametags that may itch or feel uncomfortable

Accessing Sensory-Friendly Events

- Be on the lookout for announcements about these events in your community. Park districts, children's zoos, and local theaters often incorporate them into their schedule.
- Don't be afraid to reach out to community organizations to request a sensory-friendly version of an event. They may not know you need one until you ask!
- Consider making your own events sensory friendly. Back-to-school night or a child's birthday party may be more enjoyable for everyone.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.

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