

SENSORY SMART ART

10 Ways to Help Artists Handle Sensory Issues...

BY LINDSEY BIEL, OTR/L

Whether kids, teens or adults on the autism spectrum are serious artists or simply having fun with crafts, it's essential to address any sensory challenges. Here are some ideas:

1. **Create a workspace conducive to focus and creativity.** Provide a comfortable chair and tabletop easel or slant board to reduce neck strain. If the person needs to move in order to remain attentive, consider an inflatable seat cushion such as the Movin' Sit or Disc o' Sit, a ball chair, or Hokki stool. Some people prefer to work standing up. In this case, set up a freestanding easel, raise the height of the work surface, or consider a stand-up desk.
2. **Remove visual clutter to avoid distractions, using opaque storage bins for art supplies, toys, and so on.** Turn off glaring overhead lights and use a task lamp or floor lamp at eye level with a full-spectrum or incandescent bulb. If fluorescents (which many people can see and hear flicker) are unavoidable, add a light diffuser such as Classroom Light Filters.
3. **Provide a soft, oversized shirt or cotton chef's apron instead of a plastic smock which may be distressing because of the fabric texture or scratchy neck closures.**
4. **Play music or use a white noise machine or CD if that helps with focus.** If it's a noisy room and the person needs quiet, provide noise-reducing headphones or ear plugs.
5. **If the person dislikes getting messy, have a damp cloth nearby for wiping hands, eliminating the need to get up and wash hands frequently.** Once people find pleasure in what they're doing, they're usually more willing to deal with the sensory aspects. Provide alternates to enable participation. You can certainly provide gloves and a long-handled paintbrush or glue sticks instead of liquid glue.
6. **Art media such as paint, markers, glue, and clay usually have a strong smell, so make sure you have good ventilation.** Generally, you should open a window or use a fan. Avoid invalidating a sensitive person by saying, "It doesn't smell." It does. Everything (and everyone) smells like something.
7. **Even if the label says the item is nontoxic, it may still be toxic to that person's nervous system.** If the student cannot tolerate the smell of regular markers or tempera paint, try alternatives such as Mr. Sketch scented markers or liquid watercolor paint. Colored pencils and crayons may be best tolerated.
8. **If a student refuses to touch play dough or regular clay,** try unscented gluten-free Wonder Dough; scented, gluten-free Aroma Dough; Eco-Dough for chemically sensitive kids; or low-residue Crayola Model Magic. Older kids might enjoy using Sculpey which hardens when baked to make beads and other objects.
9. **Consider how much structure the person needs.** Does he become

anxious and disorganized when given art supplies and encouraged to explore freely? If so, you may want to use a kit with step-by-step instructions and a picture of the finished product. Kits such as Alex's Color By Markers and My Clay Art, Paint by Numbers from Faber-Castell, Royal & Langnickel and others plus foam craft kits from your local crafts store are just few of the pre-packaged activities that can be explored. Sequenced drawing can help a person to stay organized and get a satisfying result. Books such as Usborne's *I Can Draw Animals* and Ed Emberley's books such as *Draw A World* can help.

10. Engage in sensory-rich activities that set the person up for success.

A person may benefit from a preparatory hand massage; waking up fingers, wrists, and arms by using squeeze balls and hand exercisers such as the Eggsercizer or Peditools monkey. It may also help to engage in movement and body awareness activities such as jumping jacks, bouncing on a ball, doing wall push-ups, chewing gum (Glee Gum is gluten-free), drinking thick liquids through a straw, or whatever sensory strategies work for that person at other times.

For more sensory strategies, please read *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit www.sensorysmarts.com. ◀

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **Stand-up desk** Worthingtondirect.com
- ▶ **Classroom light filters** Educationalinsights.com
- ▶ **Inflatable seat cushions, ball chair, Hokki stool** Achievement-products.com
- ▶ **Online Sculpey projects** Sculpey.com
- ▶ **Monkey hand exerciser and other hands strengtheners** Peditools.com

You can find most other items mentioned on Amazon and many on the sensorysmarts.com web site.

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...a pediatric occupational therapist based in Manhattan, where she evaluates and treats children, adolescents, and young adults with sensory processing issues, developmental delays, autism, and other developmental challenges. Lindsey is coauthor of *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*, with a foreword by Temple Grandin, and author of *Sensory Processing Challenges: Effective Clinical Work with Kids and Teens*. She is also co-creator of the Sensory Processing Master Class DVD program. She is a popular speaker, teaching workshops to parents, therapists, doctors, and others on practical solutions for developmental challenges and sensory strategies at home, school, and in the community. ◀

