

Success for your Sensory Child at Home

by Carolyn Dalglish

Now that school is underway and our kids have the structure of school days, let's talk about a few ways to bring that structure and routine into your home. Most children do better with organization and routine and that is especially true for "sensory" kids - those with anxiety disorder, sensory integration dysfunction, learning challenges, ADD/ADHD, obsessive/compulsive disorder, high-functioning autism, Asperger's syndrome, or other sensory challenges. As a professional home organizer and the parent of a sensory and a typical child, I know the value of routines, schedules and visual aids in supporting all types of children. By using some basic space organization, routines and visual aids at home, you can help support your "sensory" child during the downtime at home.

- **Start with the Bedroom**- A great place to start is in your child's bedroom. Most "sensory" kids have challenges in the area of executive function- the ability to formulate, sequence and execute plans. By creating visual organization and a visual pattern for your "sensory" child, you can help your child be calm and make sense of his/her environment. Try to work with your child to help her set up her room as a multi-functional area with different zones for each need. Create a sleeping area, a reading area, a play / toy area and a clothes storage / dressing area and label each area with a sign or picture. In each zone, ask your child how they would like their things organized, they may have a very different idea of how areas should be set-up. Listen to and incorporate their suggestions. Sensory kids, in many ways, interpret the world around them differently than we do. Setting-up their room in a way that makes sense to you, may not "speak" at all to your child. With this type of zone organization, that uses their input, you will be teaching your child how to create the external organization that she might be lacking internally.
- **Create a place to Escape and Regulate**- Our "sensory" kids are usually working very hard all day at school to navigate situations that are overwhelming to them. Creating a safe/quiet zone for your "sensory" child at home can help them transition from school to home or for any other times they are feeling overwhelmed. Good quiet zones are dark and quiet - areas that work well are the corner of a closet, bottom bunk of bunk bed, under a desk and even a cardboard box. Name/label the quiet area with your child if that is helpful and have it contain items that you know are soothing for your "sensory" child- flashlight with favorite books, noise - blocking headphones, beanbag, handheld sensory toys, a heavy/weighted blanket.
- **Create a central message area for your family**. This needs to be big and should have visual supports for school and home routines. You can start with a large weekly calendar (or daily if more appropriate) to write out what is coming for the week. Include after school activities, when there will be downtime at home, reading time, as well as some of the daily chore expectations. Letting your "sensory" child know what is happening and when to expect it can lower his anxiety level and prepare him for the times he will need to be engaged. Get a detailed weekly school schedule from your child's teacher to hang in the central message area. This will be helpful to look at as

your child packs their backpack and prepares for the next day. If your “sensory” child needs extra social support- you can create an area that holds a social clue for the week either in picture or short story format.

- **The Homework Station** - This can be one of the hardest times of day for our “sensory” kids. Designate a homework station and set-it up close to an adult for easy monitoring. Make a homework caddy for your child that has everything they need for homework - paper, pencils, dictionary, number lines, manipulatives to help with math, etc. The main goal is to have everything on hand so your child does not have to get up to look for anything- keeping your child on task is the big part of a successful homework session. Break down homework into manageable pieces, expecting them to sit-down for an hour and stay focused is likely not a reasonable expectation. So don't set yourself and your child up for frustration and confrontation. Have a visual homework schedule where active breaks are built-in to the process. You need to have a rough idea of how long your “sensory” child can typically stay on task before becoming frustrated and build in breaks before your child hits that point. Set your child up to be successful!

Again, an important part of making any new system at home successful is involving your child in the process. “Sensory” kids can view things very differently than we do and making them part of the process can be instrumental in creating a system that works for them. Just like every child, each sensory child is unique and will respond differently to certain techniques. Pay attention to how much can be handled by your “sensory” child and be careful not to incorporate too many changes at once. This will also allow you to pay attention to what is working/not working and tweek your plan as needed.

By taking a little time to tap into your child's needs and wishes, you can create a few simple supports at home that will help the entire family. Creating bedroom zones, having a place to escape and regulate, embracing the central message area and coming up with a homework plan are all systems that give “sensory” kids the tools they need to be successful at home.

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