Widening the Circle

Celebrating Neurodiversity in Faith Based Schools

Focus Strategy: Sensory Processing

A Sensory-Rich Classroom Environment

Classrooms are naturally sensory-rich spaces. Students experience constant sounds, visual information, movement, and social interactions. For many children, this steady stream of sensory input is manageable. But for others, their nervous system processes the same environment very differently. What is typical background noise for one child may feel overwhelming, distracting, or even distressing for another.

Every brain interprets sensory information uniquely. Some children easily filter out irrelevant noises, movements, and textures. Others notice everything around them—and because they cannot tune it out, they may struggle to stay calm, focused, or emotionally grounded.

This is not a discipline issue. It is a neurological one.

How Sensory Processing Works

Sensory processing is the brain's way of receiving, organizing, and responding to information from the world. For most children this system works reliably in the background. But when the brain has difficulty interpreting the input, everyday experiences can feel confusing or overwhelming.

Children may respond to sensory challenges in different ways:

Sensory Seekers

These students crave movement, pressure, touch, or intense sensory experiences to stay regulated. They may fidget, climb, wiggle, chew, or crash into things—not to be disruptive, but because their body is asking for input.

Sensory Sensitive Students

These children are quickly overwhelmed by noise, bright lights, crowded spaces, or unexpected touch. A normal lunchroom may feel painfully loud, or a scratchy clothing tag might be distracting enough to trigger tears.

<u>Common Responses</u>

A child may:

- Melt down in loud or chaotic environments
- Seek intense movement at times when stillness is expected
- Shut down or withdraw to escape overwhelming input
- Resist certain textures, touches, or materials

These reactions are not choices. **They are signs that the nervous system is dysregulated.**

Why Sensory Needs Matter for Learning

When the sensory system is out of sync, it affects much more than comfort. It can influence attention, emotional regulation, social interactions, participation in instruction, and academic performance Adults naturally seek sensory regulation throughout the day—coffee for alertness, pacing while thinking, stretching to stay focused. Children also need ways to regulate, and some require more intentional supports to find balance.

A regulated body leads to a regulated brain. And a regulated brain is ready to learn.

Sensory Tools as Access Points to Learning

Sensory tools are not toys or rewards—they are essential supports that help students reach a calm, organized state that makes learning possible. Tools such as wiggle cushions, wobble stools, bouncy bands, standing desks, fidgets, resistance putty, weighted lap pads, visual schedules, and timers provide the sensory input many students need to stay regulated. When used intentionally, these supports help students focus longer, manage frustration, engage more fully, build confidence, and avoid shutdowns or meltdowns. The most effective support is proactive rather than reactive; tools introduced only during a meltdown come too late. The goal is continuous regulation throughout the day, not crisis management.

Occupational therapists play a key role in this process. They assess a child's sensory responses—whether over-responsive, under-responsive, or sensory-seeking—and create an individualized plan known as a sensory diet. A sensory diet is not food-related; it is a menu of sensory activities, movement opportunities, tools, and environmental supports that feed the nervous system what it needs to remain calm, focused, and organized. Just as the body needs regular meals, the nervous system needs consistent sensory input to function well. Sensory diets work best when adults across settings use them predictably and collaboratively, helping the child internalize the strategies and experience success.

Final Thoughts

Supporting sensory processing is not simply about managing behavior; it is about understanding how the nervous system shapes learning. When students receive the input their bodies require, they feel safer, more confident, and more available for academic and social engagement. Proactive sensory support helps create classrooms where every child can thrive. A regulated child is a capable, connected, and successful learner.

Resources:

Scribble2Script - this information was brought to you through an interview with Megan Eldridge, Pediatric Occupational Therapist, Founder of Scribble2Script

Parent Connection:

Families can support sensory regulation at home by offering simple movement breaks, calm-down spaces, or hands-on activities like playdough, stretching, or outdoor play. When school and home work together to understand a child's sensory needs, students gain consistency, confidence, and stronger self-regulation skills.