FOR BUDDIES AND TEACHERS

Sensory strategies in the classroom

Many children take in the world louder, brighter and faster than the rest of us. A regular classroom can be a lot. These are small changes that help a child stay in the room with everyone else, and most of them help the other kids too.

For the whole room

- Use a picture schedule and point to it often. Knowing what's next lowers stress for everyone.
- Break up sitting time with movement. Act out part of the story, stand up for a song, or do ten wall push-ups between activities.
- Offer more than one way to sit: a carpet square to mark personal space, a wobble cushion, a beanbag, or lying on the floor for a story.
- Keep fidgets in a basket for anyone who needs something in their hands.
- Don't rush. A child who's hurried is a child who's about to be overwhelmed.
- Give the child who can't sit a job: pass out supplies, hold the picture, be the helper.
- Set up a quiet corner, even just a pop-up tent with a pillow. Make clear it's a place to reset, never a punishment.

Sound

- Use a quiet, calm voice for instructions, and fewer words.
- Get the child's attention before you give a direction. Have them say it back to you if that helps.
- Let a child wear headphones if the room gets loud.
- Soft music or white noise in the background smooths out sudden sounds.
- Split tennis balls on chair legs stop the scraping that bothers some children more than you'd guess.

Sight

- Fluorescent lights bother many children. Use natural light or lamps when you can, or add fabric covers made for fluorescent fixtures.
- Keep walls and tables uncluttered. Busy rooms are hard to settle in.
- Seat the child away from windows and doors, near the front.
- Use bright, colorful lesson materials so the thing you want them to look at is the most interesting thing in the room.
- A visual timer shows how long until the next thing.

Movement

- Build movement into the lesson: jumping, marching, Simon Says, acting out a Bible character.
- Pushing, pulling and carrying calm the body. Let a restless child carry the crate of supplies, stack the chairs, or push against the wall.
- Rocking chairs and swings settle some children and wake up others. Ask the parents which their child needs.
- Play dough and squishy toys give the hands something to do and the body something to settle with.
- A short walk in the hallway is a sensory break. It doesn't have to be the sensory room.

Mouth

- Let children keep a water bottle, ideally one with a straw. Sucking through a straw is calming for many kids.
- Ask parents whether their child uses a chew toy or a snack to settle. Chewy and crunchy foods both help, with the family's okay and an allergy check.

How to tell if it's working. The goal is a child who's in the room, part of the group, and taking in the lesson in their own way. If they're calmer and staying longer than last week, it's working.