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Physical setup of the classroom

“Josh loves to draw but suddenly refused to go to Art. The tall stools in the Art room were wobbly and he felt very unsafe when he sat on them.”

Points to note

- Children with autism are particularly vulnerable to distractions and have difficulty filtering out irrelevant information, such as background sounds and visual information.
- The child may be distracted and disturbed by the free movement of other children in the classroom, ie. other children may bump into him, his chair or table when they move about the classroom. The child may be unable to understand this contact is accidental. He needs his personal space.
- The child may be very sensitive to light and will have difficulty concentrating if seated in a position where bright sunlight or reflections hurt his eyes.
- The child might have difficulty with activities requiring balancing skills, he might have a poor sense of equilibrium and lack awareness of his position in space.

What you can do

- There is a huge pay-off for teachers who are prepared to familiarise themselves with and understand the student's particular sensory issues. Remember each child has his/her own set of behaviours. Do not overgeneralise – autism is not like other disabilities.
- If it is practical, establish a work area in the classroom that is uncluttered, free from distractions and not subject to ‘traffic flow’ by other students. It is *important not to exclude the child* from the rest of the class, but to establish a work area that takes the child's special needs into account. Make sure the child has a clear and easy path to the teacher for help.
- Organise all work materials that the child will need for an activity before commencing the work. Label tubs or trays with words, pictures or symbols to help the child organise his work and supplies. Remember to draw on the child's visual learning strengths.
- Position the child in a quiet corner of the room where there is little chance of him being distracted by light, reflections, the door opening and closing etc. Ensure there is good ventilation. The student might perform better when facing a wall or window providing the view is not too distracting if he is distracted by other students.
- The child might find it easier to focus and work at his desk if his work surface is raised to a 15 degree angle.
- Check for sensory issues concerning chair type, ie. soft or hard. If the students are sitting on the floor, consider the texture of the carpet. A mat, cushion or fabric square may be useful if the student finds the texture of the carpet particularly unpleasant.
- It can be helpful to have the child's daily visual schedule in front of his work space. Secondary students should have their timetable stuck inside their folders or school diary.

Colour coding for different subjects is very helpful, particularly if this is combined with colour coded books and folders.