

Creating a sensory friendly home



Tip sheet

An autism/sensory friendly home is one that supports the reduction of stress, anxiety and workload by anticipating the risks and supporting preferred activities.

The environment needs to be designed with the specific needs of the individual who will be living in it, but there are some common things to consider:

Lighting: Provide as much control to the individual as possible. Dimmer switches, different wattage lamps, different coloured bulbs and adjustable room darkening curtains may all be helpful to an individual who is sensitive to light.

Temperature: Provide as much control over the temperature as possible. Check for and control drafts. Install HVAC systems or individual mini-units for heating and cooling.

Sound: Manage the acoustics of the area by installing sound absorbing material on the walls (up high along the ceiling if necessary). Hang sound cancelling headphones on the wall for easy access.

Smells: Consider the cleaning chemicals used – a switch to environmentally friendly products that are low scent may be helpful.

Finishes: For floors and walls, ensure that they are an attractive and non-absorbent material to make clean up easy. Consider epoxy paint on walls, vinyl tile or flooring instead of carpet, PVC furniture, and fibreglass wall coverings. Consider colours that are relatively neutral. Decorations can be added to make the environment attractive to the person's individual likes. (Murals, posters, wallpaper).

Water Management: Select faucets that direct the water into a basin and cannot be redirected out of the drainage area. If the individual enjoys playing with water, find a location to encourage it. For example, waterproof a washroom or the area near the kitchen sink. (A floor drain is a huge benefit if you are remodelling a bathroom or 'wet room' area. In the summer months set up a water play area outside with hoses and tubs. Vinyl flooring can be welded together and covered up the walls to help waterproof an area.

Door Slamming: Door slamming can cause hinges, locksets and doorframes to break over time. Consider fibreglass doors (light weight, strong and attractive), metal door frames (hold up longer than wood), pocket doors installed on commercial hardware, or curtains attached by Velcro on door frames.

Toilet: Consider a bidet to reduce the assistance required with toileting.

Furnishings: For individuals who like to swing, spin, rock or bounce, consider using outside swings and trampolines. Inside ceiling mounted swing chairs or rope swings may be of benefit. Rocking chairs and gliders may also help to satisfy this need. If furniture damage or cleanliness is of concern, use solid wood or plywood furniture, institutional quality couches (durable and easy to clean), or vinyl cushions (like those used in boats). Sports equipment, like a high jump matt, could be turned into a couch or bed by adding slipcovers and pillows. Consider securing furnishings to the floor if there is a safety risk.

Visibility: Consider opening-up walls to create more of an open concept or installing interior windows between rooms. Video monitors may help with visual supervision as necessary.

Fixtures: Consider institutional-grade fixtures in bathrooms and kitchens – they typically stand up to more use/abuse than standard household fixture.

Walking space: Consider creating a 'walking loop' within the home to allow for 'walking-off' anxiety. This could be around a kitchen island or by putting doors into connected rooms to allow a full walk through of the rooms.

Safe Spaces: Create one or two private places within the home that the person can retreat to when needed.

Floor Registers: Move them to the wall if possible. Floor registers are very difficult to clean and they often encourage 'stashing' or inappropriate toileting.

Washing Machines: Consider industrial units that are high efficiency along with a large utility sink in the laundry area.

Elopement: Consider fences, locked or monitored gates, warning devices (such as a door alarm), locks (interconnected locks that will release should the smoke detector go off).

Technology: Link to technology section of resources. Technology can assist you with monitoring and independence in a living environment.

Eliminate Obvious Hazards:

- Keep medication and toxic chemicals locked up.
- Keep all firearms and ammunition locked.
- Install scald prevention devices at tubs and showers.
- Secure pools, hot tubs, ponds and any other potentially dangerous water source in and around your house.
- Inspect landscape and remove any poisonous plants and toxic material from your yard if pica is a concern.
- Install smoke detectors and carbon dioxide detectors throughout the home – especially in all sleeping areas. Consider choosing detectors that give voice commands.
- Install tamper free electrical outlets and ground fault receptacles.
- Address personal risks such as seizure safety or self injurious behaviors with built in padding, round corners on walls, etc.