

Sensory Room Use Supporting Inclusive Practices

Tier 2 & Tier 3 Preventative Support for Student Regulation

**Created by the School-Based Occupational Therapist (OT)
Implemented collaboratively by the entire school community**

Purpose of the Sensory Room

Our sensory room is a preventative support, not a crisis space. It is intentionally used to help students maintain regulation for learning, reduce barriers to participation, and prevent escalations before they occur.

The sensory room functions as:

- **Tier 2 support:** scheduled, short-term regulation breaks for students who need additional sensory input to stay engaged in learning
- **Tier 3 support:** individualized, planned regulation support aligned with student IEPs or behavior plans

Preventative, Not Reactive

- Students do not enter the sensory room during full escalation.
- When a student is already dysregulated, this environment is not effective and may increase distress.
- Instead, the room is used proactively, based on data, observation, and scheduled access throughout the day.

The goal is to **prevent escalation**, not respond after it occurs.

Intentional Scheduling

- Students have scheduled time slots built into their day.
- Access is purposeful and predictable, supporting nervous system regulation and readiness to learn.
- Sensory breaks are 15 minutes in duration to support regulation without removing students from instruction unnecessarily.

*Tessa Dunbar, OTD, OTR/L
tdunbar@auburn.wednet.edu*
Please reach out with any questions!

Guided Use with Zones of Regulation

- Adults use the Zones of Regulation framework to help students identify their current state. (District wide common language)
- Students are supported to choose 1–3 sensory activities based on their zone.
- The adult remains engaged, coaching regulation and transitions back to learning.

This process supports:

- Emotional awareness
- Self-regulation skills
- Choice-making within clear boundaries

Staff Training & Shared Responsibility

- All adults who support students in the sensory room are explicitly trained by the OT.
- This is a shared space, not an OT-only room.
- Staff across roles collaborate to:
 - Reinforce expectations
 - Maintain the room's organization
 - Support consistent routines and language

Clear Expectations & Administrative Support

Successful sensory rooms require:

- Clear protocols
- Consistent adult expectations
- Administrative involvement to support, reinforce, and protect the integrity of the space

Administration plays a key role in:

- Supporting consistent implementation
- Reinforcing that the room is preventative, structured, and purposeful
- Ensuring fidelity across staff and settings

Protocol with Flexibility

The sensory room follows a defined protocol while remaining flexible to meet diverse sensory needs.

*Tessa Dunbar, OTD, OTR/L
tdunbar@auburn.wednet.edu*

Please reach out with any questions!

Core components include:

- Predictable routines
- Adult-guided entry and exit
- Limited activity choices organized into types of activities (calming, movement/alerting, organizing)
- Respect for shared materials and space
- Smooth transition back to class

Flexibility allows the room to support students with a wide range of sensory profiles.

Continuous Improvement

Plans to actively enhance the current sensory room by:

- Adding a student lead/adult guided Check-In / Check-Out routine using principles from the ALERT Program
 - The ALERT Program helps students build body awareness ("engine levels") and self-regulation skills by teaching them to recognize how their bodies feel and choose sensory strategies proactively, supporting independence and regulation before challenges escalate.
 - Complements Zones of Regulation by giving neurodivergent or trauma-impacted students concrete, body-based language ("engine levels") and actionable strategies, helping them recognize internal states and select regulating supports before emotions escalate.
- Supporting students with interoceptive awareness challenges (understanding body signals)
- Strengthening language around "engine levels" to build self-awareness and independence

Our Philosophy

Sensory regulation is:

- A skill, not a behavior
- A shared responsibility
- Essential for access, inclusion, and learning

When used intentionally and proactively, sensory spaces empower students to stay regulated, engaged, and included throughout their school day.

Tessa Dunbar, OTD, OTR/L
tdunbar@auburn.wednet.edu
Please reach out with any questions!