



## Meeting Neurodiverse Children Wherever They Are with Mobile Sensory Havens

After reading this brief, you should be able to,

- Describe why sensory havens are needed in the community
- Discuss what is considered when creating a sensory haven
- Describe the advantages of having a portable model instead of a fixed sensory haven

As our world trends towards destigmatizing those who have autism, it's become more "*normal*" to see neurodiverse children and adults in community settings and participating in events that are both specifically designed for them as well as everyday events for the larger population.

This is something that many people, including occupational therapists, special educators, and speech and language pathologists, love to see - but there are still a lot of hurdles to overcome before full participation can be achieved for people with sensory sensitivities, communication difficulties, and social differences. As OT practitioners and students, we can offer our support and knowledge of evidence-based mobile sensory havens to staff and volunteers of organizations, who have not had the same benefit of education and training, to better include neurodiverse individuals during special events.

First and foremost, visiting sensory havens shouldn't be seen as going to a therapy session in the middle of your zoo day or museum date. Rather, they provide *opportunities* for neurodiverse people and their loved ones to continue enjoying what they are doing in the community by offering them an opportunity to settle or calm down. A five to ten minute to a well-appointed sensory haven should be all it takes to pull it together.

The concept of sensory havens is backed by research evidence about sensory processing, the efficacy of multi-sensory environments, autism architecture, and literature on social participation. From our perspective, having plenty of personal experience, trying to meet the expectations from community partners, and how easy it is to buy the things needed for the sensory havens also play factors in their popularity.

With all these things in mind, the goal of a sensory space is to provide community visitors with what some Russian sensory room psychologists referred to as *calming, refreshing, and activating effects* and what Italian *Magic Room* designers and biomedical engineers have described as places for children, with and without disabilities, *to increase their positive behavior, socialization, and relaxation.*

So when factoring in both autism architecture, developed by Egyptian research-architect Mostafa and Wilbarger's (1991) early pioneering work in sensory processing, the most sensory havens usually incorporate tactile (the deep pressure bear hug type), vestibular (the front to back porch swing type), proprioceptive (the where is my body in space astronaut type), auditory, and visual input into the design. It's also a good plan to avoid invasive olfactory (inescapable smells - both good and bad) and potentially messy gustatory (taste) input.

A sensory space should be easily replicable and customizable. Once you figure out your own formula for success, you can reliably make the same spaces from one event to another, and you can tailor them to whatever needs arise. When visitors are able to make their own choice, consider offering one sensory space that has lights and sounds and another without any visual or auditory input, something of a darkened calm zone. Keeping the amount of equipment to a minimum will also allow the havens to be easier to recreate and make set-up more consistent between groups or places. In this case, being a copy-cat is a good thing, but before you settle on imitating your neighbor's design, ask them how they like it. It's quite possible they would like to tweak it.

Using something that is easy to transport and assemble, like a floorless ice fishing house, heavy-duty camping tent, or even a cardboard playhouse (easily available on some of our favorite Internet shopping channels) will cut down on set-up time considerably. It's possible to put them up wherever they are most convenient for users. Another benefit of using a variety of ice fishing houses, tents, and cardboard houses that vary in sizes is that it will help community venues accommodate for users of different age groups and sensory needs. Having a mobile sensory space allows venues to have them available for use without taking up large amounts of space or detracting from the main experience that individuals are at the venue for. Plus, going the portable route is much more economical than building up a large physical space.

Choices related to creating mobile sensory havens depends a lot on the place they will be housed in. In a way, building them is like balancing a math equation - the louder and more crowded a venue is, the greater the need is for calming and providing sensory regulation opportunities in the sensory space. Likewise, the more visitors the space has, the greater the number of supports there will need to be. The more small kids who visit the space, the greater the need to clean and sanitize.

Try the sensory space out yourself! We are all sensory creatures, and the need for a pause that refreshes shouldn't be limited to autistic visitors - we can all use a break!