

# Supporting Sensory Regulation in Pediatric Healthcare Waiting Rooms



Paola Dayton, MOTS<sup>1</sup>; Sarah Eden, MOTS<sup>1</sup>; Alicia Glenwell, MOTS<sup>1</sup>; Emily Wharton, MOTS<sup>1</sup>  
 Faculty Advisor: Tracy Mroz, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA<sup>1</sup>; Community Mentor: Kari Tanta, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup> University of Washington, Division of Occupational Therapy; <sup>2</sup> MultiCare Mary Bridge Children's Hospital & Health Network

## Background

- Our bodies are constantly processing the different stimuli in our environments and from within our own bodies through sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, vestibular, proprioception, and interoception.<sup>1</sup>
- Many people have sensory processing differences and need more or less stimulation to feel calm and regulated. Sensory tools can help provide regulating inputs.<sup>2</sup>
- Sensory dysregulation can look like an 'outburst' or 'acting out'. Healthcare facilities and interventions can be very uncomfortable for children with sensory processing differences, which can adversely impact their engagement and health outcomes.<sup>3</sup>
- Sensory-friendly healthcare environments promote patient and family trust, engagement, coping, healing, and comfort while reducing patient anxiety, agitation, confusion, and distress.<sup>3</sup>



## Purpose

The goal of our project was to enhance the sensory-friendly capacity of the MultiCare Mary Bridge Children's Hospital & Health Network by providing education and sensory tools to help children feel more comfortable and calm in waiting room settings.

## Pilot Design & Implementation

### Phase 1 - Needs Assessment

Discussed project scope with Mary Bridge community mentor; designed front desk staff survey for kit already in use; researched elements of sensory-friendly healthcare environments

### Phase 2 - Content Development

Developed caregiver flyer; identified sensory tools and kit budgets; identified participating sites; sourced social stories; developed kit instructions and staff member training materials

### Phase 3 - Site Preparation

Trained identified liaisons; assembled and delivered kits containing caregiver flyer, kit menu, two social stories, instruction sheet, pilot tally sheet and 10 sensory tool options

### Phase 4 - Pilot Implementation

Piloted sensory kits across 11 sites in South King County for four weeks from March 11th-April 5th; staff members identified struggling children in waiting rooms, offered the menu of available tools, and distributed flyer on sensory regulation and tool selected by caregiver/child to use in the waiting room prior to their appointment; gathered feedback on pilot through tally sheet of items used, weekly check-in emails to site liaisons, and post-pilot survey of staff members

## Kit Components

### Sensory Tool Kit and Items



### Sensory Tool Kit Menu and Tally Sheet

Item	Week 1 3/15-3/18	Week 2 3/19-3/22	Week 3 3/23-3/26	Week 4 3/27-3/30
Fidget Spinner				
Squeeze Ball				
Stik Breaker				
Pop Tube				
Popper				
Gel Head Massager				
Liquid Bubble Wand				
Wobble Cushion				
Noise Cancelling Headphones				
Weighted Lap Pad				
Gel Squish Mat				

### Caregiver Flyer

**How to Make a Sensory Kit**

Make a sensory kit to help your child feel their best!

Exploring the world is exciting and it can be challenging for kids to feel calm all of the time, especially when they are in an uncomfortable or unfamiliar environment, like a restaurant or a waiting room. If you think your child might need more or less stimulation, you can help by making a sensory kit.

A sensory kit doesn't need to be anything fancy! It can contain simple tools that help kids get the stimulation they need. Many items can easily be found online, at stores like Walmart or Target, thrift and dollar stores, and more. Gather items you think your child would like and bring them with you on your next adventure!

**Sensory Seeking Tools**

- Squeeze toys, fidget spinners, stress balls, pop-its, wobble cushions, liquid motion bubble timers, and sensory chew toys

**Sensory Avoiding Tools**

- Headphones, white noise, sunglasses, weighted lap pad, tight hugs, and comfortable clothing

**Feeling just right!**

As kids explore the world, their senses have to take in a lot of stimulation. Kids' bodies and minds feel best when they get stimulation that feels just right - too much or too little can feel overwhelming, irritating, or stressful. Sometimes, a kid's behavior shows us that they're trying to get more or less of a particular sensation.

**Kids who are sensory seeking may prefer:**

- Loud sounds or music
- Bright lights
- Strong smells
- Lots of movement

**Kids who are sensory avoidant may prefer:**

- Clothes without tags
- Dimmed lighting
- Covering their ears at loud sounds or music
- Familiar food textures

Some kids may want more of some sensations and less of others, all at the same time. Kids' sensory preferences are as unique as they are. Understanding your child's sensory needs can help them feel their best!

## Findings

### Post-pilot survey results from 7 front desk staff:

- The waiting room environment was better (72%)
- Kids seemed better able to cope with the waiting room (71%)
- Kids seemed more calm (57%)
- Kids seemed more comfortable (43%)

**Other feedback:** More staff training needed; transitions can be challenging; site layout and volume of check-ins is key factor for kit use; staff and families were very appreciative

**“A patient kept screaming and falling on the floor so I lent him a bubble timer, and he immediately calmed down and just held on to it with amazement.”**  
 - Front Desk Staff

## Recommendations

**Sensory kit expansion:** Increase front desk staff training; prioritize take-home items; consider facility layout, rhythm, and staffing; allow site customization

**Other sensory-friendly strategies:** Start system-wide staff training; add family educational content to website; modify environment and clinical care processes to support sensory differences

## References

<sup>1</sup>Hathaway, A. (2023, December 15). *The 8 sensory systems explained - occupational therapy intro*. DEVELOP LEARN GROW. <https://developlearngrow.com/sensory-systems-101/>

<sup>2</sup>Litwin, S., Clarke, L., Copeland, J., Tyrrell, J., Tait, C., Mohabir, V., & Campbell, F. (2023). Designing a Child-, Family-, and Healthcare Provider-Centered Procedure Room in a Tertiary Care Children's Hospital. *HERD*, 16(3), 195-209. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/19375867231161097>

<sup>3</sup>Black, M. H., McGarry, S., Churchill, L., D'Arcy, E., Dalgleish, J., Nash, I., Jones, A., Tse, T. Y., Gibson, J., Bólte, S., & Girdler, S. (2022). Considerations of the built environment for autistic individuals: A review of the literature. *Autism*, 26(8), 1904-1915. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1177/13623613221102753>