

Outfitting a Home for a Child on the Autism Spectrum

Simple design changes can help create a safe and comforting space for children with autism or sensory processing issues.

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Many of us have a special spot at home that helps us hit the reset button. It might be a favorite chair, a quiet nook, or simply under the covers, in bed. But for children on the autism spectrum or who have sensory processing issues, finding this kind of sanctuary can be challenging, because ordinary items in the home, like a bright lamp or a textured rug, can trigger a negative reaction.

Some public or commercial spaces, like schools, airports and sport stadiums, now offer sensory rooms that carry a wide variety of therapy equipment. Setting one up at home, though, need not be as elaborate or expensive.

“It’s all about providing a safe and enjoyable space that a child can navigate independently,” said Paige Siper, the chief psychologist at the Seaver Autism Center for Research and Treatment at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. She recommends having an occupational therapist do an assessment to determine the child’s sensory preferences and needs before designing a space.

With one in 59 children now identified with autism spectrum disorder, there are more parents who have experimented with simple home design hacks to help their children cope with their sensory processing issues — where every day auditory, visual and other stimuli are experienced in a heightened way. Although not everyone with sensory processing issues have autism, many do. Conversely, studies conducted by the STAR Institute, a research facility based in Greenwood Village, Colo., suggest that about 75 percent of children on the autism spectrum have significant symptoms of sensory processing disorder.

Simple design changes could include soundproofing rooms, installing heavier doors and quieter laundry machines and dishwashers. For children who find too much stimulus in everyday items around the home, finding clutter-free storage ideas is another easy fix.

Lindsey Biel, an occupational therapist with a practice in Manhattan, said equipment and toys from a therapy catalog can also be helpful, but she noted that they can be pricey and even counterproductive if the wrong item is bought. For example, the Dizzy Disk, a spin toy, may help some children release energy and strengthen balance and coordination skills. For others, though, the vestibular movement may provide overstimulation.

“You have to fine tune the space and equipment to the individual’s needs,” said Ms. Biel, who is also an author of “Raising A Sensory Smart Child” (Penguin Books, 2009).

Ms. Biel recommends simple tweaks in the home, like installing light dimmers and replacing harsh florescent lights with warmer LED light bulbs. Walls should be a soft, neutral color and patterned wall paper avoided. And for children who need movement, a rocking chair, hammock or a pod swing can help.



Because her 3-year-old son, Julian, is on the autism spectrum and is sensitive to light, Vanessa Flyer installed automatic blinds in his bedroom so he can adjust the sunlight on his own. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

Vanessa Flyer, whose 3-year-old son, Julian, is on the autism spectrum and sensitive to sound and light, among other things, created a quiet nook for him in their Greenwood Heights, Brooklyn, home. She squeezed a tepee into the corner of his bedroom and cushioned the bottom with old baby blankets. Inside there are several cushions and some hand-held sensory toys in a felt bin nearby.

Ms. Flyer, who often reads books to Julian in the tepee, said her son also seeks out the space on his own, especially when the family has company.



Ms. Flyer put a teepee in the corner of Julian's bedroom. It provides a safe, quiet space for the two to read books, or for Julian to find comfort on his own if he feels overstimulated. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

“The teepee is his refuge, but it can also be fun,” said Ms. Flyer, who purchased it for less than \$100.

Ms. Flyer also installed automated blinds for about \$900. Sometimes the natural sunlight is too harsh and it is all Julian can focus on, leading him to pace and repeat certain words or phrases, known as echolalia. Julian operates the automated blinds himself to help regulate his own environment.

Michael Volchok saw the need to create a safe exercise space for his son, Max, who is on the autism spectrum and has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Max, 6, became an expert at climbing bookcases when he was about 4. So when Mr. Volchok learned that a children's play space in his SoHo neighborhood was closing two years ago, he offered to buy all the sensory exercise equipment. This included a climbing wall, numerous mats, foam barrels and stairs. The owner let him take everything, he said, including a wooden play kitchen set, for about \$1,500.



Max, who became an expert at climbing bookshelves at age 4, expends some energy on a foam barrel. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

“I saved thousands,” said Mr. Volchok, adding that he had previously used closeout sales to buy items for his own computer business.

Melissa Morgenlander said she had spent many hours thinking about her son’s sensory needs and determined less was more, especially in the bedroom, where he needs help falling and staying asleep. Diagnosed with autism, ADHD and obsessive compulsive disorder, Quentin, 12, had shared a room with his twin sister, Fiona, until age 8, when the family decided to create two small bedrooms so that each sibling could decorate their room to suit their needs. For Quentin, this meant keeping his room a soothing, light green color with no wall hangings. The windows are dressed with blackout curtains and there’s a small bookshelf, dresser and a bed. In contrast, Fiona has lots of photos, posters and lights hanging on her wall.

Quentin’s room certainly looks rather bland, according to Ms. Morgenlander, who lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn. But the tweaks were necessary because her son found many ordinary household items in his room too stimulating. “It’s almost like a sensory deprivation room,” she joked.

The costs connected to raising a child with special needs include fees for special schools, doctors, medication and therapies. A study published in 2014 in the journal *Pediatrics* said the parents of a child with autism paid about \$17,000 more per year for health and non-health-related costs than parents with a neurologically typical child.

Some retailers now offer more affordable options. Target introduced a line of sensory-friendly furniture for children last April, with each piece costing under \$110.

Moiz Rauf’s family business, SensoryMoon, based in Paramus, N.J., began offering bubble lamps online for under \$150 in 2015. He originally thought the lamp, an acrylic water tube with color-changing LED lights and floating fake tropical fish, would sell as a decorative, novelty item. But when most of the orders and client reviews came from special-needs families, he realized he had stumbled into a niche market.

“It blew us away to learn about how our lamp could help kids with sensory issues,” Mr. Moiz said, who has since added other sensory-related products, like weighted blankets, for sale on the website.

Garner Oh hands his son, Kas, who has cerebral palsy, gym rings. Mr. Oh, who is an architect, decided to build a sturdier indoor playground set in their Gramercy Park home after not finding what he wanted online. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

Some families have designed their own sensory-friendly items. Tamara Petrovic, who happens to be a product designer at 0 to 1, a design firm that she runs with her architect husband Garner Oh, said she looked for an eco-friendly soft wall and floor covering because her son, Kas, 10, has cerebral palsy. The couple first outfitted their two-bedroom Gramercy apartment with foam-rubber mats, but they found it hard to keep clean. Ms. Petrovic was also concerned about using regular floor rugs because she thought loose fibers could trigger Kas's tactile sensitivities and cause muscle spasms.

Unable to find exactly what they wanted, the couple designed their own wall and floor padding with cork, felt and canvas. In place of an ordinary kitchen table, they designed a low-lying cork table with foam cushions that could be rearranged into various seating configurations. A sturdy indoor slide set that would fit in their living room was difficult to find, so Mr. Oh designed one and built it with the help of a friend and family member.

Now that Kas is outgrowing the slide, the couple plan to donate it to his former school. Ms. Petrovic said she might put up a hammock and build something new so Kas could continue to develop his physical strength.

"There are a lot of things you can buy online, but I think there's a huge gap in simply designed, eco- and budget-friendly items," for special needs children, she said.

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