



Handy Handouts®

Free, educational handouts for teachers and parents*

Number 437



Creating an Autism-Sensitive Environment at Home

by Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

Receiving a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for your child affects every member of the family living in the home. Parents must direct more focus on helping the child with ASD foster daily living and communication skills and shift their resources of time and money towards providing treatment and interventions (sometimes to the exclusion of other priorities). The needs of a child with ASD can complicate familial relationships, especially with other siblings living in the home. The Autism Society of America suggests parents can help their entire family by

- Teaching their other children (and immediate family members outside the home) about the challenges and complications associated with autism.
- Helping siblings understand and cope with everyday challenges and adaptations they may face in the home environment involving their sibling with autism.



Karen Wang, mother of a son with autism and contributing author to the anthology **My Baby Rides the Short Bus: The Unabashedly Human Experience of Raising Kids with Disabilities**, includes suggestions for creating an autism-sensitive home and lifestyle for the family. In her article, *"Autistic Home Decorating: Make Your Home Autism Friendly"*, she offers suggestions in creating a livable environment when stimming, special interests, and sensory integration become a huge part of your family life. In creating an autism-sensitive environment in your home, Ms. Wang advises parents to establish a:

Sensory Environment

- Provide a place where opportunities for movement, stimulation, and lack of stimulation are okay.
- Install soft, natural lighting (better for mood and attention than artificial lighting).
- Place pillows on soft furniture and quilts on walls to absorb and soften sounds.
- Paint walls with colors associated with mood. For example, some shades of blue may help with creativity and calmness. Have another area filled with bright colors and activities that the entire family enjoys (television and stereo), and another area with blank walls, soft colors, soft textures, and quiet activities such as books or puzzles.
- Make space for vestibular (balance), and proprioceptive (body awareness and position) exercises. Any type of movement stimulates the vestibular receptors, but spinning, swinging, and hanging upside down provide the most intense, longest-lasting input. Proprioceptive input (sensations from joints, muscles, and connective tissues that lead to body awareness) include lifting, pushing, and pulling heavy objects, including one's own weight. Consult your child's Occupational Therapist for vestibular and proprioceptive activities appropriate for your child's individual needs.

Work Space

- Devote a small area to your child's pursuit of special interests and goals. In several of her books, including *"Thinking in Pictures"* and *"The Way I See It,"* author Temple Grandin (an adult with autism, noted author and lecturer) advises parents to use these "special interests" areas to steer individuals with autism toward academic or career goals.

Space For Life Skills

Research studies performed in the USA, UK, Ireland, and Sweden concluded that more than 95% of individuals with autism are unable to live independently as adults – including those with high IQs that received intensive early intervention. Therefore, it is imperative that lessons in life skills begin in early childhood **and continue** into adulthood.

Label and re-arrange cupboards, shelving, and closets to make everything accessible as your child learns to communicate his/her needs. Teach age-appropriate daily living tasks: clean up after him/herself, wash dishes and laundry, keep track of his/her own schedule, etc.

- Include your child in as many age-appropriate family and community-based activities as possible. Break down tasks into simple steps so your child can learn them over time. Use this time to teach and practice social skills as well.

Space For Eating

- Block out as much outside stimulation as possible in the dining area so your child can focus on chewing and swallowing food.
- Use the dining area only for eating. You don't want your child associating this area with other activities.
- Keep conversation light and cheerful during meals. Again, have family activities in a different room after the meal so your child has something to look forward to after he/she finishes eating.

Space For Rest

Insomnia and night-waking are hot topics in the autism community. You may want to:

- Use blackout curtains.
- Paint the bedroom a dark color.
- Use a weighted blanket.
- Use a white noise machine.
- Buy a mattress that doesn't bounce and jiggle (latex or memory foam), and use a box spring with no bed frame.
- Use body pillows to encourage tummy or side sleeping, which can help alleviate nighttime indigestion or certain types of breathing problems.
- Use the bedroom only for sleep to help your child associate this room with rest.
- Limit the use of electric lights after sunset.
- Take a walk outdoors at dusk to boost natural melatonin levels in the body.



Space to Honor Special Interests, Talents, and Achievements

- Honor **all** your children's interests by encouraging lively discussions one-on-one or during family time to help foster language development (especially for the special needs child).
- Display photos, drawings, school work, and other recognitions of **all** of your children on magnet boards and photo boards throughout the house in order not to overlook *anyone's* achievements. Sometimes, we unknowingly become so focused on the special needs child, we may fail to recognize our other children are working just as hard at their interests, achievements, and talents as their special needs sibling.

Resources

<http://www.educationandbehavior.com/classroom-for-students-with-autism/>

<http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/04/10/autistic-home-decorating-make-your-home-autism-friendly/>

<http://nationalautismnetwork.com/blog/1/entry-211-creating-a-sensory-friendly-home-environment-for-children-on-the-autism-spectrum/>

More FREE Handy Handouts®, go to www.handyhandouts.com

Helpful Products

The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when working with children who have special needs. Visit www.superduperinc.com and type in the **item name or number in our search engine**. If you're viewing this Handy Handout on a computer, click the links below to see the product descriptions.

MagneTalk Turns & Topics

[Item #GB-46](#)

Webber Problem Solving Photo Lotto

[Item #BGO-176](#)

Big Vocabulary Nouns Photo Cards

[Item #BIG-753](#)

Webber Photo Cards Function Pair-Ups

[Item #WFC-62](#)