

Creating Supportive School Environments

Every student deserves a learning space that supports their comfort, confidence, and participation. This guide shares practical strategies for teachers and support staff to create classrooms that are accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all learners.

Why the environment is important

- The classroom environment has a big impact on how students focus, participate, and manage their day.
- Small changes in layout, lighting, organisation, and routines can make a big difference, especially for students who experience challenges with attention, mobility, communication, sensory regulation, or anxiety.
- Occupational Therapists (OTs) work with schools and families to shape environments that support every learner's strengths and needs.

How the classroom setup can help

Layout + space

- Keep pathways clear so students can move around safely and independently.
- Provide enough space between desks to accommodate wheelchairs, mobility aids, or flexible seating.
- Create defined areas for different activities (quiet work, group work, sensory breaks).
- Use rugs, mats, or furniture to visually separate noisy and calm zones.
- Ensure classroom materials and displays are accessible from different heights or positions.
- Include accessible storage options for students who use wheelchairs or adaptive equipment.
- Check that evacuation routes and safety procedures are accessible to all students, including those with mobility or sensory needs.



Lighting + sensory comfort

- Use lighting with adjustable brightness where possible. Harsh or flickering light can cause discomfort or distraction.
- Make the most of natural light and reduce glare from windows or whiteboards.
- Provide access to quiet spaces or “chill-out corners” for students who need sensory breaks.
- Use soft furnishings such as curtains or bulletin boards to absorb noise in echoing rooms.
- Offer noise-reducing headphones or ear defenders for students who are sensitive to sound.
- Use neutral or calming colours on walls to reduce visual overstimulation.
- Avoid strong scents or cleaning products that could cause sensory discomfort.

Routines + transitions

- Provide clear, predictable routines throughout the day.
- Use visual or verbal cues before transitions (for example, “In 5 minutes we’ll pack up for lunch”).
- Allow extra time and support for students who find changes difficult.
- Build in movement breaks between seated activities.
- Prepare students for changes in routine (such as excursions, relief teachers, or timetable changes).
- Use consistent language and cues across staff to help students feel secure and supported.
- Offer choices or control where possible to reduce anxiety and increase engagement.

Seating + positioning

- Offer different seating options to suit student needs (chairs with arms, wobble cushions, standing desks, or stools).
- Check that desks and chairs are at the correct height to support posture and comfort.
- Allow students to change position when needed to stay engaged.
- Keep resources like pencil grips or slanted boards available for students who need them.
- Provide adaptive or specialised equipment (for example, adjustable tables or supportive seating systems) for students with physical disabilities.
- Position students with hearing or vision impairments closer to the teacher or visual aids to improve access.
- Use weighted lap pads, footrests, or fidget tools to support focus and body awareness.

Visual supports + organisation

- Use visual schedules, checklists, and labelled zones to support understanding and routine.
- Keep frequently used items (books, pencils, technology) in consistent, easy-to-reach places.
- Colour-code storage areas or subjects to help with organisation.
- Display only essential information on walls – too many visuals can be overwhelming.
- Include symbols, photos, or simplified text on displays to support understanding for students with communication or literacy challenges.
- Use digital or talking timers to support transitions and time awareness.
- Provide access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices and ensure they are easy to reach, use, and charge.

Working with an OT

An Occupational Therapist can help your school:

- Review classroom setups to improve accessibility and engagement.
- Suggest simple, low-cost adjustments for sensory comfort and participation.
- Recommend equipment or seating options to support student posture and focus.
- Provide professional development sessions for staff.
- Work collaboratively with teachers, aides, and families to ensure strategies are consistent across settings.
- Support implementation of sensory circuits or environmental modifications for specific student needs.

When to ask for support

Consider consulting an OT if a student:

- Has difficulty sitting still or maintaining attention.
- Avoids certain environments (like the playground, art room, or assembly hall).
- Becomes easily overwhelmed by noise, light, or movement.
- Struggles with fine motor tasks or self-care routines.
- Finds it hard to follow visual or verbal instructions.
- Needs help accessing technology, communication devices, or adapted learning tools.
- Has trouble staying regulated throughout the day due to sensory overload or fatigue.
- Requires environmental adjustments to engage in school activities safely and confidently.

Back to Basics Health Group OTs can observe, advise, and work alongside educators to make the learning environment more supportive and inclusive.

For more information

- Visit: BackToBasicsHealthGroup.com.au
- Call: (03) 9763 7613