School Success Kit for Kids With Sensory Processing Issues

Tools and strategies to help kids stay comfortable and focused

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Going back to school is an exciting time, but for kids with sensory processing issues it can be overwhelming. Here are a few tips and strategies to help your child (and you!) feel calm, comfortable and confident this year.

**Stress-Free Clothing:** When it comes to clothes, use the 3 S rule: softer, simpler, and seamless. Avoiding irritants like tags or seams will make mornings easier. Likewise, clothes that are easy to coordinate and put on will help kids be more independent when it comes to getting dressed. When shopping, stick to seamless underwear and socks, and look for clothes with few buttons or zippers.

**Avoid the New:** For kids with sensory issues, the first day of school is not the right time to try those brand-new outfits. One way to ward against morning meltdowns is to go with comfortable, familiar clothes you know they like wearing. If he really (really) needs to wear new shoes, be sure he has time to break them in. Likewise, if kids have to wear a uniform, give them time to get used to it, and if they find it uncomfortable, allow them to layer soft, familiar t-shirts or leggings underneath.

**Hearing Protection:** School buses, lunchrooms, halls, and even classrooms can range from buzzing to downright cacophonous, so making sure kids have the tools to quiet the noise can mean the difference between a great day and a total meltdown. There’s a wide range available, from sound-cancelling headphones to foam earplugs. And hearing protection doesn’t need to announce itself. If kids are feeling self-conscious, try using flesh-tone or clear plastic earplugs. If you’re using disposable earplugs, remember to change them frequently to prevent ear infections.
**Eye Protection:** No one likes bad lighting, but for kids with sensory processing issues, sitting under flickering fluorescents can be overwhelming and painful. If your child is sensitive to light equip her with a comfortable (and pre-tested! See tip #1.) pair of lightly-tinted sunglasses to help block the glare.

**Sensory Kits:** To help kids get through the school day’s inevitable challenges, **arm them with a sensory kit** full of things that help them stay calm. What’s in the kit will be different depending on the child’s individual needs but some great things to add include: chewing gum, a comforting tactile object they can play with without disrupting the class such as a stress ball or silly putty, snacks to keep blood sugar up, and a weighted lap pad.

**Signs and Signals:** Give teachers a heads-up about your child’s sensory needs, so they’ll know what to look for and how to support him during class. Kids can also arrange to have a **secret signal with teachers** they can use if they need a break. Putting him in charge of deciding when he needs a break will prevent meltdowns and teach him useful self-advocacy skills.

**Give Everything a Test Drive:** Whether it’s a new kind of ear protection or the most comfortable bookbag, be sure to **test drive all your new tools ahead of time.** Give kids time to try out new school supplies and see what feels good and works best. That way, they’ll be comfortable and ready by the time the bus pulls up for the first day of school.

**Routines:** Kids with sensory issues do best when they know what to expect. Establishing **consistent routines around school**—getting up, breakfast, bus or car ride, afterschool routine—will help them feel more comfortable and less overwhelmed. You can also request that teachers or officials give you a heads up if school schedules are changing so you can help your child adjust accordingly.

**Accommodations:** Kids with sensory issues may need accommodations of a different kind than schools are used to granting. For example, being allowed to chew gum, wear dark glasses, or use earplugs during class. You can also ask to be warned of potentially jarring school events, such as fire drills or surprise pep rallies, so you’ll have time to make sure your child is prepared. **Be sure to include these accommodations in his IEP.** That way if any confusion arises, you’ll have the documentation you need to advocate for your child.