Adapting Early Childhood Settings to Support Sensory Experiences (Tip Sheet)

This Tip Sheet will explore different ways to consider and modify the sensory experience within an early childhood setting.

Sensory tools, such as fidget tools and noise cancelling headphones can be fantastic, but there may be some other and better ways to modify the experience to support participation.

Sensory Processing is **"the process of organising the sensation that comes into our bodies through our senses."** Sensory processing is different for everyone, in different settings, at different times.

The same child might be sensitive to noises during group time, but not during outside play. Or enjoy messy play one day, but not the next. The sensory experience will be different for all children. They may seek or avoid sensory activities, or you might notice other sensory differences such as reduced ability to concentrate when it is noisy.

When looking to modify the sensory experience to support participation, there are some different variables to consider:

Environment Considerations:
- How does the physical environment reduce or enhance sensory information to support participation?
- What can be changed?

Planning Considerations:
- What changes will support the sensory and regulation needs of the whole class?
- When are the trickiest times in the day for most children?
- What is the purpose of the activity, and how could it be modified to suit a variety of sensory preferences?

Predictability Considerations:
- What are the unchangeable sensory elements? (e.g. toilet location, fire alarms.)
- What might help create some predictability around these elements?

Individualising Considerations:
- What is a reasonable goal or expectation for the child within the activity?
- After adjusting the other variables, does the child still need additional individualised supports?

Remember! Participation may look different for everyone...

Planning: Changes to routines & activities.

Examples:
- Reduce unclear periods of waiting or lining up.
- Access to inside/outside activities.
- Include whole group movement breaks within or prior to group time.
- Have a variety of materials and options to access different activities such as paint brushes or finger painting.

Predictability: Reduce anxiety.

Examples:
- Turn the sound or lights down.
- Noise dampening furniture or fixtures.
- Move "noisy" play areas away from "quiet" play areas.
- Minimise visual clutter.

Participation

Examples:
- Use visual schedules.
- Use countdown or warnings.
- Use a story or script to talk about what to expect.

Environmental Changes: Modifying spaces.

Individualising: Child-specific modifications.

Examples that a child may choose:
- Child is tasked with the job of making the noise, like ringing the bell.
- Child sits away from the group at mat time.
- Child accesses a quiet corner during noisy routines.
- Child wears glasses or noise reducing headphones.