Tips for creating autism-friendly school environments

Imagine wearing a hearing aid on its highest setting and being unable to make any adjustment. You can hear the speech of the person next to you but at the same volume, you hear birdsong through an open window, the air conditioning whirring above and the traffic droning outside. The difference in the layers of sound cannot be filtered. Combine this with some of your senses being crossed or scrambled, rather like a poor telephone connection, and you start to appreciate how some autistic people encounter the world.

Within our living spaces, all of us are bombarded with an array of stimulating sensory inputs - sound, smell, touch, taste, movement - and a never-ending deluge of visual information. Many people are able to filter these sensory inputs, but some autistic people encounter the world differently. Sensory differences can cause hyper-sensitivity (sense too much) or hypo-sensitivity (sense too little), or combinations of both. The environment becomes a confusing place when attempting to process “too much information”. Unexpected changes can cause anxieties and the level of stimuli can cause sensory overload and a meltdown, which some may misinterpret as a ‘tantrum’.

An optimised learning environment is vital for every child, particularly for autistic children who may experience sensory differences as outlined above. The right architecture and design can offer autistic children a learning environment in which they can thrive.

Over the past five years, I have been conducting research into how to teach the design of autism-friendly environments to future designers, with eight case
study schools and colleges. The research has identified a number of ways schools can adjust spaces to support autistic children and young people to learn more effectively in learning environments.

How schools can help

The recommendations take into account the importance of preparation before an activity for autistic children, giving them more time to process information. This gives children time to understand what is happening next, thereby reducing anxieties, providing reassurance and enhancing their ability to learn.

1. Provide pause places

Make the most of any open alcoves or recesses. Clear any small spaces “under the stairs” or in an outside area, providing an opportunity to stand back, process information and recalibrate. It could mean removing a door from a shallow cupboard or locating a “pop up” tent. This is particularly important when moving from one building to another – when the difference between environments is significant.

2. Multiple entrances help

A main entrance may be too busy, so provide a quieter, alternative side entrance. Schools can also help by establishing a slow longer route from the playground to classrooms, as well as a quick short route – again giving both choice and time to process information.

Equally, softening the boundary from an internal to an external space can also help. An external canopy, for example, can create an ideal outdoor learning space to help with anxieties surrounding sudden sensory change.

3. Windows can offer reassurance

Some autistic children have anxiety and may want to return to a space they have just occupied for reassurance. Providing strategically placed openings may mean children do not need to go back to this space for reassurance, they can look back from a short distance. This allows more time for learning in the classroom.
4. Join the dots

Schools should also look at offering activities that emulate real life tasks, as this will help autistic children to see patterns and connections with things. A simple mock up shop, for example, both inside the classroom and outside in the playground, could help children learn how to generalise the skill of exchanging payment for goods, across different environments.

A richer learning experience

“Taster spaces” are also a great idea as these can offer children areas to participate in a pre-activity, helping them explore part of a bigger activity in a smaller way. This can help children to build up to the final activity – such as playing a percussion wall before playing an instrument, or playing with a water channel before immersion in a pool.

As these ideas show, the need to **encourage a richer learning experience in a regulated environment** is paramount for autistic children and young people. An important consideration is that no two autistic people experience their environments in the same way. There is no one approach or solution to sensory differences but small, individually-led adjustments (like those outlined above) can make a real difference and really help to improve the learning and quality of life of autistic children and their families.

Further information

This is an amended version of an article that previously appeared in The Conversation: