



Sensory & Self-Regulation Support

What is sensory processing and self-regulation?

Sensory processing is how the brain notices, organizes, and responds to information from our senses so we can function in daily life.¹ Most people think of five senses: seeing, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, and OTs also consider a few additional sensory systems:

- *Vestibular (movement and balance)*: Helps with balance, posture, and coordinated movement (e.g., balancing on one foot, moving safely on stairs, participating in PE).
- *Proprioception (body awareness)*: Helps us know where our body is in space and how much force to use (e.g., writing without watching your hand, using scissors, catching a ball).
- *Interoception (body signals)*: Helps us notice signals from inside the body (e.g., hunger, pain, needing the bathroom) and can support identifying emotions like anxiety or anger.

Self-regulation is the ability to manage energy level, emotions, and attention to meet the demands of the moment (e.g., listening, waiting, transitioning, or coping with frustration).

Sensory needs often overlap with attention and learning differences, and can impact everyday school tasks.

Impact on student participation

Students may:^{1,2,3}

- be distracted or distressed by noise, crowds, or visual clutter
- seek movement (standing, rocking, crashing) or avoid movement
- have difficulty staying seated, waiting, or transitioning between activities
- use too much/too little force (pressing hard when writing, breaking pencil tips, bumping into others)
- struggle with coordination in PE or at recess
- have trouble noticing body needs (hunger, bathroom, stress signals)

How school-based occupational therapy can help

School-based OT supports participation in school routines and learning by identifying what helps a student feel “ready to learn” and successful in the classroom.

OT may:^{1,2,3}

- help students learn about their sensory preferences and practice strategies to stay regulated
- consider seating and movement needs (for example, some students benefit from safe movement options to support focus)
- recommend and teach the use of sensory tools (e.g., noise-reducing headphones, fidgets, wiggle seats) with clear guidelines for when/how to use them
- adjust the environment to reduce barriers (e.g., less visually busy worksheets, strategic seating, a plan for assemblies)
- support self-advocacy (e.g., requesting a break, choosing a helpful tool, communicating needs respectfully)

Contact

If you're interested in learning if OT services might be helpful for your child at AIM, please contact supportservices@aimpa.org.

Sources

1. Gibbs V. *Occupational Therapy and Self-Regulation*. Webinar. American Occupational Therapy Association; 2021. Accessed February 4, 2026. <https://learn.exceptionalchildren.org/products/occupational-therapy-and-self-regulation-brought-to-you-by-cec-and-aota>
2. Jureka L, Duchier A, Gauld C, et al. Sensory processing in individuals with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder compared with control populations: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. Published online 2025. Accessed February 4, 2026. <https://sensoryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Jurek-et-al-2025.pdf>
3. Decarli G, Franchin L, Vitali F. Motor skills and capacities in developmental dyslexia: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Acta Psychol (Amst)*. 2024;246:104269. doi:10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104269