

# Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 125

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# Home Design for Hyper and Hyposensitivities

By Martha OSCHWALD

## TIPS AND IDEAS FOR DESIGNING A COMFORTABLE HOME FOR CHILDREN WITH SENSORY PROCESSING CHALLENGES.

**A**utistic children may experience hypo- or hypersensitivities which profoundly impact their sensory perception. As a result, they may interact with their physical environment in distinctly different ways than neurotypical children. It's also fair to say that no two autistic kids are alike. However, designing with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) sensitivities in mind may create a more calming, helpful, and synergistic space.

### Defining needs

The first part of designing your home is understanding what a particular room is meant to do.

You, as the parent, will already know the answer to this question. For example, a child's bedroom should be relaxing for sleep and solace. Bedrooms with a desk or study area should also encourage studying and concentration. Having a rough idea of the needs a room should satisfy goes a long way toward good design.

### Getting feedback

The next step of the process involves getting your child's feedback. Asking questions about his/her sensory experience may shed light on his/her specific needs. As Karen Kabaki-Sisto, M.S. CCC-SLP points out: "Using more descriptive language helps to accurately identify the sensory issues your child is having." Get your children to be as specific as possible about what they like or don't like about a sound, feeling, or other sensory experience.

## Understanding hypersensitivity vs. hyposensitivity

The next stage involves discerning between hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity. Quite simply, “hyper-” refers to heightened sensitivity while “hypo-” refers to a diminished level. It’s also worth mentioning that ASD children experience hyper or hyposensitivity in widely different ways. From a design perspective, that means their individual needs in a physical space also vary greatly.

Here are some common responses autistic children may have with hyper- or hyposensitivity. For more information, please refer to *Sensory Hyper- and Hyposensitivity in Autism*, the second reference for this article.

### Responses to hypersensitivity

The child may have a:

- dislike of bright lights
- dislike of fluorescent lights
- fear of loud noises
- particular sensitivity to smell
- dislike of being touched
- aversion to certain materials or textures

### Responses to hyposensitivity

The child may have:

- difficulty with spatial recognition due to limited visual perception
- an attraction to bright lights and reflections
- an interest in touching objects in an unfamiliar place
- an attraction to loud sounds or vibrations
- a limited feeling of hot/cold temperatures
- a high pain threshold
- a tendency to put objects in their mouth
- an attraction to pressure, tight clothing, and heavy objects
- a limited bodily perception in space
- tendency to lean against furniture and walls

In both cases, autistic children with hyper or hyposensitivities have unique needs in different environments.

## Integrative design by sensitivity type

The good news is that homes can be designed to better accommodate autistic children and their needs with regards to their sensory perception. Here are a few ideas to consider for a safe and customized home:

### Design for hypersensitivity

- use a calming color palette
- include dimmed lighting
- avoid fluorescent lighting
- create sound blocks or barriers
  - consider sound-proofing one or more rooms in your home
  - choose a quieter area of the home for your child’s bedroom
  - use noise-cancelling headphones or ear plugs when needed
  - use carpet, textiles or other materials used for sound absorption



- eliminate odors
  - choose a bedroom far away from strong smells (kitchen, bathroom, etc.)
  - ventilate the room regularly by opening windows, turning on fans, etc.
  - prohibit scented products like candles, lotions, etc. in your child’s room
- use textures or materials approved by your child
  - have your child help pick out pillows, blankets, etc. based on how he/she feels
- include a space where your child can sit comfortably by him/herself (i.e. a chair or nook designed for a single person)
- create a distraction-free study area (high walls, no visual or tactile stimuli)

In short, hypersensitive autistic children benefit from a less-is-more approach. Try to imagine a room which functions as a retreat from daily life and all its sensory overload. The use of subtle light, colors, and sound set the tone for a calm and collected ambience.

## Design for hyposensitivity

- avoid changing the room layout regularly for easier spatial recognition
- avoid or limit bright lights and mirrors to prevent distraction
  - use pelmet lighting or other more subtle lighting
  - keep mirrors hidden or away from study areas
- prevent clutter to avoid injury
- remove small objects which could be inadvertently swallowed
- use an externally controlled thermostat such as a non-programmable or Wi-Fi version to avoid accidental burns or fire hazards
- prohibit candles in his/her room
- use weighted blankets for your child’s comfort
- use textures or materials that your child approves of





- have your child help pick out pillows, blankets, etc. based on how he/she feels
  - add rainmakers, putty, or other safe sensory aids for comfort
- avoid hard edges or sharp surfaces
- consider babyproofing solutions to soften edges and limit potential hazards
- ensure walls are strong enough to bear the weight of your child
  - avoid partitions or other flimsy building materials
- consider using night lights, railings, or other space defining aids to delineate spaces
- use color blocking to separate areas (i.e. study area, closet, etc.)

When it comes to hyposensitive children, safety and structure are key. The idea here is to give them more visual and physical cues to meet them halfway. Be sure to incorporate design that accommodates your child's individual hyposensitivities.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Having a child with autism means seeing the world through a different set of eyes. Hyper- or hyposensitivities add to the complexities of living with autism and should be duly considered when creating a space. Remember to get your child's input and you'll be well on your way to a happier, healthier home.

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## THE NUMERIC LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

"My son is so happy with himself, you can see the joy!"

"She advanced from a D- to 98% in math!"

"He advanced from 3.4 to 5.8 score in reading!"

"His teacher said he has never seen a student advance so quickly, especially in math!"

"Adam's handwriting improved from the worst in his class to the best in his class!"

"His reading ability increased from a first grade level to a fifth grade, 3rd month level!"

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