Sensory Inclusive Practices & Performances

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What Does "Sensory Inclusive" Mean?

"**Sensory-inclusive**" refers to environments, programs, or services thoughtfully designed to accommodate and support individuals with sensory sensitivities, including those with autism, PTSD, ADHD, or sensory processing disorders. These settings recognize that some people may feel overwhelmed by factors like loud noises, bright lights, or crowded spaces.

To create a welcoming experience, sensory-inclusive environments often make adjustments such as dimming lights, reducing noise levels, or offering tools like noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, or designated quiet areas. The goal is to ensure comfort, enable full participation, and prevent sensory overload. This approach is increasingly adopted in museums, schools, theaters, sports arenas, and theme parks, fostering inclusivity and accessibility.

What Are Sensory Sensitivities?

Sensory sensitivities encompass conditions such as sensory processing disorder (SPD), sensory processing sensitivity (SPS), and environmental sensitivity (ES). Individuals with sensory sensitivities often perceive and process stimuli more intensely or less intensely than those without these sensitivities.

These sensitivities can affect people of all ages—from infants and young children to older adults—and may be present from early childhood or develop over time. Common challenges for individuals with sensory sensitivities include difficulties with stimuli such as:

They may also feel anxious or overwhelmed. In some instances, they may need to take a break from highly stimulating or unfamiliar environments.
Credit: https://www.sensoryinclusive.org/sensory-inclusivity

What Are Sensory Inclusive Performances?

A "sensory-inclusive" performance is a theater production thoughtfully adapted to accommodate individuals with sensory needs. These performances are designed to welcome all audience members—both with and without disabilities—into a supportive, judgment-free environment, achieved through physical and cultural adjustments that foster inclusivity and comfort for everyone.

Relevance

A typical performance can often feel too loud, too bright, or too overwhelming for individuals with autism, sensory processing disorders, or other intellectual or developmental disabilities. However, it's important to emphasize that sensory-inclusive performances are not segregated events for those with sensory sensitivities. Instead, they are thoughtfully designed to be inclusive, creating a shared experience for all audience members, regardless of their abilities.

For many families, the isolation they feel stems from communities being unaware of their unique needs or differences—especially since many disabilities are invisible. Sadly, this often results in families feeling unwelcome or unable to attend traditional theater performances. This is not because of intentional exclusion but because their experiences in other settings have taught them otherwise.

Sensory-inclusive performances aim to change this narrative. They prioritize actions over words, creating welcoming environments where everyone feels they belong. This mission lies at the very heart of sensory-inclusive performances, fostering inclusivity and ensuring access for everyone in our communities.

Potential Audiences

If we believe the arts should be accessible to all people, what does that really look like? First, let's identify who these audiences might be.

Autism

A large part of this population will be those individuals who have an Autism diagnosis. In the United States, 1 in 34 school-age children have an autism diagnosis – that a little over 2 million children. In the first US study of autism in adults, the CDC estimates that 2.2% of American adults have an autism spectrum condition (approximately 1 in 45) or another 2.5 million adults.

Sensory Processing Disorder

Approximately 1 in 20 adults in the US have a *sensory processing disorder* without any other physical or intellectual disability. That's approximately 16.5 million people. Sensory Processing Disorder is a condition where the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information that comes in through the senses.

People with SPD might be overly sensitive to things like sounds, lights, textures, or smells, or they might not respond enough to sensory input. For example, a person might find normal background noise unbearably loud or might not notice sensations that others do, like feeling cold or hot. It can affect daily activities, making it hard to focus, stay calm, or feel comfortable in certain environments. Some people with SPD might avoid sensory experiences, while others may seek out intense sensory input to feel balanced.

ADD - ADHD

Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are terms we hear quite often. And some of us use them as an excuse when we lose

focus or procrastinate on whatever we need to get done. But, these are real and serious concerns that impact the lives of millions of people. About 5.4 children and as many as 9 million adults in the U.S. have this diagnosis.

Development & Intellectual Disabilities

And then there is the broad classification of developmental or intellectual disability…and that's another 12 million Americans.

PTSD/PTSS

PTSD or PTSS are terms we often associate with veterans. But, this diagnosis impacts a much larger population. Post Traumatic Stress is a mental health condition that may occur in individuals who have *experienced* or *witnessed* a traumatic event. This can include natural disasters, serious accidents, war, poverty, disease, sexual assault, or serious injury. This affects 1 in 11 persons or 11 million people.

Dementia & Alzheimer's

Early on-set Dementia, Dementia, or Alzheimer's Disease can cause a person to experience memory loss and confusion which can make them fearful and unsettled. Statistics reveal that 1 in 10 people over the age of 65 experience a form of dementia…that's 5.8 million Americans.

Mental Health

Mental health concerns affect millions of people in the U.S. each year. The total number of individuals impacted by mental health crises each year is approximately 72 million Americans. For many of them, social reintegration is

difficult and finding welcoming opportunities to engage in their community can be challenging.

Characteristics of Sensory Inclusive Performances

Sensory Inclusive Performances are designed or slightly modified to address the sensory sensitivities that are often found in children, adolescents, and adults who have a variety of diagnoses. There's so much more to this to consider if we are going to *respect the individuals* we seek to serve. It is disrespectful to this population to simply reduce a sensory inclusive performance to *"lowering the sound and raising the lights."*

Let's talk about modifications. There are differences in how certain types of shows are modified. Theatrical productions, plays, Broadway shows, music and dance concerts can all be slightly modified to make them more accessible. These modifications are pretty straightforward:

- Adjusting sound and light levels including those that shine into the audience.
- Reducing and preparing audiences for surprises, jarring sounds, and loud noises through the use of social narratives.
- House lights are dimmed but not blacked out.
- Creating resources for each production that prepare the audience for a day at the theatre.
- Offering break areas or sensory rooms to those who may need to leave their seats during the performance.

But what about variety shows or those that are *more interactive*? These require a bit more thinking. Once the performance breaks the fourth wall and comes into the audience, everything changes. We are now asking our audience not

just to watch what is happening on the stage. We are *bringing them into the show*…and often asking them to participate. This can be done very effectively and with great success…but it takes some intentional, thoughtful consideration.

One way to examine this approach is to consider your performance through the lens of our senses. The first five senses we know, so that's where we will begin.

Sight

Bright lights, whether on stage or in the venue, can be challenging for individuals with sensory sensitivities. This may explain why some patrons wear sunglasses indoors or prefer to keep their hats on. Creating a more inclusive experience might involve relaxing dress codes and providing dimly lit areas for those who need them.

For example, house lights could be set to 75% brightness rather than 100% when patrons enter the theater. Performers should also consider how their lighting design impacts the audience, especially when bright or flashing lights are a key part of the show, to ensure a more comfortable and enjoyable experience for everyone.

Sound

Individuals with sensory sensitivities may respond differently to sounds. Some might not react when spoken to, while others could be startled or even irritated by soft noises. Loud, unexpected sounds can be particularly distressing, potentially leading to panic or a meltdown.

A helpful strategy is providing a social narrative in advance to prepare individuals for what to expect during the show. You may notice some patrons

wearing headphones to reduce or soften noise; offering these as an option is a thoughtful and welcoming gesture.

If you typically play music as patrons enter the house, consider lowering the volume to help them acclimate to the space. Performers should also be mindful of the music they use in the show and the volume at which it's played to ensure a comfortable experience for all.

Touch

Individuals with sensory sensitivities are often highly attuned to touch and textures, which can make crowded spaces overwhelming and increase anxiety. Allowing patrons to enter the theater up to an hour before the show begins can provide a calmer, less stressful environment. Having a designated quiet room or area readily accessible is another effective way to help reduce anxiety.

For performers, it's important to plan ahead and allow ample time for setup to ensure the doors can open earlier than usual. If your show includes audience participation, consider how you will thoughtfully guide someone to the stage and support them while they are on it, ensuring a comfortable and inclusive experience for everyone involved.

Smell

Individuals with sensory sensitivities can be highly attuned to smells in their environment. To create a more inclusive experience, consider turning off artificial air fresheners in public areas, including restrooms. On days with sensory-inclusive performances, kindly ask staff to refrain from wearing perfume or cologne.

For performers, it's important to ensure you are fresh and presentable without overusing fragrances, especially if you'll be inviting audience members to

join you on stage. A thoughtful approach to scents can make a big difference in creating a welcoming atmosphere for all.

Taste

While taste isn't typically a major concern, it's still worth considering. Many children and adolescents with autism adhere to special diets due to the taste and texture of certain foods. Allowing parents or caregivers to bring small bags of snacks and water into the theater, even if it's an exception to your usual policy, can be a thoughtful and welcoming gesture.

For performers, this is rarely a direct concern unless your show involves serving food. However, be prepared to see some patrons eating during the performance as part of their sensory needs or dietary routines. A little flexibility goes a long way in creating an inclusive experience for everyone.

There are two other senses we should be aware of, especially if you are a *performer whose show is interactive.*

Vestibular

The vestibular sense is often called the sense of balance. But, there is much more to it than that. It is an essential part of what informs our:

- Balance
- Postural control
- Muscle tone
- Spatial orientation
- Alertness
- Eye movements.

The vestibular system helps us understand our movement and position in space by processing information from head movement. This system allows us to maintain balance, move smoothly, and stay upright while sitting or standing.

When the vestibular system doesn't process this information effectively, there are three common responses. Some people are hypersensitive to movement, meaning their brains react strongly to even small amounts of motion. Others may be slower to respond, requiring more movement to process the information. This can lead people to either seek more movement or appear sluggish. It's important to give them time to process—avoid rushing!

Some individuals may experience a combination of these responses. Additionally, many with sensory sensitivities face challenges with balance, which can impact their ability to walk to the stage if you're inviting audience participation. Being mindful of these considerations helps create a more inclusive and comfortable experience for everyone.

Proprioception

Proprioception is the sense of body awareness, allowing us to subconsciously understand where our body is in space. It's like an internal map that helps us know how our limbs are moving and how much force to apply when lifting, squeezing, or pushing.

There are two main types of proprioceptive challenges. People with hypersensitivity, often called "sensory seekers," may struggle to remain still, are very active, and may lack awareness of potential danger—so it's important to be cautious near the edge of the stage. They often move their whole body to look at something, appear uncoordinated, and may easily bump into things. Children with this sensitivity can also face challenges with fine motor skills.

On the other hand, those with hyposensitivity tend to be more sedate and may prefer low-key activities, showing reluctance to participate and opting to observe instead. They may stand too close to others due to difficulty judging personal space and often struggle to navigate obstacles, sometimes bumping into people. Children who are hyposensitive may also have trouble planning how to move in and out of play equipment.

Many individuals with sensory sensitivities—especially those with autism—experience challenges with proprioception. For example, they may find it difficult to touch their nose with their eyes closed because they lack a clear sense of where their hand or nose is without sight. Transitioning between different surfaces, such as from carpet to a hard floor, can also be challenging. This is why being in a completely dark theater can cause anxiety, as they are not in control of their sensory input. Keeping house lights dimmed at 25% or more during a performance can help ease this discomfort.

For performers, consider adapting your show to a variety of venues—such as black box theaters, large open rooms, or traditional stages—to make the experience accessible to a wider range of individuals.

These are just a few ways we can enhance the experience for people with sensory sensitivities, ensuring they feel more comfortable and included in our venues.

What Is a Sensory Room?

Sensory rooms are specially designed to provide tailored sensory input that meets a child's individual needs. With the help of various therapeutic tools, children can learn to self-regulate their behaviors and improve their focus. When their sensory systems are balanced, they are better able to tune into their emotions, which promotes emotional awareness and helps develop essential social skills,

contributing to long-term well-being. Spending time in a sensory-safe space also alleviates anxiety about potential triggers. To get the most from a sensory room, it should be integrated into a child's daily routine, rather than being used as a reward or punishment.

Types of Sensory Rooms

Sensory rooms can be classified into three types: active, calming, or hybrid spaces. Since every person has unique needs, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. When planning a sensory room, it's important to consider factors like the users, their age, sensory preferences, and the available space. Our Sensory Room Planning Checklist can help you identify additional key considerations. Once you've assessed the space and established goals based on the child's needs, you'll be able to choose the most suitable type of sensory room.

Active rooms are ideal for sensory seekers—children who are under-stimulated and crave more sensory input. Activities that combine proprioceptive and vestibular stimulation, such as joint compression, swinging, climbing, and obstacle courses, help regulate the nervous system and improve body coordination. These activities support motor planning skills, body awareness, and promote a calm state that enhances focus and learning.

Calming rooms are designed for sensory avoiders—children who are easily overwhelmed by sensory input and need a quiet space to relax. Soothing music and fiber-optic lighting create a peaceful environment, especially for children with autism who may experience sensory processing challenges that affect their visual systems. Deep pressure, from weighted blankets or vests, provides calming sensory input, helping children organize their thoughts and focus. Gentle, rhythmic swinging on equipment like the Raindrop Swing is another effective way to induce relaxation.

Hybrid sensory rooms blend both active and calming elements, making them suitable for children with a range of sensory needs. Children may begin with active activities and then transition to the calming section to return to a state of focus, preparing to leave the sensory space.

Creating A Sensory Room

A sensory room for individuals with sensory sensitivities can help a child feel safe and explore their senses by providing a variety of experiences. Here are some things you can consider when creating a sensory room.

- **Organization:** Keep the room organized and uncluttered to avoid visual overstimulation. You can use storage bins to keep toys and other items in different areas.
- **Lighting:** Consider natural light or mood lighting. Fluorescent lights can be overstimulating, so you can try covering some with fabric to diffuse the light.
- **Sounds:** Provide soothing sounds or music, or tools for sound therapy. You can also consider if your child prefers loud, rhythmic beats or soft instrumental music.
- **Touch:** Include a variety of textures for touching and feeling, such as soft fabrics, fidget toys, beads, or sand. You can also add a weighted blanket or body sock for deep pressure.
- **Smell:** Consider if there is a scent that would help to bring a sense of calm, like lavender or vanilla. You can also use an aromatherapy diffuser.
- **Visuals:** Consider adding interactive walls, a night sky projector, or a disco strobe setup.

- **Activities:** Include stations and activities that can help stimulate or relax the child.
- **Comfort:** Provide comfortable places to sit or relax, such as bean bags or soft chairs.
- **Crash pad:** Create a crash pad by stuffing a large zip-up duvet cover with pillows, blankets, and large stuffed animals.

Here is a list of things you can include in a sensory room.

Acrylic Mirror: You can purchase acrylic mirrors from most home goods stores or they are easily found on Amazon at a very reasonable price. You can purchase two 24" X 48" mirrors to create a larger reflective surface. These acrylic mirrors create an optical illusion that sensory seekers find highly engaging and mesmerizing. Double-sided mounting tape works well as these don't weigh all that much.

Ball Pit: A ball pit is a play area filled with small, soft plastic balls that children (and sometimes adults) can jump into, swim through, or play around in. The balls are typically lightweight and designed to cushion the person inside, creating a fun and tactile experience. Ball pits are often found in indoor playgrounds, sensory rooms, and therapy centers.

For children, ball pits provide not only entertainment but also sensory stimulation, as they offer proprioceptive input (body awareness) and can help with motor skills development. In sensory settings, they can be particularly beneficial for children with autism or sensory processing disorders, offering a safe, calming space to explore their environment through tactile and movement experiences.

Bean Bag Chairs: Bean bag chairs are soft, cushion-like seating made of fabric or leather covers filled with materials such as foam beads, polystyrene pellets, or shredded memory foam. In sensory or therapeutic environments, bean bag chairs are especially useful because they provide deep pressure input, which can be calming for individuals with sensory sensitivities or autism. They can help promote relaxation, body awareness, and a sense of security by hugging the body as someone sits in them.

Bubble Tube: The bubble tube is a staple feature in any sensory room. They can be purchased on Amazon for around $120 by searching for "sensory moon bubble tubes" and selecting the size you would like to incorporate into your space. It is highly recommended that you attach it firmly to the wall for stability.

Crash Pad: A crash pad is a large, soft cushion or mat designed to absorb impact, allowing children or adults to safely jump, fall, or crash into it. It is typically filled with foam or other soft materials and is used in therapy rooms, sensory spaces, or play areas. Crash pads are particularly beneficial for children with sensory processing disorders or those who seek proprioceptive input (body awareness), as the physical impact helps them regulate their sensory systems.

In sensory settings, crash pads are often used for activities that provide deep pressure input, such as jumping, rolling, or even resting, which can help calm the nervous system and support self-regulation. They're popular in occupational therapy and sensory rooms, helping children burn off energy or find comfort through physical activity.

Fibre Optic Lights: Fibre optic lights are lighting systems that use thin strands of glass or plastic (fiber optics) to transmit light. These lights work by sending light

through the fibers, which can be arranged in various configurations to create stunning visual effects. The light travels along the fibers, often bending around corners, and emerges at the ends of the fibers, producing vibrant colors and illuminating patterns. The soft glow and gentle movement of fiber optic lights make them particularly effective in sensory environments, promoting relaxation and sensory exploration.

Glow in the Dark Sensory Bin: A glow-in-the-dark sensory bin is a container filled with materials and objects that glow under blacklight or in the dark, designed to provide a tactile and visual sensory experience. These bins typically contain items like glow-in-the-dark water beads, neon-colored rice or sand, glow sticks, or UV-reactive toys. The glowing elements create a visually stimulating environment, while the different textures engage a child's sense of touch.

Glow-in-the-dark sensory bins are often used for children who enjoy visual stimulation or for those with sensory processing disorders, as they offer a calming and engaging way to explore their senses. They're popular in sensory rooms, classrooms, and at home, offering a fun, hands-on way to improve fine motor skills, creativity, and sensory exploration in a unique, low-light setting.

SUMMARY

If you’re considering creating or designing a sensory-inclusive show, it’s important to be intentional and mindful of every detail—just as you would with any other production. If you're planning to offer these types of performances, be sure to ask plenty of questions to the artist to ensure the experience is truly sensory inclusive. Without a doubt, this has been one of the most rewarding and meaningful experiences of my career.

The goal is to establish consistent language and clear characteristics for sensory-inclusive performances so that families, no matter where they live or move, can expect the same level of inclusivity. Consistency is key in reaching this audience. These families have faced disappointment more often than not, so while they'll appreciate our efforts, if the experience isn't positive, you risk losing them. This community is highly connected, and word of mouth is powerful in your town or city.