

Consider sensory needs and flexible options to minimise anxiety and support attention, concentration, and communication

A suggestion for implementing the strategy
'Design for all from the outset' from the
Guide: [ILEs](#)

Includes:

- Create calm spaces
- Tools for releasing tension
- Plan lighting to create comfortable spaces
- Support listening and communication
- Provide a range of sensory supports
- Useful resources

Inclusive Education

From

Guide: [Planning innovative learning environments \(ILEs\)](#)

Strategy: [Design for all from the outset](#)

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Date

29 August 2025

Link

inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/planning-innovative-learning-environments-iles/consider-sensory-needs-and-flexible-options-to-minimise-anxiety-and-support-attention-concentration-and-communication

Create calm spaces



Source:

[Mark Osborne](#)

<https://leadinglearning.co.nz/profile-mark-osborne/>

[View full image \(1.7 MB\)](#)

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Tools for releasing tension

Movement often reduces tension and assists concentration.

Regular breaks throughout the day, supported by sensory tools, help students to stay focused and calm the nervous system.

Identify with students a range of equipment they would like to use in their ILE.

Suggestions:

- swiss balls
- ergonomic chairs
- adjustable seating
- equipment, such as bean bags, stress balls, fidget toys
- height-adjustable tables
- noise-reducing headphones.

[Avoiding sensory overload at school](#) provides simple strategies and suggests some useful equipment to reduce sensory overload.

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Plan lighting to create comfortable spaces

Use natural and artificial light effectively to create physically and emotionally comfortable spaces.

When selecting lighting and organising its placement, consider the specific needs of your students.

- ✓ The location of interior and exterior windows can be distracting for students with ASD, ADHD and Down syndrome.
- ✓ Shadows and glare on whiteboards and screens can be visually distracting for all students, particularly those who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or have low vision.
- ✓ High levels of illumination can be over stimulating. Dimming switches or blinds help to reduce discomfort.
- ✓ Some fluorescent lighting systems emit a constant noise (up to 60dB), causing difficulty for students who are hard of hearing. Housing the lighting system above the acoustical-tile ceiling reduces the amount of noise.
- ✓ Place window shades, lighting, and seating to optimise visual communication.

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Support listening and communication

Listening is critical to language acquisition and learning.

Design classroom acoustics to reduce reverberation and other sources of background noise. This supports students who have difficulties hearing and processing language as a result of Otitis Media (glue ear), auditory processing difficulties, attention difficulties, English as second language, and permanent hearing loss.

The acoustic design of the classroom affects the intelligibility of speech through reverberation (echoes) and the absorption of sound. You can monitor classroom sound levels using a safe sound indicator. Ensure your design meets **DQLS standards** for acoustics.

Plan to minimise background noise:

- inside the classroom (such as the noise of computers, heating and ventilation systems, fish tanks, and students in the classroom)
- outside the classroom (such as traffic noise, playground noise, noise from other classrooms, rain).

Consider assistive listening systems, such as sound loops and soundfield systems.

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Provide a range of sensory supports

Involve students in planning the supports they need. Include students with ASD, FASD, Down syndrome.

- ✓ Include sensory supports such as blankets, familiar objects, music, or soothing sounds.
- ✓ Support clear routines and systems using visual timetables.
- ✓ Present instructions in more than one way.
- ✓ Label key areas of the environment with visuals and text.
- ✓ Use charts, visual calendars, colour-coded schedules, visible timers, and visual cues to increase predictability of regular activities, and transitions between environments and activities.
- ✓ Offer ear protection or noise-cancelling headphones.
- ✓ Use flexible timetabling to break up tasks.
- ✓ Make calming spaces available to students when they are overwhelmed by sensory stimuli. Support students in how to use these spaces.

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Useful resources



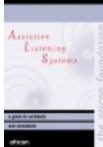
Avoiding sensory overload at school

Read time: 11 min

This chapter from the book, Raising a Sensory Smart Child, by Lindsay Biel and Nancy Peske offers practical suggestions to reduce sensory overload in the classroom.

Publisher: sensorysmarts.com

[Visit website](#)



Assistive listening systems: A guide for architects and consultants

Read time: 25 min

An assistive listening system is a wireless link directly between the sound source and the hearing impaired person. The direct link to the listener eliminates the effects of background noise and reverberation, providing some amplification and improving clarity. The three types of systems: electromagnetic loop, infrared communication, FM radio communication are described and reviewed.

Publisher: Oticon NZ Limited

[Visit website](#)



Optimal Learning Spaces Design Implications for Primary Schools

This research applies international good practice and evidence to identify how to gain the most value from ILE environments.

Publisher: ResearchGate

[Visit website](#)

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