

The Sensory-Friendly Music Teacher:

Creating a Welcoming Environment for All Students

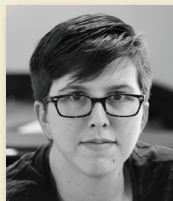
Careful attention to students' sensory needs is required for effective music teaching in all formats and at all levels, from lessons for children to RMM classes for adults, to private and group collegiate instruction. Sensory sensitivities tend to be more common in the neurodiverse community, where students have one or more diagnoses related to development. However, students in the neurotypical population (i.e., students without diagnoses) can also be affected by sensitivities of touch, hearing, and vision. Most research in music pedagogy tends to focus on the sensory needs of the neurodiverse population, and many teachers now specialize in teaching students with Sensory Processing Disorder, Autism, ADD/ADHD, and Dyslexia. This awareness creates a welcoming and inclusive environment for music study in the neurodiverse population, but does not account for unique sensory needs in the general population. These sensitivities are often undiagnosed; students and their parents

may be unaware that they process sensory input differently than others and as a result, may not discuss their particular needs with the teacher. In fact, many "bad behaviors" can be traced back to sensory sensitivities and discomfort. Teachers can be observant of students' comfort levels during the lesson and understand that some negative behaviors could be due to overstimulation. Due to the hands-on nature of music instruction, teachers should be prepared with alternative approaches to teaching traditional aspects of technique, particularly concepts that are often taught through touch. Reaping the benefits of mirror neurons and the use of analogy in teaching may be more beneficial to students with touch sensitivity. Simple changes in materials and environment (e.g., having a variety of pencils to choose from, or offering a hyperactive student a manipulative to hold during demonstrations) may also instantly change a troublesome student's behavior by alleviating stress caused by sensory disorders. Students with sensitivities may also benefit from low-sensory studio and classroom setups. Having a flexible studio or classroom environment may mean having a variety of lighting and seating options, in addition to the careful use of technology and visual stimulation. This poster identifies students for whom sensory overstimulation may be a hindrance, defines sensory disorders and sensitivities in both the neurodiverse and neurotypical populations, offers sensory-friendly strategies for teaching traditional pedagogical concepts, and suggests tips for developing studio and classroom environments that make learning comfortable for all students. ◀◀

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The Sensory-Friendly Music Teacher: Creating a Welcoming Environment for All Students

Do you have a student who...

- is a wiggle-worm?
- is easily distracted?
- has difficulty articulating thoughts?
- covers their ears when you play?
- stares distractedly at the walls during the lesson?
- avoids physical contact?
- requires extra stimulation to focus?
- is uncomfortable with recital dress code?
- struggles inordinately with reading?

They may benefit from special sensory care!

Common Neurodiverse Diagnoses

Students with **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)** may experience:

- lights that are too bright.
- background noise that is too loud.
- sensitivity to textures and/or touch.
- visual distractions.

Students with **Autism** may experience:

- Difficulty with social interactions
- Restricted interests
- Resistance to change
- Trouble with nonverbal communication
- Uncoordinated and clumsy movements
- The tendency to exclusively focus on one task
- Hypersensitivity

Students with **ADHD** and **ADD** may experience symptoms of:

- Inattention:
 - Doesn't follow directions or finish tasks
 - Doesn't appear to be listening
 - Is easily distracted
- Impulsivity:
 - Has trouble waiting their turn
 - Blurts out answers
 - Interrupts others
- Hyperactivity:
 - Squirms, fidgets, or bounces
 - Doesn't stay seated
 - Talks excessively

Sensory-Friendly Solutions

Materials

A simple swap of materials can make all the difference. Consider keeping on hand:

- A variety of pencils, including wooden, mechanical, Twist N' Write pencils, oversized pencils, and grips.
- Colored paper and paper alternatives. Some students can process material more efficiently when reading from colored paper.
- Manipulatives that may include pebbles, squishy objects, fuzzies, etc.

Alternative Approaches to Traditional Pedagogy

Alternatives to physical touch:

- Analogies & descriptive words
- Teacher demonstrations

Alternatives to playing and singing along:

- Allow the student to play through the excerpt uninterrupted before demonstrating.
- Rather than saying counts aloud as the student plays, try tapping the beat on their shoulder.

Activities with macro-movements:

- Teach concepts away from the instrument (e.g., stepping, hopping, jumping).

Environment

- Soft lamplight is preferable to overhead fluorescent light.
- Be mindful about electronics. Keep volume turned down or simply turn off devices.
- Consider offering multiple seating options that provide a variety of heights, textures, and support.

Because environment can affect learning, consider these options for an even more welcoming studio or classroom!

All students, whether neurodiverse or neurotypical, have sensory preferences!

The Sensory-Friendly Music Teacher...

- is observant of students' behavior.
- facilitates the learning of neurodiverse and neurotypical students.
- realizes that students and parents may not be aware of sensitivities.
- understands that sensory sensitivities may be the root cause of some behavioral problems.
- creates a sensory-friendly studio and classroom environment.
- has alternative materials handy.
- draws from a repertoire of alternative pedagogical approaches.
- actively adapts to students' needs.

Resources

www.autismspeaks.org

www.healthline.com/health/sensory-overload.com

www.sensory-processing-disorder.com

www.spdstar.org

www.understood.org

Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast Too Tight: What To Do If You Are Sensory Defensive in an Overstimulating World by Sharon Heller

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