

# Designing for Autism

Deborah Rosenberg

**M**ost of us have experienced what I refer to as “the square peg in a round hole” moment. It’s that uncomfortable feeling we get when we are completely out of sync with our surroundings or the people around us. To a person with Autism, this is not a temporary situation. Autism is a neurological disorder that impairs a person’s ability to communicate and relate to others. It’s associated with rigid routines and repetitive behavior. One in 45 children in this country are Autistic and—so far—there is no cure.

Our fast-paced world is a constant struggle for this population. They have difficulty expressing their discomfort, which leads to tremendous frustration. In order to thrive and grow to their full potential, children with Autism need to feel in control in an environment that is comforting and non-threatening.

I have a daughter with sensory issues. She is sensitive to certain colors, sounds, surfaces and smells. I have always been intrigued by her unique emotional blueprint, how her environment affects her development and behavior. She has taught me a lot about a person’s sensory needs. As an interior decorator, I began incorporating these elements into my clients’ spaces, specifically the ones with sensory and developmental issues. I call it Design with Direction. Lately, I have been designing spaces for children and adults in the Autistic Spectrum, ADHD, Dyslexia and other sensory challenges.

When approaching the design of a space for a child or adult with Autism, I think about my goals for the room. Safety comes first. I try not to use items with cords or strings, mirrors that could break or



anything else that is potentially dangerous.

Here are some tips for anyone who plans to decorate a room for a child with Autism.

Furniture, especially larger, heavier pieces should be anchored to walls. Bean bags, floor cushions, small tents for cocooning, rocking chairs, tunnels and swings are wonderful additions to the space.

Incorporate calming nature sounds such as waterfalls, the ocean, rain and birds chirping. Choose pink and soft blue surroundings, because they tend to be more relaxing than other colors. Keep the space as clean and clutter-free as possible and add multisensory toys to the space.

Consider items that address gross and fine motor skill function and toys for pushing, pulling, rolling and hugging. Incorporate visually stimulating products such as clocks, wind chimes and crystals.

Select soft, diffused lighting. Choose ceiling fixtures that are covered with frosted glass, table lamps that don’t give off harsh light and don’t forget outlet covers.

Hang wall coverings and art that portray happy images of baby ani-

mals and choose blankets that are heavy and enveloping.

Furnishings should be low to the ground. In place of a traditional desk and chair, consider a small coffee table with big pillows to sit on or a lap buddy.

In order for the child to learn while at play, store small toys and items in clear bins with labels and graphics to match.

Secure a cork board to the wall for family photos and the child’s art. Change the artwork frequently. Use putty in place of thumbtacks.

Even if you’re choosing furnishings and toys for an older child, treat the space as if it’s being designed for a young child. Consider an upholstered, low platform bed and a snug mattress, preferably organic.

Within all of us lies the ability to tune in or tune out sensory information. However for a child with Autism, this is a constant challenge—one that creates a state of imbalance. It is fundamental for all children to trust their environment so that they can explore it, interact with it, learn from it and thrive. □

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