

AUTISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Ever wonder how to set up a relaxation station in your classroom? The beginning of the school year is the best time to set up the physical structure of the room and create routines that lead to success throughout the year. Thank you to Kimberly Maich, and colleagues, for sharing these highlights from their article, *A Relaxation Station for Every Location*. Information on how to access the full article is provided below. Get started on your relaxation station today!

Kendra Lane, Director of Operations, Autism Society of Newfoundland & Labrador

Relaxation Station, Zen Zone, or Cozy Corner

by KIMBERLY MAICH, CHELSEA O'KEEFE, TRICIA VAN RHIJN, & ADAM W. J. DAVIES

Today's inclusive classrooms feature many diverse groups of students who have a need for teaching and supporting effective self-regulation skills. One element of classroom design that can support this area of need that permeates everyday interactions – and classroom successes – is the creation of a classroom space where all students can head for reflection, relaxation, and self-calming. Although such spaces can be beneficial for many students, it can be essential for some students, such as students with Autism Spectrum Disorder who are beginning to learn strategies to self-regulate in group settings like classrooms. Because such spaces are not restricted by age or grade and can support students with or without exceptionalities, a range of students in varying classrooms and schools can use this approach for those moments of every day disquiet, stress, or anxiety that occur throughout the school day.

Whatever students and teachers choose to name it, a relaxation station is a proactive way of setting up the classroom to give students a way to initiate and practice self-regulation – right in a classroom space. The below 10-step process can help.

Step 1: Choose Location Carefully

Consider which spaces are easily accessible and/or make use of nooks or spaces in the classroom while providing a balance of some privacy with supervision. Spaces can be created under reading lofts, utilizing play tents that sit on desks – depending on the grade level and needs of the classroom and its students, keeping safety foremost in mind.

Step 2: Set Physical Boundaries

Pseudo-barriers, such as translucent curtains, low fur-

niture, or even tri-fold cardboard cubbies, can be used to create boundaries around spaces set up in Step 1. These elements give a message to the classroom community that some privacy is needed, for now.

Step 3: Create Names & Labels

This space can be given a positive name like “The Nest” or “The Office,” with inviting visuals promoting its use as an everyday classroom tool.

Step 4: Provide Expectations

Simple and concrete procedures and rules should be created and posted. Rules should be limited in number and be brief and explicit, such as, “Use the relaxation station only when it is needed.” A procedure might include, “Set the timer for five minutes.”

Step 5: Develop Entry Procedures

Choose how students will let teachers know that they need to use this classroom space. A verbal comment to the teacher is an option, or the use of a sign-up sheet, or a break card that can be placed on students' desks.

Step 6: Providing Relaxation Tools

Sensory and self-regulation tools are critical components of relaxation stations and may include manipulatives and/or visuals such as stories or posters that encourage students to utilize self-regulation strategies. One example is the *Incredible Five-Point Scale*. Such tools should be taught and described to the whole class so that students are familiar with them once encountered within (or outside of) the relaxation station.

Step 7: Comfort Objects and Preferred Items

The relaxation station must be structured utilizing physically comfortable and pleasing materials, which could include family photos, comfort objects, drawings – or photos of some items if space is limited. For younger students, the station may include an “All

About Me” book. For older students, it may include more in-depth materials, such as photos of favourite people, hobbies or items. Students’ interests, strengths and passions should be considered when developing a relaxation station, as these items can be utilized to provide a comforting and calming effect.

Step 8: Sensory Items

Sensory items can provide benefits when utilized appropriately within relaxation stations. Such items may be tactile (like fidget items) or target other sensory systems such as noise-cancelling headphones and/or calming music. These items encourage student direction and individualized choice around self-regulation when students experience and learn which strategies and/or tools help them best to self-regulate.

Step 9: Using Reflective Teaching Tools

Reflective tools may be open-ended (such as journals) or more structured, such as sentence completion exercises that focus on emotions and/or behaviours – as well as future self-regulation plans.

Step 10: Creating Exit Procedures

To establish relaxation stations that work smoothly and effectively, teachers can consider establishing guidelines and procedures which can be taught and displayed (e.g., the maximum number of breaks per day and the length of breaks). Additionally, timers and/or self-monitoring forms may be utilized to reinforce such criteria and allow for increased student independence.

It is important to remember that the set-up and use of a relaxation station depends on age, grade, and functioning level of students – but such stations can be utilized in a range of teaching and learning environments in a positive way. There are many possibilities and choices in setting up such a station, and there are many commercial kits and resources that can guide teachers in developing relaxation stations. Just search *Pinterest* or *Teachers Pay Teachers* to see examples of what others have accomplished.

The full article can be found by accessing the below title: Maich, K., Davies, A.W., & van Rhijn, T. (May 2018, OnlineFirst). A relaxation station in every location. Feature Article: *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 1-6. doi: 10.1177/1053451218767916

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