Winter Wonderland? Meeting Sensory Needs During the Winter Months

Contributed by Kristi A. Jordan, OTR/L

When Anxiety “Snowballs”

After surviving the snow and an extended Holiday Break, we are finally back and attempting to establish a routine, despite delays and frequent changes in schedule. Winter is a time when we find ourselves indoors, with inconsistencies in routines. These changes may contribute to increased anxiety.

One main source of stress and anxiety for individuals is uncertainty about events and a lack of control. This, in combination with fewer potential opportunities to meet sensory needs through activities and movement, can create a “snowball-effect” of anxiety. To reduce this, it is helpful to consider the use of evidence-based practices (EBP), such as:

- Visual Supports
- Self-Management
- Social narratives

EBP: Visuals Supports

Visual supports can take the form of schedules, photos, visual cues, and other types of supports.

Visual Schedules

Use a daily schedule at home and at school. Schedules are visual lists of upcoming activities presented in a format that the individual can easily follow, such as objects, photos, or pictures. Use of a visual schedule increases independence, prepares for changes, improves flexibility, and improves transitions.
Some articles and info about Visual Schedules

For Home:

Using Visual Schedules: A Guide for Parents: By Catherine Davies

For School:

Visual Schedules in the School Setting: By Kara Hume

Other Visual Supports:

Use visual supports to structure activities, including sensory breaks and sensory diets. An example is the Brainworks First, Then visual above.

IRCA Visual Support Examples:


☐ Create visuals for movement and sensory activities. Incorporate these into daily visual schedules and choice boards.
☐ Create visual lists for chores and activities to be completed in the classroom or at home.
☐ Establish an organization center in the home or classroom where materials related to the schedule and tasks are turned in, kept, or stored, including schedule materials and visual support materials.
☐ Consider putting activities into plastic bins with lids and labeling them. Create a matching label to use on calendars, schedules, and in visual supports.
☐ See visual strategies related to self-management

**EBP: Self-Management**

![Anxiety Curve](image)

Individuals can learn to independently regulate their behaviors at home, school, and in the community through learning how to recognize and self-monitor their own behaviors.
Teach students to recognize levels of anxiety and self-manage using a visual support, such as a 5-Point Scale.

Create calm spaces within classrooms and home environments to safely manage anxiety. Consider a safe pass for students to access this space, as needed. Consistent adult supervision is recommended in these areas.

Determine what types of inputs calms an individual when they are anxious. Use interviews or lists/visuals of calming activities to facilitate this process.

Keep calming items and activities in a container in the home, classroom, for the car, or in a carry-on for trips and activities in the community. Include oral and tactile tools, such as gum, suckers, and fidgets or items the individual finds calming, if contextually appropriate.

Use weighted blankets, weighted backpacks, compression garments, or other modifications, as needed, to provide calming and organizing input.

Teach and role play individualized steps for calming when calm. Include alternative behavior choices and strategies.

Create a system for prompting individuals on calming strategies and practice responses to set prompts. Fade as desired behavior and level of calmness is demonstrated.

Train students to self-monitor their behaviors using visual systems and through reinforcement of desired behaviors.

Consider cueing systems for time, such as alarm clocks, kitchen timers, or stopwatches to set time limits for calming breaks, activities, and sensory interventions.

Students & staff or family help maintain data and charting for levels of anxiety/calmness and related behaviors daily.

Consult with an occupational therapist (OT) and share data and information regarding effectiveness of sensory and calming strategies.

**EBP: Social Narratives & Scripts**

Individualized pictures and stories that describe social expectations and provide cues to desired behaviors

- Incorporate strategies, such as visual 5-Point Scale into social narratives, to describe behaviors and teach expectations.
- Use examples of choices that match systems and strategies available within narrative.
- Review positively written social narratives about being calm, proactively.
- Consider printed materials, such as *When my Worries Get Too Big!*
- Coordinate visual supports and self-management systems with social narratives & scripts
- Consider Power Cards and other short versions of narratives as a quick reminder of expectations.