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Visual stimuli in the classroom

Points to note

- Children with autism may be unable to tolerate bright sunlight or flickering fluorescent lighting. A classroom filled with bright colorful objects can be highly distracting or disturbing.
- A child with autism may have difficulty giving attention to the relevant information when he is in a room full of distracting visual stimuli.
- A child with autism can become disturbed by minor changes in the classroom, such as removing or relocating a picture.
- Some children with autism see words on a blackboard as a meaningless jumble.
- The child may squint at objects, use his peripheral vision or look at things very closely. He may be doing this because he enjoys the sensation he gets from this different perspective.

What you can do

- There is a huge pay-off for teachers who are prepared to familiarise themselves with and understand the child's particular sensory issues. Remember each child has his/her own set of behaviours. Do not overgeneralise – autism is not like other disabilities.
- Examine the child's physical environment. Check that he is not affected by sunlight streaming through a window or reflections that might cause a distraction. See also [Physical setup of the classroom](#).
- If the child is being overloaded by visual stimuli, tell him exactly what he needs to focus on. Give short, explicit reminders – you may need to repeat these frequently.
- Worksheets can be enlarged to A3 size; use a highlighter to indicate the space where the answers must go. It might seem like a small thing, but this can be a real problem for children with autism.
- Encourage the child to use a blank sheet of paper when using worksheets, to cover up the other questions. This will help the child focus on one task at a time.
- Stress the importance of having an uncluttered work area. If the child has an aide, they can help them keep his desk tidy and ensure all his belongings are in order. When the child is working on his own, it may help to have his desk facing a blank wall to limit distractions. Or a visual timetable in front of the child's table may be helpful. Sit the child away from eye contact of other students if he find this distracting.
- Always try to keep the environment tolerable. Ensure he has his 'own space'.