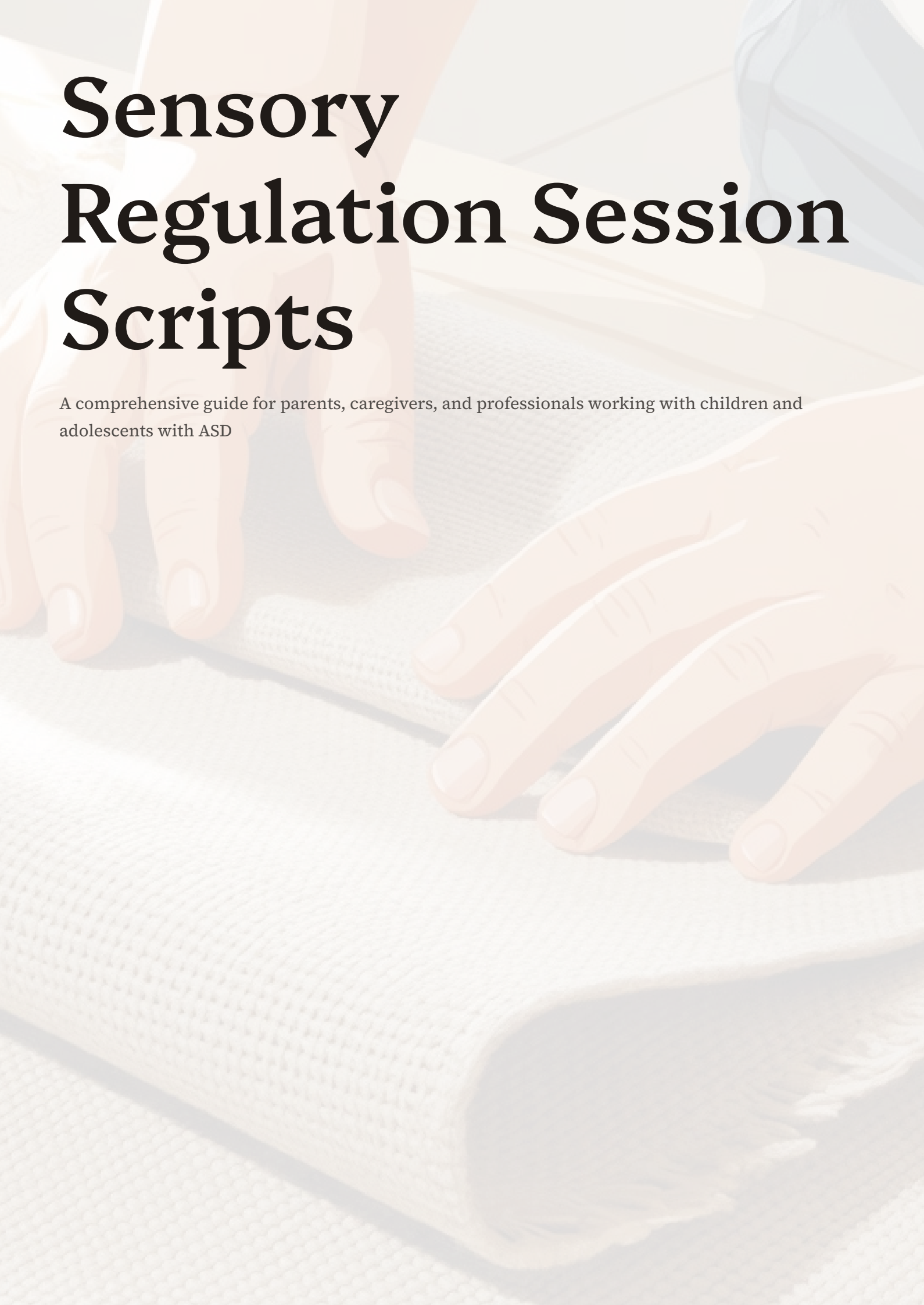
Sensory Regulation Session Scripts

A comprehensive guide for parents, caregivers, and professionals working with children and adolescents with ASD



Welcome to Your Sensory Regulation Journey

Sensory regulation is one of the most fundamental aspects of supporting children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Every day, these remarkable individuals navigate a world that can feel overwhelming, unpredictable, and sometimes even painful due to sensory processing differences. This guide offers you 20 carefully crafted session scripts designed to help manage sensory challenges and promote self-regulation.

Whether you're a parent seeking tools for home, a caregiver looking for practical strategies, or a professional therapist or educator, these sessions provide structured, evidence-based approaches that can be adapted to meet individual needs. Each script has been developed with warmth, understanding, and practical application in mind.

The sessions are organized into four key areas: calming activities for crisis moments, strategies for increasing tolerance to sounds and stimuli, sessions focused on textures and proprioception, and practical self-regulation sequences for different contexts. Together, these tools form a comprehensive approach to sensory support.

What You'll Find Inside

- Ready-to-use session scripts
- Adaptable strategies for different settings
- Evidence-based techniques
- Practical, compassionate guidance

Understanding Sensory Processing in ASD

Before diving into the practical sessions, it's essential to understand what sensory processing differences mean for individuals with ASD. Sensory processing refers to how the nervous system receives, organizes, and responds to sensory information from the environment. For many people with autism, this process works differently, leading to either hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) or hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) to sensory input.

Imagine walking into a room where the lights feel like they're burning your eyes, the sound of conversation feels like sharp needles in your ears, and the texture of your clothing feels unbearably scratchy. Or conversely, imagine needing to seek intense sensory input constantly—crashing into furniture, chewing on objects, or seeking deep pressure—just to feel grounded and regulated. This is the daily reality for many individuals with ASD.

These sensory differences aren't behavioral issues or choices; they're neurological differences in how the brain processes information. Understanding this fundamental truth helps us approach sensory challenges with compassion, patience, and appropriate support. When we provide the right sensory strategies, we're not just managing behaviors—we're helping individuals feel safe, comfortable, and capable in their own bodies.

The eight sensory systems include the commonly known five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) plus three often overlooked but equally important systems: vestibular (balance and movement), proprioceptive (body awareness and position), and interoceptive (internal body signals like hunger, thirst, and emotional states). Many of our sessions will address multiple sensory systems simultaneously, creating comprehensive support.

How to Use These Session Scripts

01

Read Through Completely

Before implementing any session, read it entirely to understand the flow, materials needed, and objectives.

02

Gather Materials

Prepare all necessary items in advance to ensure smooth transitions and minimize disruptions during the session.

03

Adapt to Individual Needs

Every child is unique. Modify timing, intensity, and activities based on the individual's current regulation state and preferences.

04

Create a Safe Environment

Ensure the physical space is comfortable, predictable, and free from unexpected sensory triggers.

05

Observe and Document

Keep notes on what works well and what doesn't. This information helps refine future sessions.

06

Practice Consistency

Regular implementation builds familiarity and effectiveness. Consistency helps establish routines that support regulation.

Remember, these scripts are starting points, not rigid rules. Your knowledge of the individual child, combined with these structured approaches, creates the most effective intervention. Trust your instincts, remain flexible, and celebrate small victories along the way.

Part One: Calming Activities for Crisis Moments

When a child with ASD experiences sensory overload, the nervous system shifts into fight-flight-freeze mode. During these crisis moments, traditional reasoning or behavioral interventions often fail because the child's brain is literally in survival mode. The calming sessions in this section provide concrete strategies to help the nervous system return to a regulated state.

These activities focus on activating the parasympathetic nervous system—the body's natural calming mechanism. Through deep pressure, rhythmic movements, controlled breathing, and other evidence-based techniques, we can help a dysregulated child find their way back to calm. The key is having these strategies prepared and practiced before crisis moments occur, so they become familiar tools the child can eventually use independently.

Each calming session typically lasts between 10-20 minutes, though this can vary significantly based on the severity of dysregulation and the individual's response. The goal isn't to rush through the crisis but to provide supportive presence and effective tools that genuinely help the nervous system reset.

Session 1: The Deep Pressure Sanctuary

Objective

Use deep pressure input to activate the calming parasympathetic nervous system and reduce anxiety or sensory overload.

Duration

15-20 minutes

Materials Needed

- Weighted blanket or heavy cushions
- Body pillow or large stuffed animal
- Soft, dimmed lighting
- Optional: calming music or white noise

When to Use

During moments of high anxiety, after overwhelming sensory experiences, before bedtime, or when the child appears scattered and unfocused.

Safety Considerations

Always ensure the child can easily remove any weighted items. Never force deep pressure if the child resists. Monitor breathing and comfort throughout.

Step-by-Step Protocol

1

Create the Space (2-3 minutes)

Dim the lights and remove any unnecessary visual or auditory stimuli. Arrange the weighted blanket and cushions in a comfortable configuration. If using music, start it at a low volume.

2

Introduce the Activity (1-2 minutes)

Use calm, simple language: "We're going to make a cozy nest where your body can feel safe and calm." Demonstrate if needed, showing how you might sit or lie under the weighted blanket.

3

Initial Pressure Application (3-5 minutes)

Help the child get comfortable and gradually apply the weighted blanket, starting from the feet and moving upward. Apply gentle but firm pressure, checking in frequently: "Does this feel good?" or "More pressure or less?"

Session 2: The Sensory Storm Weather Report

This session uses the metaphor of weather to help children understand and communicate their internal sensory states. By externalizing the experience as "weather," we reduce shame and create a shared language for discussing regulation.

Objective

Develop awareness of sensory states and create a communication system for expressing dysregulation before reaching crisis level.

Duration

10-15 minutes during calm moments; 5 minutes during check-ins

Sunny Weather

Body feels calm, comfortable, ready to learn and play. All sensory systems feel "just right." This is our goal state where we can handle typical daily activities.

Cloudy Weather

Starting to feel uncomfortable. Maybe sounds are getting louder, lights brighter, or body feels restless. This is the perfect time to use calming strategies before things get harder.

Stormy Weather

Feeling overwhelmed, upset, or out of control. Sensory input feels painful or impossible to manage. Need immediate support and calming strategies. Not a time for demands or reasoning.

Implementation Steps

Create a visual weather chart with pictures or symbols representing each state. During calm moments, practice identifying current "weather" and discussing what each state feels like in the body. When the child reports "cloudy" weather, immediately implement preventive calming strategies. This proactive approach often prevents full sensory storms from developing. Over time, children internalize this system and can advocate for their own sensory needs: "I'm feeling cloudy—I need my headphones" or "I'm sunny today—I can try the noisy cafeteria."

Session 3: The Counting Breath Anchor

Controlled breathing is one of the fastest ways to activate the body's calming response, but traditional "just breathe" advice rarely works during crisis moments. This session teaches a concrete, countable breathing pattern that gives the anxious mind something to focus on while physiologically calming the nervous system.

The beauty of breath work is its portability—once learned, it can be used anywhere, anytime, without any equipment. However, breathing exercises must be practiced during calm moments first, building the neural pathway so it's available during stress.

The 4-7-8 Breathing Pattern

Breathe In

Count slowly to 4 while breathing in through the nose. "Smell the flowers."

Hold

Hold the breath gently for 7 counts. "Keep the smell inside."

Breathe Out

Exhale slowly through the mouth for 8 counts. "Blow out the birthday candles."

Teaching Protocol

Start by modeling the breathing yourself while counting aloud. Use visual cues like raising your hand on the inhale, holding it steady during the hold, and lowering it during the exhale. Practice during calm moments at least twice daily for several weeks before expecting it to work during crisis. Some children respond better to different metaphors: smelling pizza, blowing bubbles, or inflating a balloon. Adapt the imagery to match the child's interests and understanding. For younger children or those who struggle with longer counts, start with a simpler 3-3-3 pattern and gradually extend. The key is the extended exhale, which stimulates the vagus nerve and triggers the relaxation response.

Session 4: The Sensory Reset Corner

Creating a designated physical space for sensory regulation gives children a consistent, predictable place to retreat when overwhelmed. This session guides you through establishing and using a sensory reset corner effectively.

Essential Elements of a Reset Corner

Comfortable Seating

Bean bags, floor cushions, or a small tent create a contained, cozy space that provides gentle proprioceptive input.

Sound Management

Noise-canceling headphones or a white noise machine help control auditory input during overwhelming moments.

Lighting Control

Soft, dimmable lighting or even a small lamp with colored bulbs allows adjustment of visual stimulation levels.

Fidget Tools

A basket of sensory toys like stress balls, fidget spinners, or textured objects provides healthy sensory input options.

Visual Supports

Pictures showing calming strategies, emotion charts, or a visual timer help structure the reset experience.

Using the Reset Corner Protocol

The reset corner should never be presented as punishment but rather as a helpful tool, like having a first aid kit for sensory emergencies. Introduce it during calm times, allowing the child to explore and personalize the space. Practice voluntary visits: "Let's spend five minutes in the reset corner practicing our calm-down tools." When the child is dysregulated, offer the reset corner as a choice, not a command: "Would the reset corner help right now?" Respect if they decline and offer alternatives. Time in the reset corner should be child-directed rather than adult-imposed. The child leaves when they feel ready, not when a timer goes off. This autonomy builds self-awareness and trust in their own regulation process.

Session 5: Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Kids

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) helps children become aware of the difference between tension and relaxation in their bodies. This awareness is crucial for recognizing early signs of stress and taking action before reaching crisis level. The technique involves systematically tensing and releasing different muscle groups, creating a wave of relaxation through the body.

For children with ASD, who may have difficulty identifying and interpreting body signals, PMR provides concrete, physical experiences of what "tense" and "relaxed" feel like. Over time, this builds interoceptive awareness—the ability to sense and understand internal body states.

Kid-Friendly PMR Script

Hands: Make a Snowball

Squeeze your hands into tight fists like you're making a snowball. Hold for 5 seconds. Now let the snowball melt and feel your hands get soft and warm.

Arms: Be Strong

Bend your arms and make your muscles big and strong like a superhero. Hold tight. Now let your arms flop down like cooked spaghetti—so soft and loose.

Shoulders: Touch Your Ears

Lift your shoulders up to try to touch your ears. Hold them up high. Now let them drop down like heavy weights falling. Feel how relaxed they are.

Face: Make a Silly Face

Scrunch up your whole face—squeeze your eyes, wrinkle your nose, and make your face as tight as possible. Hold it. Now let everything go soft and smooth like butter melting.

Belly: Hard as a Rock

Make your belly hard like there's a rock inside. Hold it tight. Now let your belly be soft like a pillow. Feel how it moves gently when you breathe.

Part Two: Increasing Tolerance to Sounds and Stimuli

Auditory hypersensitivity is one of the most common sensory challenges in ASD. Everyday sounds that most people barely notice—the hum of fluorescent lights, the rustle of paper, background conversations, or sudden noises—can be genuinely painful or overwhelming for individuals with auditory sensitivities. This doesn't mean they need to "toughen up" or "get used to it" through forced exposure. Instead, we can use gradual, respectful desensitization approaches that slowly expand the window of tolerance.

The key principle is "controlled exposure"—introducing challenging sensory input in predictable, manageable doses while ensuring the child feels safe and maintains some control. We never flood the system or force participation. Instead, we build tolerance gradually, celebrating small victories and respecting the child's limits. This approach actually creates lasting change, whereas forced exposure often leads to increased anxiety and resistance.

The following sessions provide structured approaches to sound desensitization, along with strategies for managing other overwhelming stimuli like lights, smells, and crowds.

Session 6: The Sound Ladder Challenge

The Sound Ladder is a systematic desensitization approach that gradually introduces challenging sounds in a controlled, predictable way. By starting with tolerable sounds and slowly increasing intensity or duration, we build the nervous system's capacity to handle auditory input without triggering the fight-flight-freeze response.

Creating Your Sound Ladder

Work with the child to identify specific sounds that cause distress and rate them from 1-10, with 1 being "a little uncomfortable" and 10 being "unbearable." This creates a hierarchy of sounds to address. Start with sounds rated 1-3, as these are within the child's window of tolerance and provide the foundation for building skills.

Level 1: Soft Recordings

Play recordings of the target sound at very low volume for short periods (30 seconds to 1 minute) while engaged in a preferred activity.

Level 2: Moderate Volume

Gradually increase volume and duration over multiple sessions, ensuring the child maintains regulation. Use headphones for better control.

Level 3: Distance Control

Introduce the actual sound source (not recording) from a distance, allowing the child to control proximity. Move closer gradually over weeks.

Level 4: Variable Timing

Once comfortable with predictable exposure, introduce slight unpredictability in timing while maintaining volume control and safety.

Level 5: Real-World Practice

Practice in actual environments where the sound occurs naturally, starting with short visits and building duration over time.

Session 7: Creating a Sound Menu

Not all sounds are challenging—many children with ASD have preferred sounds that actually help with regulation. Creating a "sound menu" of calming or organizing sounds gives children a tool for self-regulation and can even help build tolerance for more challenging sounds by providing a sensory anchor.

Exploring Sound Preferences

Spend time discovering which sounds the child finds calming, focusing, or enjoyable. Common preferred sounds include white noise, nature sounds (rain, ocean waves), rhythmic music, specific instruments, or even certain mechanical sounds like fans or washing machines. Create a digital library or playlist of these preferred sounds that the child can access easily.

Sound Menu Categories

Calming Sounds

Gentle, rhythmic, predictable sounds that activate the parasympathetic nervous system: white noise, rain, heartbeat rhythms, soft instrumental music.

Organizing Sounds

Sounds that help with focus and attention: binaural beats, classical music, nature sounds with steady patterns, brown noise.

Masking Sounds

Sounds that cover up unpredictable environmental noises: fan noise, specific frequency white or pink noise, wave sounds that create an auditory buffer.

Energizing Sounds

For moments when the child needs to increase alertness: upbeat music, nature sounds with more variation, rhythmic drumming or specific songs.

Using the Sound Menu

Teach the child to identify their current regulation state and choose appropriate sounds. "Feeling overwhelmed? Let's use your calming sounds." "Need to focus on homework? Let's try your organizing sounds." Make preferred sounds easily accessible through a dedicated device, playlist, or sound machine.

Session 8: The Sensory Volume Control

Teaching children that they can have control over sensory input is incredibly empowering. This session uses the metaphor of a volume control knob to help children understand that sensory experiences exist on a continuum and that they have tools to "turn down" overwhelming input.

Understanding Volume Control

Create a visual representation of a volume control dial with numbers from 1-10. Use this to discuss how different environments or situations have different "volume" levels for various senses. For example, the school cafeteria might be a 9 for sound, while the library is a 3. Help the child identify their comfort zone—perhaps they can handle sounds at level 5 but anything above feels overwhelming.

Physical Volume Control Tools

Noise-canceling headphones, earplugs, sunglasses, or hats reduce sensory input intensity. These aren't crutches—they're assistive devices that enable participation and comfort.

Environmental Modifications

Dimming lights, closing doors, moving to quieter spaces, or creating physical distance from stimuli all act as volume controls for the environment.

Internal Regulation Strategies

Breathing techniques, grounding exercises, or using preferred sensory input (like calming sounds) can help the nervous system "turn down" its response to stimuli.

Time Management

Limiting duration of exposure, taking sensory breaks, or scheduling challenging activities during optimal regulation times controls the "volume" of sensory demand.

Practice Activities

Practice using volume control tools during calm moments in low-stakes situations. Visit various environments and practice rating their sensory "volume," then discuss what tools might help. Role-play asking for accommodations: "This is too loud for me—may I use my headphones?" or "I need a break in a quieter space." Build a personal "volume control toolkit" that the child can keep accessible, containing their most effective tools. Celebrate and reinforce when the child successfully uses tools to manage their own sensory environment—this is a crucial life skill.

Session 9: Surprise Sound Story

Unpredictable sounds are often more distressing than loud sounds. Fire alarms, door slams, sudden laughter, or unexpected announcements can trigger intense fight-flight-freeze responses. This session helps build tolerance for sound unpredictability through playful, controlled exposure within a narrative framework that provides some structure and meaning.

Creating the Story Framework

Develop a simple story together with the child, incorporating spaces where surprise sounds will occur. The story provides context and slight predictability—the child knows surprises will happen within the story structure, even if they don't know exactly when. Choose themes that interest the child: adventures, mysteries, silly scenarios, or favorite characters.

Example story structure: "We're going on a jungle adventure, and we'll hear jungle sounds along the way. Some might surprise us! When we hear a surprising sound, we'll stop, take a breath, and then continue our adventure."

1 Preparation Phase

Review the story structure together. Show the child the sound-making tools you'll use (small drum, bell, whistle, etc.). Let them experiment with the sounds during this calm preparation time.

2 Introduction Round

Tell the story with very predictable sound cues. "Now we're crossing the river... and there will be a splash sound... here it comes... splash!" Build confidence with this structured approach.

3 Slight Surprise Round

Repeat the story but make the timing slightly less predictable. Still signal that sound is coming but vary when exactly it occurs. "As we walk through the jungle, we might hear a bird call... it could happen any moment..."

4 Recovery Practice

When surprise sounds occur, pause and practice recovery strategies: "Let's take a breath together. The sound surprised us, but we're safe. Should we continue?" This builds resilience.

5 Celebration

End with specific praise for brave moments: "You heard that surprise sound and recovered so quickly! Your nervous system is getting stronger!" Document progress visually with stickers or chart marks.

Session 10: Beyond Sound—Light and Visual Sensitivity

While sound sensitivity often receives the most attention, many individuals with ASD also experience significant visual sensitivities. Fluorescent lights, bright sunlight, busy visual patterns, or certain colors can be genuinely overwhelming or even painful. The flickering of fluorescent bulbs—often imperceptible to neurotypical individuals—can be extremely distracting or distressing for those with visual sensitivities.

Common Visual Challenges

- Fluorescent or LED lighting flicker
- Bright sunlight or glare
- High-contrast environments
- Busy visual patterns (crowds, patterned carpets, busy wallpaper)
- Rapid movement in peripheral vision
- Screen glare and blue light
- Sudden changes in lighting

Visual Accommodation Strategies

- Sunglasses or tinted glasses for indoor/outdoor use
- Desk lamps with warm, steady light instead of overhead fluorescents
- Blue light filters on screens
- Reducing visual clutter in learning and living spaces
- Providing visual breaks and simpler visual environments
- Seating position away from bright windows or facing less busy directions

Light Tolerance Building Protocol

Similar to sound desensitization, visual tolerance can be built gradually. Start in low-light environments and very gradually increase brightness over weeks or months. Allow the child to wear sunglasses while slowly reducing the tint level. Practice brief exposures to challenging visual environments (busy stores, crowded spaces) followed immediately by visual rest in calm, simple environments. Never force eye contact or visual attention—this often increases stress without benefit. Instead, honor the child's natural visual preferences while building capacity for necessary visual tasks. Consider that looking away might actually improve attention and processing for some individuals with ASD.

Part Three: Texture, Touch, and Proprioception Sessions

Tactile sensitivities and proprioceptive differences profoundly impact daily functioning. From wearing clothing to accepting physical affection, from participating in messy play to navigating crowded spaces, tactile and proprioceptive processing affects nearly every aspect of life. Some individuals are hypersensitive to light touch (which can feel ticklish, irritating, or even painful) while seeking deep pressure. Others may be under-responsive, requiring intense tactile input to register sensation. Proprioceptive input—information about body position and movement—often has an organizing, calming effect for individuals with ASD.

These sessions focus on building tolerance for necessary tactile experiences while also providing ample proprioceptive input that supports regulation. We'll explore texture exploration, body awareness activities, and strategies for managing tactile challenges in daily life.

Session 11: The Texture Treasure Hunt

Gradual exposure to various textures in a playful, controlled context helps expand tactile tolerance while respecting the child's boundaries. The treasure hunt format adds motivation and structure, making texture exploration feel like an adventure rather than a challenge.

Setting Up the Treasure Hunt

Gather a variety of textures representing different categories: soft (cotton, fleece, silk), rough (sandpaper, burlap, bark), bumpy (bubble wrap, textured balls), squishy (play dough, stress balls), cold/warm items, wet/dry materials. Hide small treasures or preferred items within or beneath each texture. The child must touch or manipulate the texture to find the treasure.

Start with Tolerable Textures

Begin with textures the child already tolerates or enjoys. Success builds confidence and willingness to try more challenging textures later.

Introduce Variety Gradually

Add one slightly challenging texture at a time. If the child refuses, respect the boundary and try again another day. No pressure, no force.

Tools Before Direct Touch

Offer tools like paintbrushes, tongs, or gloves for exploring challenging textures. This provides control and allows gradual progression toward direct touch.

Progression Protocol

Week 1: Explore 5-6 preferred or tolerable textures. Focus on success and enjoyment. Week 2: Introduce one slightly challenging texture among the familiar ones. Keep the ratio heavily weighted toward success. Week 3-4: Gradually increase the proportion of challenging textures, always ensuring some easy successes remain. Week 5+: Begin introducing textures relevant to daily life challenges (clothing tags, food textures, craft materials needed for school). Throughout this process, maintain detailed notes on which textures are accepted, tolerated, or refused. Look for patterns—does temperature matter? Does texture predictability help? Does having control over the interaction increase tolerance?

Session 12: Heavy Work Station Circuit

Proprioceptive input—often called "heavy work"—involves activities that load the joints and muscles, providing deep pressure and body awareness. This type of sensory input is almost universally organizing and calming for individuals with ASD. Unlike other sensory systems that can be easily overloaded, the proprioceptive system generally responds positively to increased input, making heavy work a safe and effective regulation tool.

Creating Your Heavy Work Circuit

Design a rotation of activities that provide proprioceptive input through resistance, weight, or pressure. Each activity should last 2-5 minutes, with the full circuit taking 15-20 minutes. Rotate through activities rather than doing just one, as variety maintains engagement and works different muscle groups.

Wall Pushes

Push against a wall as hard as possible for 10-second intervals. This provides intense proprioceptive input with no equipment needed.

Resistive Activities

Theraputty exercises, hand grips, or stretchy resistance bands provide controlled proprioceptive input to hands and arms.

Heavy Carrying

Carry weighted objects (books, water bottles, weighted stuffed animal) from one location to another. Adjust weight to child's ability.

Jumping

Jump on a trampoline, jump rope, or do jumping jacks. The impact provides proprioceptive input through the joints.

Animal Walks

Bear crawls, crab walks, or wheelbarrow walks load the arm and shoulder joints while being playful and engaging.

Session 13: The Body Map Adventure

Many individuals with ASD have difficulty with body awareness—knowing where their body is in space, how to plan movements, or even recognizing when they're touching something. This activity builds interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness through playful mapping of body parts and their capabilities.

Creating a Body Map

Trace the child's body outline on large paper (or use a pre-made body outline). This becomes a visual map for exploring body awareness. Use the map to identify and mark different body parts, discuss what each part can do, and explore sensations in different areas.

Body Awareness Activities

1. **Body Part Identification:** Touch each body part and mark it on the map. Name it together. "This is your elbow. Can you feel me touching your elbow?"
2. **Movement Mapping:** Demonstrate what each body part can do. Mark movements on the map with arrows. "Your legs can bend, straighten, kick, and jump!"
3. **Sensation Spotting:** Touch different areas with various textures or temperatures. Mark which areas are more or less sensitive. Build awareness of sensory differences across the body.
4. **Strong and Gentle Touch:** Practice firm vs. light touch on different body parts. Many children tolerate firm touch better than light touch. Use the map to document preferences.

Advanced Body Mapping

Once basic body awareness is established, use the map for more complex activities. Create "mission" cards: "Can you touch your right elbow to your left knee?" This builds motor planning and body awareness simultaneously. Mark on the map where the child feels different emotions: "Where do you feel happy? Where do you feel worried?" This builds emotional interoception. Identify safe touch zones and uncomfortable touch zones, respecting the child's boundaries while building communication about physical contact. Use the body map to practice describing pain or discomfort to doctors or caregivers, building crucial communication skills for medical situations.

Session 14: Messy Play Tolerance Building

Messy play—activities involving substances like paint, glue, sand, water, or food—is often profoundly challenging for children with tactile sensitivities. Yet these activities are common in school and social settings. Rather than avoiding messy play entirely, we can build tolerance gradually, always respecting boundaries while gently expanding comfort zones.

The Messy Play Hierarchy

Not all messy substances are equally challenging. Work with the child to identify which materials are most and least tolerable, creating a personalized hierarchy. Generally, dry materials (rice, beans, sand) are easier than wet materials (water play, paint, mud). Contained mess (in a bin or on a tray) is easier than unlimited mess. Washable materials are easier than sticky or staining ones.

1

Tools Only—No Direct Touch

Explore messy materials using paintbrushes, tongs, spoons, or toy tools. The child controls the material without direct skin contact. This builds familiarity and reduces fear while maintaining comfort.

2

Barrier Protection

Progress to touching materials while wearing gloves, finger cots, or plastic bags on hands. This provides a protective barrier while allowing more direct interaction.

3

Brief, Controlled Contact

Encourage quick touches of the material: "Can you poke it once?" or "Can you touch it for just 3 seconds?" Immediate access to washing or wiping provides control.

4

Extended Direct Contact

As tolerance builds, extend the duration and intensity of contact. The child might begin to tolerate getting hands messy, though still may need frequent cleaning breaks.

5

Functional Messy Activities

Apply tolerance to functional activities like finger painting art projects, cooking activities, or gardening. These provide meaningful reasons for engaging with messy materials.

Session 15: Deep Pressure Protocol

Deep pressure has remarkable organizing and calming effects on the nervous system. Unlike light touch, which can be irritating or overstimulating, deep pressure activates the parasympathetic nervous system and releases calming neurotransmitters. This session provides multiple ways to incorporate deep pressure throughout the day.

Compression Clothing

Compression vests, tight-fitting base layers, or weighted vests provide constant gentle pressure. Start with short wearing periods and gradually increase as tolerated.

Weighted Blankets

Use weighted blankets during rest time, homework, or sleep. Follow safety guidelines: weight should be approximately 10% of body weight plus 1-2 pounds, and child must be able to remove it independently.

Therapeutic Squeezes

Provide firm hugs or "sandwich squeezes" between cushions. Always ask permission first: "Would a squeeze help?" Respect if the child declines—timing matters.

Body Sock or Pressure Burrito

Use stretchy lycra body socks or wrap the child in blankets with firm pressure. This provides contained, controlled deep pressure that many find extremely calming.

Deep Pressure Daily Integration

Deep pressure works best when integrated throughout the day rather than only during crisis moments. Morning routine: start the day with 10 minutes under a weighted blanket or with compression clothing. School transitions: brief deep pressure activities before challenging transitions. Homework time: sit on a therapy ball with a weighted lap pad or vest. Bedtime routine: include 15-20 minutes of deep pressure activities to promote sleep. Recognize individual preferences—some children prefer certain types of deep pressure over others. Offer choices and follow the child's lead regarding what feels organizing and calming.

Part Four: Self-Regulation Sequences for Different Contexts

Self-regulation doesn't look the same in every environment. What works at home may not be feasible at school. Morning regulation needs differ from bedtime needs. This final section provides context-specific regulation sequences that can be adapted to various settings and situations that children encounter in daily life.

These sequences combine elements from earlier sessions into comprehensive protocols tailored to specific challenging moments. By having prepared sequences, caregivers and children can respond more effectively when regulation challenges arise, rather than trying to problem-solve in the moment of dysregulation.

Session 16: Morning Launch Sequence

Morning transitions are notoriously difficult for many children with ASD. Moving from sleep to waking, managing the sensory experiences of personal care routines, and preparing for the day ahead all require significant regulatory resources. A consistent morning sequence can make this transition much smoother.

The Morning Regulation Protocol (20-30 minutes)

Gentle Wake-Up (5 minutes)

Use a gradual alarm or natural light alarm clock rather than jarring sounds. Allow time for the child to transition from sleep to waking without demands. Soft music or preferred sounds can help.

Heavy Work Wake-Up (5 minutes)

Incorporate proprioceptive activities immediately: pushing against the wall, bear crawls to the bathroom, carrying a laundry basket, or simple yoga poses. This organizes the nervous system for the day ahead.

Predictable Routine (10 minutes)

Follow the same sequence every day: bathroom, get dressed, breakfast. Use visual schedules to provide predictability. Minimize unexpected changes to the routine.

Sensory Check-In (3 minutes)

Have the child identify their "weather" (from Session 2) and choose regulation tools for the day: fidgets for backpack, headphones, compression shirt, or other tools based on anticipated challenges.

Preview and Prepare (5 minutes)

Review the day's schedule together, identifying any changes or challenges. Problem-solve in advance: "We have an assembly today—let's pack your headphones and plan to sit near the exit."

Clothing and Personal Care Adaptations

Clothing sensitivities can derail the entire morning. Keep multiple sets of the same comfortable clothing to reduce decisions and ensure availability. Remove all tags and choose seamless, soft fabrics. Allow the child to wear yesterday's clothes if they're clean and that reduces stress. Consider compression clothing as the base layer. For personal care routines, use preferred-scent or unscented products. Allow some control: "Do you want to brush teeth first or get dressed first?" Build in extra time so rushing doesn't add stress to already challenging sensory experiences.

Session 17: School Survival Strategies

School environments present intense sensory and regulatory challenges: fluorescent lights, loud cafeterias, unexpected fire drills, close physical proximity to peers, multiple transitions, and sustained attention demands. Success requires both environmental modifications and portable regulation strategies.

Environmental Modifications

- Preferential seating: away from high-traffic areas, near exits, away from bright windows
- Access to alternative lighting: desk lamp instead of overhead fluorescents
- Movement breaks: scheduled opportunities for proprioceptive input
- Quiet space access: permission to use library, resource room, or designated calm space when overwhelmed
- Modified cafeteria arrangements: eat in classroom, wear headphones, or come to cafeteria during less crowded times

Portable School Tools

- Fidget tools that don't distract others (quiet fidgets, therapy putty)
- Noise-canceling headphones or earplugs
- Chewy jewelry or gum (if allowed) for oral sensory input
- Weighted lap pad for sustained attention activities
- Visual supports: schedule, break cards, communication cards
- Comfort item from home if permitted

The School Sensory Break Protocol

Teach the child to recognize early signs of dysregulation and advocate for breaks before reaching crisis level. Develop a signal system with teachers—a card, hand signal, or code word that communicates "I need a break" without drawing attention. Create a designated break area or routine: walk to the water fountain and back, visit the library for 5 minutes, do wall pushes in the hallway, or use the sensory corner in the classroom.

1 Recognize Warning Signs

Teach the child to notice increased fidgeting, difficulty focusing, feeling overwhelmed, or physical tension—these are signals that regulation is decreasing.

2 Request Break Immediately

Use the agreed-upon signal to request a break before dysregulation escalates to crisis level. Early intervention is key.

3 Engage in Regulation Activity

Go to the designated break space and use prepared strategies: deep breathing, proprioceptive activities, or preferred sensory input.

4 Return When Ready

Allow the child to determine when they're ready to return, within reasonable limits. Forced early return often means the break was ineffective.

Session 18: Bedtime Wind-Down Ritual

Sleep difficulties are extremely common in ASD, often related to difficulties with sensory regulation and transition management. A consistent, sensory-supportive bedtime routine can significantly improve sleep quality and decrease bedtime struggles.

The 60-Minute Wind-Down Protocol

60 Minutes Before Bed: Screen Shutdown

Turn off all screens and blue light sources. The blue light suppresses melatonin production and makes sleep more difficult. Transition to calm, non-electronic activities.

45 Minutes Before: Heavy Work Activities

Engage in 15 minutes of proprioceptive activities: carrying laundry, wall pushes, jumping on trampoline, or animal walks. This helps discharge excess energy and organize the nervous system.

30 Minutes Before: Calming Sensory Activities

Warm bath with dim lighting, gentle massage with preferred lotion, or brushing protocol if using Wilbarger approach. Keep the environment calm with soft lighting and quiet sounds.

15 Minutes Before: Transition to Bedroom

Move to the bedroom environment. Engage in quiet activities: reading, listening to calming music, or gentle conversation. Use consistent routine every night.

Final 10 Minutes: Deep Pressure and Breathing

Apply weighted blanket, do progressive muscle relaxation, or practice breathing exercises. This final stage should be predictably calm and consistent every night.

Session 19: Community Outing Preparation

Trips to stores, restaurants, medical appointments, or other community locations can be extraordinarily challenging due to unpredictable sensory input, crowds, unexpected changes, and unfamiliar environments. Careful preparation can make these outings more successful and less stressful for everyone.

The Before-During-After Framework

Before: Preparation Phase

Preview the location using photos, videos, or a brief pre-visit if possible. Discuss what to expect, including sensory experiences: "The store will be bright and might have loud music." Pack a sensory toolkit: headphones, fidgets, snacks, visual schedule. Plan timing to avoid peak crowds when possible. Identify safe spaces or exit strategies.

During: Active Support

Arrive with the sensory toolkit easily accessible. Implement accommodations immediately: put on headphones before entering, start with grounding strategies. Take preventive breaks before dysregulation starts. Narrate what's happening to provide predictability. Stick to the planned agenda—unexpected changes increase stress. Watch for early warning signs and respond quickly with regulation strategies.

After: Recovery Time

Recognize that community outings are exhausting. Plan downtime immediately after for sensory recovery. Don't schedule multiple demanding activities back-to-back. Offer preferred regulating activities: quiet time, favorite shows, proprioceptive activities. Debrief what went well and what was challenging—this information improves future planning.

Session 20: Building Independent Self-Regulation Skills

The ultimate goal of all these sessions is building independent self-regulation—the ability to recognize one's own regulatory state, choose appropriate strategies, and implement them without constant adult support. This is a gradual process that unfolds over years, but we can actively teach these skills from early childhood.

The Self-Regulation Skill Progression

Continuing Your Sensory Regulation Journey

These 20 session scripts provide a comprehensive framework for supporting sensory regulation in children and adolescents with ASD. However, remember that these are starting points, not rigid prescriptions. Each child is unique, with their own sensory profile, preferences, challenges, and strengths. Your role is to take these tools and adapt them to meet individual needs, always following the child's lead and respecting their limits while gently expanding their comfort zones.

Key Principles to Remember

- **Respect over force:** Never force sensory exposure. Coercion creates trauma, not tolerance.
- **Slow and steady:** Building sensory tolerance takes months or years, not days or weeks. Patience yields lasting results.
- **Celebrate small wins:** Every tiny step forward deserves recognition. Progress isn't linear—honor the journey.
- **Individual differences matter:** What works for one child may not work for another. Stay flexible and observant.
- **Regulation first, demands second:** A dysregulated child cannot learn, follow directions, or behave appropriately. Regulation is the foundation for everything else.

Building Your Support Team

Sensory regulation support works best with a collaborative team approach. Consider involving:

- Occupational therapists specializing in sensory integration
- Educational professionals who understand sensory needs
- Medical providers aware of sensory processing differences
- Family members who can provide consistency across settings
- The child themselves as the expert on their own experience

Resources for Continued Learning

Continue expanding your knowledge about sensory processing and regulation. Organizations like the STAR Institute, research on sensory processing disorder, occupational therapy resources, and the growing body of literature on autism and sensory differences all offer valuable information. Most importantly, remain curious about the child's experience. Ask questions, observe patterns, and let their responses guide your approach. They are the true experts on their own sensory needs.

Your Sensory Regulation Toolkit

20	4	∞
Session Scripts	**Core Areas**	**Adaptations**
Ready-to-implement protocols for various sensory challenges and contexts	Calming activities, sound tolerance, tactile/proprioception, and context-specific strategies	Infinite possibilities for customizing these approaches to individual needs

You now have a comprehensive toolkit for supporting sensory regulation in children and adolescents with ASD. These sessions provide structure, evidence-based strategies, and practical guidance for navigating the sensory challenges that impact daily functioning. Remember that implementing these approaches is an act of love, advocacy, and profound support for individuals navigating a sensory world that wasn't designed with their needs in mind.

Every time you help a child find calm in chaos, build tolerance for a challenging sensation, or develop the skills to regulate their own nervous system, you're changing their life trajectory. You're teaching them that they can feel safe in their own body, that they have tools to manage overwhelm, and that their sensory differences don't have to limit their potential.

> "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future." This wisdom applies beautifully to sensory regulation work. We're not just managing today's challenges—we're building lifelong skills that will serve these remarkable individuals throughout their lives.

Approach this work with patience, compassion, creativity, and hope. The journey may be long, but the destination—a child who understands and can regulate their own sensory needs—is profoundly worth every step. Thank you for being part of this crucial support system. Your dedication makes an immeasurable difference.