

Designing a sensory-friendly bathroom

closomat®

Introduction

This guide will provide you with best practice advice and ideas on designing a sensory-friendly bathroom. It covers all areas of bathroom design including lighting, flooring, fixtures, and heating.



Who is this guide for?

This guide has been produced for all those involved in caring for children and adults with sensory processing difficulties:

- Health and care professionals
- DFG technical officers
- Relatives and carers
- Contractors who carry out bathroom adaptations
- Social landlords

What are sensory processing difficulties?

We all have eight senses that transmit messages to our brain about the world around us.

The eight senses are:

- Tactile (touch)
- Visual (sight)
- Auditory (hearing)
- Oral (taste)
- Olfactory (smell)
- Vestibular (movement)
- Proprioception (body position)
- Introspection (internal messages such as hunger, thirst and needing to urinate)

We subconsciously process the abundant information received from these senses to block out what's not useful and turn our attention to the task at hand. For example, when talking with friends, we can ignore the sound of passing cars to focus on the conversation.



Sensory processing disorder (SPD) – the umbrella term that covers all sensory processing difficulties – is where children and adults struggle with organising and integrating information from the senses. They are unable to notice and filter both internal and external information, often causing them to become dysregulated. This inability to self-regulate often results in a meltdown where the nervous system switches to fight-or-flight mode because the brain has become overloaded with information.

Some examples of sensory difficulties include intolerance to loud noises, unexpected touch or the feeling of clothing labels, as well as sensitivity to bright lights, disliking hair brushing, being a picky eater, spinning on the spot and clumsiness.

These problems with managing everyday life can be incredibly overwhelming and frightening for people with SPD, and even the smallest of tasks can pose huge obstacles. So finding ways to support them to remain calm and regulated will give them the skills they need to be independent.

What is a sensory-friendly bathroom?

It considers the needs of people who have sensory processing difficulties. Staying regulated can be challenging in different environments and while carrying out self care tasks – so careful consideration is needed when designing a bathroom to accommodate their needs.

Why is it so important to create well-designed, sensory-friendly bathrooms?

The bathroom is typically the smallest room in a house, but it plays a vital role in our day-to-day lives. It can be a very taxing and hazardous environment for someone with sensory processing difficulties, as often they have a different awareness of danger.

A well-designed bathroom will create a soothing and welcoming space. For children, this is particularly crucial – unless they can remain regulated in the bathroom, they won't be able to learn and practise the essential skills needed to look after themselves. One in 20 children have some degree of sensory processing difficulty* and these difficulties remain into adulthood. However, with an understanding of their needs and optimal bathroom design, you can help them to achieve independent bathing and toilet skills.

Click here for additional information on sensory processing difficulties

With a few simple design considerations, creating a sensory-friendly bathroom will provide a safe and serene environment, helping to relieve stress and anxiety, and making full use of the bathroom a more enjoyable experience. With this comes confidence and an improved quality of life for people living with sensory processing difficulties.



Design guide

Our design guide is split into two sections:

- The individual – A person-centred approach to bathroom design, highlighting the challenges experienced by people with SPD and offering solutions to accommodate their needs
- The product – A product guide dealing with all aspects of bathroom design

The individual

Lighting

Challenge	Solution
Light sensitivity is common for people with SPD. It can cause them pain and discomfort, especially when the light is reflecting off other hard surfaces. Many people with visual sensitivities will squint or cover their eyes when lights are too bright, preventing them from carrying out the task at hand.	Where possible, use natural daylight, but fit a soft fabric blind or install frosted glass to diffuse direct sunlight. Fit dimmer switches so the level of light can be adjusted to fit the mood. Fit soft task lighting above the sink area to allow for targeted light for specific tasks – and always choose opaque bulbs, as this will diffuse the light. Minimise the number of shiny surfaces by choosing matt tiles, installing a shower curtain instead of a shower screen and positioning mirrors adjacent to any windows.
Some children with SPD will seek visual input – so for these children, the bathroom light alone may not be enough for them to remain regulated.	A sensory light projected onto the wall or ceiling or coloured smart bulbs will help a sensory-seeking child remain engaged with their task.

Flooring

Challenge	Solution
Body temperature regulation can be affected by SPD. For some, cold tiles will be unbearable and cause a significant amount of distress.	Fit soft flooring such as vinyl or rubber, as these will be warm and soft underfoot.
Children with movement-seeking behaviours may put themselves at risk of a fall if they move too quickly or unpredictably on a slippery tiled floor.	Nonslip flooring reduces the chance of a fall.
Bathmats create a trip hazard for people with movement and balance difficulties.	Nonslip flooring reduces the need for bathmats, creating a safer environment with fewer trip hazards.
Wood and tiled floors can enhance the noise and make the room echoey, which can be painful for people with sensitive hearing.	Fit soft flooring such as vinyl or rubber to help reduce noise reduction. Cork flooring is also a good sound-proofing material and can endure a typical amount of bathroom heat and humidity. If it's safe to do so, use strategically placed bathmats by the bath, shower and sink to help absorb any noise.

Tiles and wall coverings

Challenge	Solution
Loud, echoey spaces can often be frightening for people who are sensitive to noise. For those who seek noise, bathroom sounds could be very relaxing, and they may even crave more noise.	Consider the tiles in your space – large tiles have a bigger surface area and are better at absorbing sounds. Also, thicker tiles made of dense materials will offer additional sound-proofing properties. Fitting ceiling speakers is a safe way to play calming music in the bathroom.
For people with visual sensitivities, a small room can be overwhelming, especially if the walls are patterned or overly detailed.	Avoid patterned tiles and instead opt for neutral colours and plain designs.

Heating

Challenge	Solution
Many people with SPD have issues with regulating their body temperature. The changes in temperature when undressing or getting out of a warm bath may be a shock and their skin may be painful to the touch.	Underfloor heating will keep the whole room warm, and the feeling underfoot will be more comforting.
Some children with SPD often have comorbid diagnoses – such as autistic spectrum disorder – which can have a big impact on danger awareness, impulsivity, and compulsivity. These children are at risk of scalds and burns.	Fit low surface temperature radiators that will heat the room but are safe to touch when on to prevent burns and scalds. Make sure all exposed pipes are covered with foam insulation.

Bath

Challenge	Solution
For people with movement and body positioning issues, transferring in and out of the bath can be demanding, as they have a limited understanding of how their body is orientated – or if it's stable. They may have difficulty with depth perception, balance, and coordination, putting them at risk of a fall.	Grab rails and a step will assist with safer bath transfers. A nonslip bathmat will also help them feel steadier on their feet.
Children with limited danger awareness are at increased risk of burns and scalds – especially if they have tactile difficulties that mean they cannot recognise pain and extreme temperatures.	Fit thermostatic taps to prevent burns and scalds.
Some children with SPD display obsessive and repetitive behaviours and often have a fascination with water. This is particularly hazardous if they also have a limited awareness of danger.	Fitting both a flood-proof plug and taps that turn off automatically after half an hour will limit the chance of flooding occurring.
For people with tactile difficulties, the hard bathtub pressing against their skin may be painful or uncomfortable.	A nonslip bathmat, or bath comforter and pillow, will provide a soft surface between skin and the bathtub.

Toilet

Challenge	Solution
For people who experience tactile sensitivities, the physical sensation and mess of using the toilet could be very daunting and stressful. They may also find the texture of toilet paper too rough on their skin when wiping.	A shower toilet that provides a wash and dry system could support a quick and easy clean up. The flow of water will be a gentler sensation on the skin compared to wiping.
People with body positioning difficulties may also struggle to wipe themselves after using the toilet. This is a very difficult task, as it is completed outside of their visual field, and they cannot see what their hand is doing.	A shower toilet can support independent cleaning, as it would eliminate the need to twist and carry out any tasks outside their visual field.
From a tactile perspective, sitting on a cold, hard toilet seat might be painful against the skin.	Fit a padded toilet seat, as this will feel softer and warmer to the touch. Also consider the size of the toilet seat's aperture and provide children with suitably sized seats, if necessary.
People with auditory sensitivities may find the loud, sudden sound of a toilet seat closing frightening. If this fear intensifies, it could create incontinence issues.	Fit a soft-close toilet seat and lid, as this will reduce the noise when closing.
Balancing while sitting on the toilet can be difficult for anyone with movement and body positioning issues, especially if their feet do not touch the floor.	A step and handrail may offer sufficient stability support. However, for people with more complex balance and coordination difficulties, you may want to install a commode chair over the toilet seat.

Sinks

Challenge	Solution
Children with limited danger awareness may be at increased risk of burns and scalds, especially if they cannot register hot temperatures.	Fit thermostatic taps to prevent burns and scalds.
Some children with extreme sensory processing difficulties are driven to play with water compulsively and may not notice any overrunning water or flooding.	Fitting flood-proof plugs and taps that automatically turn off after half an hour will limit the risk of floods occurring.

Shower, shower screens and curtains

Challenge	Solution
For people with tactile difficulties, the shock of water touching their skin while showering can be very painful and distressing. They may also be unable to regulate their body temperature and may not notice if the water is too hot or too cold. Drying off with a towel may create sensory overload if they cannot tolerate a lot of touch at once, and they may choose to air dry instead, becoming cold in the process.	Fit a rainfall shower head, as its greater surface area offers a low-pressure flow of water. A thermostatic shower will limit the risk of burns or scalds. Using an iDry could support someone who prefers a softer touch, as the device supplies a gentle flow of warm air, drying the body without any rubbing.
Anyone with movement issues may have difficulties with depth perception, balance, and coordination, putting them at risk of falling in the shower.	Grab rails fixed to the shower walls and a nonslip mat or anti-slip shower tray can limit the risk of slips and falls.
A child with movement-seeking behaviours may move quickly and unpredictably, putting them at risk of a fall.	Fit an anti-slip shower tray, as a nonslip mat could cause an additional trip hazard. Fit a PET plastic shower screen. As it's constructed of a softer material than glass, it reduces the possibility of an injury if a child falls against it.
Too much visual stimulation can make it very difficult for someone with these sensitivities to focus on self-care tasks. Also, the glare from an excessive number of hard, shiny surfaces can be too intense.	Fit a frosted shower screen, as it is less reflective than standard glass and minimises visual stimuli when showering.

Storage

Challenge	Solution
Bathrooms can be noisy environments due to the number of hard surfaces. These echoey noises can be uncomfortable for anyone with hearing sensitivities.	Use open shelving to store towels and decorate with potted plants, as these will help to absorb any noise and lessen the reverberation.
For anyone overstimulated by visual input, a bathroom can be a very stressful space due to the number of products and equipment on display. Children with limited danger awareness and tactile-seeking behaviours may look to empty the contents of any bottles within reach.	Storing products such as shampoo, shower gel, sponges, and cleaning supplies in a cupboard with doors will make the bathroom feel less cluttered and visually more calming. Fitting an invisible magnet lock to the cupboard will ensure children cannot access any products without supervision.

We're specialists in helping people with specific toileting needs.

We invented the Wash and Dry toilet over 60 years ago, and tens of thousands of people use our products every day to help them live their best lives. So we can say, with confidence, that we understand the needs of users better than any other manufacturer and we use this unrivalled knowledge to determine what is important (and what is not!).

We help OTs build specifications every day, and we can be there for you whether you need us on site with you to help determine the best possible solution for your client, or we can do this remotely, should access not be possible for clinical reasons.



Our products have been designed in consultation with healthcare professionals and have a range of clinical, health and well-being benefits.

We know that everyone is different, even if they have the same disability or condition. That's why we ensure our products are customisable in thousands of ways. This may seem complicated; but it isn't. It simply means that we can support you whatever your client's requirements are at the time of specification or into the future.



We’re a UK-based manufacturer, and on hand to help

We’re the only specialist UK-based manufacturer of Wash and Dry Toilets.

We have our own service team and our own engineers, meaning that we can ensure a consistent and expert back up service for our products, for you, and for your clients.

We understand that our products provide a much-valued level of independence, which is relied on every day. As such our in-house service team are on hand to maintain, repair and adapt your toilet for as long as your client needs it.



Closomat Limited
Building 1, Brooklands Place,
Brooklands Road,
Sale, Cheshire, M33 3SD

Freephone: 0800 374 076
Telephone: 0161 969 1199

General Enquiries: info@closomat.co.uk
Sales Orders/Enquiries: sales@closomat.co.uk
Quotations/Pricing: quotations@closomat.co.uk

DESIGNED AND BUILT IN BRITAIN

In collaboration with

the OT service

For more information view our webinar:

closomat.co.uk/webinars/

closomat®

closomat.co.uk