



## Volunteer Training - Learning about Sensory Needs

### How our senses impact self-regulation.

#### Our sensory systems

**We interact with the world and our own body through our senses.** The senses that are most relevant for our class are the visual, auditory (hearing), vestibular (sense of head movement position in space), proprioceptive (sense of body position in space from muscles and joints), and tactile (touch) systems.

#### Sensory experiences

**We each have a unique, dynamic sensory comfort level for each sense individually and for all our senses together.**

#### Sensory pleasure

We each find specific kinds of sensory experiences pleasing. For example, we may like the sound of a pen clicking or the feeling of a specific scarf. We may seek out specific sensory experiences because it is pleasing and/or helps soothe us. For example, when you are stressed out, you may want to go for a walk outside because you find the deep pressure of walking with a heavy step soothing and grounding. Some other examples of actions we may see as self-soothing are putting items in one's mouth, moving in one's spot or around the room, moving one's hands and arms in a repetitive motion, singing, chewing on items, etc. Sensory experiences are powerful tools that all of us use to manage discomfort.



#### Sensory discomfort

We also each have sensory experiences that we find uncomfortable. For example, some of us may find fully-illuminated fluorescent lights to be uncomfortable but have no issue with the sound at a concert, whereas others may have no sensitivity to light but find the volume at a movie theatre uncomfortable.



## Factors that might affect sensory experiences

**When we are tired, in pain, hungry, anxious, etc., we may find we are less tolerant of sensory information in general.** When we experience too much sensory information, like going to a loud, bright, warm arcade, we may find that all these experiences together make us uncomfortable even if we would find the experiences each individually tolerable (ie. a warm room but it is dimly lit and quiet, or a bright space that is cool and quiet). It is important to understand our sensory system because our sensory experiences can impact our self-regulation, energy, and participation in class.

## What is Self-regulation?



Take a deep breath



Count to 10



Go for a walk

**Self-regulation is a general term for the management of stress.** Our ability to manage stressors in our environment is essential for our participation in activities in the moment. Stressors can be many things - sensory information in the environment, fatigue, hunger, etc.

Often, we self-regulate through taking actions in the moment or prior to an event to help us manage the potential stress of a situation. Some examples might be mapping out your route to a new location before you leave to help ease the stress of getting lost, using self-talk (speaking to yourself out loud or in your head to soothe your stress and/or help you return to a calmer state), using a schedule to help us anticipate the sequence of experiences to manage stress, moving (leg shaking, walking/pacing, hand wringing, etc), and deep breathing. **In your role as volunteers, you can assist dancers in self-regulating either by reducing stressors or facilitating self-regulation.**

**We prioritize self-regulation in the Adaptive Dance Program and as such, we encourage our dancers to move and participate in a way that facilitates their regulation.** When a child is regulated, that is when they're most curious, comfortable, receptive, and able to follow instructions. Our dancers may self-regulate by joining us for part of the class and then choosing to go home, moving outside of the circle, using devices/sensory aids they enjoy/benefit from, etc.

## What is dysregulation?

**When we are feeling overwhelmed by the sensory information in the space and we cannot self-regulate, we can experience dysregulation.** This means we are in a stressed

state and have trouble managing our attention, energy, behaviour, and feelings in the moment because we are stressed out and uncomfortable.

Think back to a time when you felt “stuck” and physically uncomfortable in a situation because of the sensory information and/or what was going on in your body - you were at school when you were ill and felt overwhelmed by all the noise in your classroom; you were on a long, warm airplane ride in an uncomfortable chair; the new top or pants you were wearing were stuffy and scratchy and you couldn't change until the end of the day. **The feeling in your body of frustration, anxiety, stress, etc were you starting to feeling dysregulated.** Maybe you were successfully able to manage the stress in the moment (e.g. distract yourself, breathe deeply, etc) or maybe you removed yourself from the stressful situation (e.g. went home from school, walked around the airplane aisles, changed outfits). These types of strategies are what we hope to help our dancers engage in when they are feeling dysregulated.

### **What does dysregulation look like as a stress response?**

- Distraction
- Impulsivity
- Difficulty listening to instructions
- Getting frustrated easily
- High energy
- Desire to do their own activities as opposed to what the group is doing
- Zoning out
- Desire for space
- Desire to be alone
- Desire to exit
- Decreased or increased movement (e.g. jumping, running, crashing, hanging off structures, pushing, flapping, hitting, pinching, freezing, etc.)
- Decreased eye contact
- Increased or decreased vocalizations (ie. speaking, humming, singing, yelling, etc)
- Decreased responsiveness to questions

### **Reframing our perspective**

When our dancers display challenging behaviours, **we encourage our volunteers to perceive the child's behaviour not as something that is willfully defiant, attention-seeking, etc but as the child communicating that they're having a challenge with self-regulation.**

### **What self-regulation strategies are used in the class?**

**We prioritize our students' self-regulation and comfort in the ADP above their replication of the dance teachers' and/or other dancers' movements or regulation strategies.** We aim to provide each dancer with the strategies and materials they need/would like to use to regulate themselves during the class to best facilitate their engagement in and enjoyment of the class. **Generally, we can assist our dancers in regulating themselves by offering sensory aids;**

**maintaining a calm energy ourselves; providing choice around how (or if) they participate in the class; and speaking in clear, uncomplicated language (and/or using visuals).**

As we are all dynamic individuals, strategies and resources that may work for us one day may not for another so it is important we keep an open and flexible mind to allow us to experiment with other strategies and resources as seems appropriate for your dance buddy (in collaboration with the Occupational Therapist and/or the dance teacher).