

Pre-Test

Back to School: Sensory-Smart Strategies for School Success

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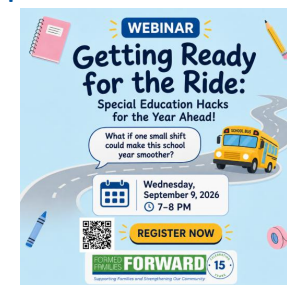
Formed Families Forward - who we are...

- A family-led resource center in Northern Virginia supporting foster, adoptive and kinship families who are raising children, youth & young adults with disabilities, mental health conditions and other specialized needs, and professionals who work with our families.
- We offer free training, consultations to families, events, resources, and systems navigation. Also - peer support groups; webinars; events; videos and other resources.
- Family partner to Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS; a VDOE project)

Certificate of Attendance

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Special Education "Hacks" webinar on September 9



Register for FREE webinar at <https://bit.ly/SpecialEdHacks>

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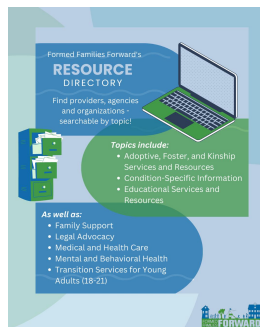
- Free, on-line, on-demand learning
- Self-paced & interactive
- Certificates of Completion
- 7 Courses Available:
 - Special Education 101
 - Constructive Communication & Collaboration
 - Special Education Dispute Resolution
 - Trauma 101
 - Kinship Care
 - Other Health Impairment
 - Positive Parenting



Registration link:

<https://bit.ly/LYWfall26>

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<https://formedfamiliesforward.org/resources/>

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Support Group



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Introductions: Drop in the chat

- Who are you?
- Name one challenge related to caring for your foster/adopted/kinship child(ren) that concerns you as they embark on a new school year?



Session goals

By the end, participants will be able to...

Understand the challenge

What "back-to-school" can activate for children in foster, adoptive, and kinship families with specialized needs

Recognize sensory needs

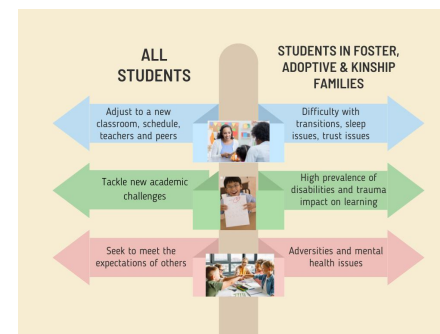
Identify signs of sensory overload, sensory seeking, shutdown, and difficulty with body cues.

Respond effectively

Use trauma-informed strategies that build felt safety, reduce escalation, and strengthen connection. Explore how to share these strategies with school staff.

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Back to School Challenges

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Why the Start of the School Year Might be Hard



- Transitions can stir up both needs and memories
- New people, spaces, rules, smells, sounds, and expectations
 - Loss, separation, placement history, or school changes may resurface
 - Disability-related needs may look like “behavior” before adults understand them
 - Children may hold it together at school and fall apart at home

The first 30 days: what to watch

Body	→	sleep, stomachaches, headaches, appetite
Mood	→	irritability, anxiety, sadness, shutdown
School	→	avoidance, calls home, missing work, peer issues
Home	→	after-school meltdowns, regression, clinginess
Services	→	IEP/504 supports actually happening

Caregiver prompt: “Is this a new behavior, a louder version of an old pattern, or a sign that school supports need adjustment?”

Use a brain-based lens to understand behavior

Common areas of impact

Attention • memory • impulse control • adaptive skills • communication • learning • emotional regulation • judgment

Caregiver reframe

The child may not be choosing difficulty. Their brain may be working harder to do what looks simple from the outside.



Try: “What support does this brain need right now?”

Zero in on Sensory Processing

Sensory processing is how the nervous system receives input and turns it into action.

Input

Light, sound, touch, movement, smell, taste, internal body cues

→

Processing

The brain sorts: safe or unsafe? important or background? too much or not enough?

→

Response

Approach, avoid, seek, freeze, shut down, melt down, or connect

Sensory differences are common across autism, ADHD, FASD, anxiety, trauma histories, intellectual/developmental disabilities, and other neurodevelopmental profiles.

Approximately 80% of children who have experienced complex trauma will have sensitivities in the way they process sensory information.

8 Sensory Systems

Visual

Auditory

Tactile

Olfactory

Gustatory

Vestibular

balance, motion

Proprioceptive

muscle, joints, pressure

Interoception

hunger, pain, bathroom, emotions

Sensory patterns caregivers may see

A child can be over-responsive in one system and under-responsive or seeking in another.

Over-responsive

Reacts strongly to input: covers ears, avoids touch, gags, bolts, cries, becomes irritable, or shuts down.

Under-responsive

Misses or barely notices input: does not feel messy face, hunger, pain, bathroom needs, or people calling their name.

Sensory seeking

Needs more input to feel regulated: crashing, spinning, chewing, squeezing, fidgeting, loud sounds, constant movement.

Patterns change with fatigue, stress, hunger, novelty, transitions, grief, reminders of trauma, and relationship safety.

Examples of Sensory Sensitivities

Sight

School

- Visual clutter/chaos
- Classroom
- Cafeteria
- Fluorescent lights

Home

- Visual clutter/chaos
- Cluttered/lumpy bedroom and common areas

Smell

School

- Cafeteria - smells of foods
- Cleaning supplies
- School supplies
- (glue, markers, clay, etc.)
- Other people

Home

- Kitchen/cooking
- Cleaning supplies
- Toiletries

Taste

School

- School lunch
- Classroom treats
- Restrictions on what can be in packed lunch

Home

- Unfamiliar spices
- Unfamiliar foods

Touch

School & Home

- Clothes (shoes, socks, seams, tags, etc.)
- Texture of lunch/snacks
- Others bumping/brushing against
- Furniture/Carpet texture
- Personal care
- Physical activity with materials (the gym mats or sports equipment)

How sensory needs can look like “behavior”

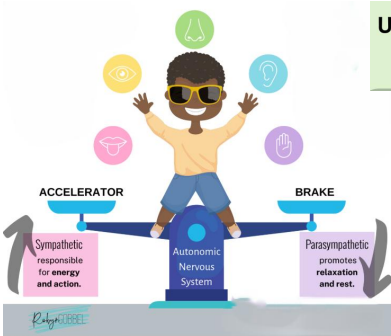
Many big behaviors are nervous system communication.

Looks like	Could be
Defiance	auditory overload or slow processing
Aggression	panic, pain, or need for deep pressure
Running away	escape from sensory threat
Refusing hygiene	tactile, smell, temperature, or interoception barrier
Lying/denying	fear response, memory gap, shame, or overwhelm

Video- A Day in the Life...



Sensory Integration Education



Understanding Sensory Regulation

Keeping the Body in Balance

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Trauma-informed sensory support

Trauma and sensory processing interact through the survival brain.



Felt safety first

The body must experience safety before the brain can reason, learn, apologize, or problem-solve.

Predictability lowers threat

Visual routines, previews, choices, and transition warnings reduce uncertainty and surprise.

Connection is regulation

A calm adult voice, lower demands, respectful distance, and attuned presence can help the nervous system settle.

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Connection-building language

Words can reduce threat or increase it.

Instead of...

“Stop it.”
“Why are you acting like this?”
“You know better.”
“You’re fine.”

Try...

“Your body is telling us this is too much.”
“I can help you find a quieter place.”
“Let’s make this smaller.”
“You are safe. We will solve it after your body calms.”

Use fewer words, a warmer tone, and concrete choices.

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Build a simple regulation plan

Before school

Predictable routine, visual schedule, connection ritual, protein/water

At school

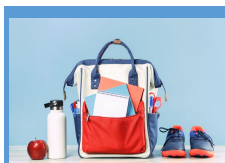
Break card, sensory tool, safe adult, movement, quiet space

After school

Low-demand transition, snack, decompression, repair later

Ask: “What helps this child’s body feel safe enough to learn?”

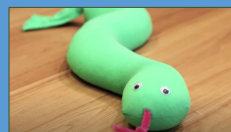
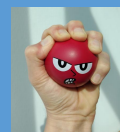
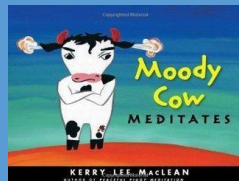
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Build a sensory detective plan

Track patterns so supports become proactive rather than reactive.

Before

What happened earlier?
Sleep, hunger, transition,
demand, crowd, noise,
smell, conflict?

During

What did the body do?
Cover ears, run, freeze,
chew, crash, hide, yell,
stare?

After

What helped recovery?
Quiet, pressure, snack,
movement, connection,
reduced words?

Look for the pattern, then change the plan. The child should not have to “fail” repeatedly before adults adjust the environment.

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Sensory supports by system

Match the support to the sensory need you observe.

Sound

Noise-reducing headphones,
quiet space, lower voice,
warning before loud sounds

Touch

Tagless clothes, firm pressure
with consent, hygiene
choices, texture alternatives

Movement

Movement breaks, rocking
chair, wall pushes, walks,
obstacle course

Body awareness

Heavy work, carrying
groceries, resistance bands,
deep-pressure tools

Interoception

Regular snacks/water,
bathroom prompts, feelings
thermometer, body check-ins

Visual/Smell

Sunglasses, hats, reduce
clutter, unscented products,
scent-free space

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Sensory Preferences

Name: _____ Date: _____	Name: _____ Date: _____
My Sensory Preferences  Touch & Texture ☐ I like squishy slime or putty ☐ I like soft textures or fabrics ☐ I like textured balls or socks ☐ I like smooth objects or metal objects ☐ I like smoothie drinking with a straw and a hard sippy  Movement ☐ I like swinging back and forth ☐ I like spinning in circles ☐ I like climbing large toys or slides ☐ I like hanging upside down ☐ I like jumping and feeling a rebound in my tummy  Calmness Spaces ☐ I like sitting in the quiet zone ☐ I like hiding in tents or forts ☐ I like sitting facing the LED or melody lights ☐ I like making it to school or sensory tables ☐ I like brushing out sounds with headphones  Sounds ☐ I like low music ☐ I like quiet and calm nature sounds like rain. ☐ I like music inside the music or a car ☐ I like making noise with bells or on my voice ☐ I like singing my favorite songs	My Sensory Preferences  Smells ☐ I like smelling ☐ I like smelling sweet berries or melons ☐ I like smelling fruit or flowers ☐ I like being next to sweet smells from the kitchen ☐ I like the pairing with scented dryerase  Visuals ☐ I like watching bubbles float or spin ☐ I like watching other's faces and eye goals ☐ I like watching other's faces and eye goals ☐ I like watching lights and patterns ☐ I like examining objects up close to my eyes ☐ I like watching water in fountains or rivers  Proprioception & Deep Pressure ☐ I like pressure from my legs or weighted blankets ☐ I like pushing and pulling carts or weights ☐ I like stretching and yoga mats ☐ I like squeezing balls or stuffed animals ☐ I like 20mg heavy items like books or my backpack  Tastes ☐ I like crunchy food like pretzels, carrots or chips ☐ I like sweet like gummies or bubble gum ☐ I like cold items like granola or smoothies ☐ I like the texture from the melt and sticky ☐ I like smooth food like yogurt or apple sauce

Partner with professionals

Caregivers should not have to figure this out alone.

Occupational therapy

Assessment of sensory processing, functional routines, adaptive tools, environmental supports, and caregiver coaching.

Medical & behavioral health

Screen for sleep, pain, hunger, medication effects, anxiety, trauma symptoms, and co-occurring conditions.

School & community team

Use accommodations, predictable routines, sensory supports, crisis plans, and shared language across settings.

Ask: "What does this person need for access, regulation, safety, and participation?"

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Reducing the sensory load at school

Design the environment so the child does not have to spend all day coping.

Lower intensity

Dim harsh lights, reduce background noise, minimize visual clutter, offer quiet spaces.

Build predictability

Use first/then, visual schedules, countdowns, and consistent routines.

Offer regulation tools

Headphones, chew tools, fidgets, movement breaks, heavy work, weighted lap items, textured options.



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Practice scenario

Use the sensory + trauma-informed lens.

A 10-year-old in foster care melts down every evening during homework. They yell, throw pencils, deny having homework, and hide under the table. The caregiver feels frustrated because the child “did fine yesterday.”

What might be underneath?

What could support look like?

Prompt: What would you change before, during, and after homework?

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All About Me!

- A positive student profile helps quickly and visually orient teachers and other staff with whom your child will be working
- Can include sensory preferences and aversions
- Clarifies important family and other background information & states what information is/is not to be shared
- Succinctly states strengths/challenges
- Leaves no room for lack of contact!

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Student Profile

All About Me		Name:	Sex:
We will see you for: (fill in classes, times, periods) MO:			
I am good at: Interests Academics Hobbies Sports Personality traits, etc.		I have trouble with:	
You should know: family information, financial information, etc. I (don't) want this information shared with other students.			
What works for me all school: Physical arrangement of room, lesson preparation; academic accommodations, assignments, test taking, organization, behavior reinforcement, health/medication, home-school communication, etc.			
Contact me by: Student email, cell, home phone, study hall or support periods?		Contact my parents/caregivers by: Email, phone, texts or day, preferred frequency of contacts	

Form in Word & format guide at https://www.formedfamiliesforward.org/resource_category/special-education-advocacy/

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Other Student Profile Formats

- [Student Personal Profile](#) (IU)
- [Student Introduction Letter](#) (Understood.org)
- [Understanding Me: An Individual with FASD](#) (FASD Success)

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**PLEASE COMPLETE the EVALUATION
and POST-TEST.**

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