



# Sensory-Friendly Modifications

**SMALL** changes can make a **BIG** difference.

## For the Dental Office

Many patients—especially those with autism, ADHD, anxiety, sensory processing disorders, developmental disabilities, or trauma histories—experience heightened sensitivity in a traditional dental environment. A sensory-friendly dental office uses simple, intentional tools to reduce sensory overload, support regulation, and create a more welcoming atmosphere.

This document highlights practical products and modifications that dental teams can implement to improve patient comfort, cooperation, and overall experience.

## Understanding Sensory Needs in Dental Care

Dental settings contain multiple sensory triggers:

Type	Cause
Smell	Disinfectants, scented products, perfumes
Auditory (sound)	Handpiece noise, suction, overhead music
Visual	Bright lights, fast movements, sharp instruments
Tactile (feel)	Textures, seating, tools in the mouth, cold temperatures
Taste	Gloves, toothpaste, flavored products

Supporting sensory needs involves offering alternatives, reducing overstimulation, and giving patients tools to regulate themselves.

### **START HERE: My Dental Care Passport**

One simple step is to start using the My Dental Care Passport. This tool helps patients and dental providers prepare for a successful visit. Patients fill it out before their appointment, sharing helpful information about communication needs, mobility, sensory sensitivities, and past dental experiences. With this insight, you can make modifications in advance, reducing sensory challenges and easing anxiety. **SMALL** changes can make a **BIG** difference.

Patients and their caretakers can print off the document or fill it out online and email it to your office. You can find more information about it [here](#).

# Modifications

There are many different ways you can make the dental office a sensory friendly environment. Modifications can make a big difference in the success of an appointment. Some modifications cost nothing, some require a small investment, and others involve larger changes.

## No Cost Modifications

### Before providing treatment

- Greet patient by name
- Greet patient before donning PPE
- Speak directly to patient
- Collaborate with caregivers and care providers (OT, PT, care team)
- Schedule patient during less busy times
- Desensitizing appointment prior to care
- Use [person-centered language](#)
- Limit perfumes or scented lotions among staff
- Provide a quiet section of the waiting room

### During treatment

- Consistency with provider and room
- Give clear, simple instructions using positive language
- Provide breaks; patient-paced care
- Cue before each step (tell-show-do)
- Ask for permission before moving patient
- Provide positive reinforcement
- Use adjustable headlamps instead of overhead light
- Rhythmic counting/tapping when using loud tools

## Low-Cost Sensory Modifications

You can equip one operatory with these objects, or you can have an office **sensory toolkit** to take into the operatory.

Patients might have some of these tools at home. Ask patients if they have their own comfort items they would like to bring.

Smell Modifications	Items
Scent Reduction	• <a href="#">Air purifiers</a> to minimize strong chemical odors
	• Unscented or hypoallergenic cleaning products
Calming Aromatherapy	• <a href="#">Lavender or chamomile diffusers</a> in low concentrations
	• <a href="#">Aromatherapy stickers</a> to place on dental bib
Auditory (sound) Modifications	Items
Sound Reduction Tools	• <a href="#">Noise-reducing headphone</a> to block equipment noise
Auditory Distraction Options	• <a href="#">White-noise machines</a> placed in operatories or waiting areas
	• <a href="#">Personalized music playlists</a>
	• <a href="#">Radio with headphones</a>

Visual Modifications	Items
Calming Visual Distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer sunglasses or <a href="#">comfortable eye masks</a></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Twinkle lights</a>/<a href="#">colored lights</a>/<a href="#">warm lights</a></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tablets/TV with soothing videos, guided breathing apps, shows/movies, timers, social stories</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Ceiling projectors</a> displaying calming images/lights</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wall and ceiling art with nature or neutral themes</li> </ul>
Tactile Modifications	Items
Comfort Items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Weighted blankets</a>, <a href="#">weighted stuffed animals</a>, or lead apron for pressure input</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Therapressure brush</a> with the Wilbarger protocol or firm, deep pressure massage of joints, facial muscles, upper extremities</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Fidget tools</a> for waiting room or chair use</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Stress balls</a> to squeeze during difficult moments</li> </ul>
Seating Accomodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Chair cushions</a> for extra back, knee, head support</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Dyna Discs</a> for active sitting</li> </ul>
Comfort-Focused Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Silicone-coated mouth mirrors</a> that feel less cold</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-warmed instruments and water</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-sized mouth mirrors and probes</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blankets, heaters, or fans to adjust operatory temperature</li> </ul>
Taste Modifications	Items
Alternative Flavors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flavor choice options for all flavored products</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unflavored prophylactic paste</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unflavored fluoride</li> </ul>

Communication & Behavioral Modifications	Items
Communication Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">“First-Then” visual boards</a> to prepare for each task</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Choice cards</a> giving the patient control (e.g., “pick flavor,” “pick music”)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Visual schedules</a> that show pictures of each visit step</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Procedure step cards</a> that patients can view during care</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Visual timers</a> that show how long each step will last</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">White board</a> with a marker</li> </ul>
Behavioral Modifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion-regulation cards to help kids express needs</li> </ul>
Waiting Room Modifications	Items
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort seating options like beanbags or soft chairs</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coloring books, fidget bins, or activity boards</li> </ul>

## Modifications that go the extra mile

If your office is already doing the steps above and you are looking for additional ways to make your space more sensory-friendly, here are some larger modifications to consider.

- Install **dimnable lighting** or replace harsh fluorescent lights with **soft LED lighting**.
- Use noise-reducing materials such as **acoustic ceiling tiles, wall panels, or carpets** to lower ambient noise.
- Create a designated **sensory-friendly room** or **quiet space** for patients who need a calm area before or after treatment.
- Use **quieter tools or slow-speed alternatives** when possible to reduce noise and vibration.

## Bringing it all together

Becoming a sensory-friendly dental office does not require expensive renovations. Many practices begin by selecting a few low-cost products—such as headphones, fidgets, and visual schedules—and gradually expand their toolkit. Consistency is key: when patients know the environment is predictable and accommodating, trust grows quickly.