

Sensory Friendly Class Design

Creating studio environments that support regulation, focus, and learning



What This Supports

These strategies support dancers who may:

- feel overwhelmed by light, sound, or visual clutter
- struggle to stay regulated in busy studio environments
- experience sensory overload that affects focus or coordination
- need predictable, calming spaces to learn effectively

Sensory-friendly design does not remove challenge. It removes **unnecessary barriers** so dancers can focus on movement, learning, and expression.

Why Sensory Design Matters in Dance

Dance studios are highly stimulating spaces. Music, mirrors, movement, touch, proximity, and lighting all place demands on the nervous system.

For neurodivergent dancers, sensory overload can lead to:

- reduced focus and memory
- anxiety or shutdown
- difficulty coordinating movement
- misinterpreted behaviour

Thoughtful sensory design supports regulation first, which allows learning to follow.

Practical Strategies for Sensory-Friendly Studios

1. Support Visual Regulation

Why it helps

Bright lighting, mirrors, and visual clutter can overload processing and reduce focus.

What to try

- Use soft or natural lighting where possible
- Dim overhead lights during learning sections
- Reduce visual clutter on walls
- Teach facing away from mirrors when learning new material
- Use clear, consistent visual cues

2. Manage Sound Levels

Why it helps

Auditory sensitivity can make music and noise feel physically uncomfortable or overwhelming.

What to try

- Keep music volume lower when teaching
 - Avoid sudden loud sounds
 - Offer ear defenders or earplugs as an option
 - Pre-warn dancers before louder sections
 - Reduce echo by spacing dancers or working in smaller groups
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3. Create Clear Spatial Organisation

Why it helps

Clear spatial boundaries reduce anxiety and support motor planning.

What to try

- Use floor dots, tape, or designated “home spots”
 - Keep pathways consistent
 - Clearly mark starting positions
 - Maintain uncluttered floor space
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4. Respect Tactile Sensitivities

Why it helps

Clothing textures, floor contact, and unexpected touch can be distressing.

What to try

- Allow flexibility with uniforms and footwear
 - Ask for consent before hands-on corrections
 - Offer alternatives to floorwork where possible
 - Use props or mats for comfort
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5. Provide Regulation Spaces

Why it helps

Neurodivergent dancers may need brief sensory breaks to stay regulated.

What to try

- Designate a quiet corner or low-stimulus spot
- Allow dancers to use it without penalty
- Introduce the space positively at the start of term
- Frame breaks as self-regulation, not avoidance

Strengths Sensory-Friendly Design Unlocks

When sensory needs are supported, dancers often show:

- improved focus and memory
- greater movement confidence
- calmer transitions
- reduced anxiety
- stronger engagement
- clearer technique

Sensory regulation supports **learning capacity**, not avoidance.

Key Takeaway for Teachers

A sensory-safe studio is not about removing stimulation. It is about **thoughtful balance**.

When teachers adapt the environment with care and intention, dancers feel safer, learn more effectively, and move with greater confidence and clarity.