

Ways to Adapt Physical Environments for People with Intellectual Disabilities



We want to make the physical environment more accessible to people with intellectual disabilities. These changes often make the environment better for everyone. Changing the environment to be more comfortable is sometimes called an “accommodation.” An example of an accommodation is to provide detailed directions, a map, or to personally show someone where to go. When you’re looking to modify the physical environment to make it more cognitively accessible, it will typically involve:

- Minimizing distractions
- Reducing noise
- Adjusting lighting

Checklist: Minimizing Distractions

Hearing, seeing, smelling, feeling, thinking...these are some of the ways a person can be distracted. Consider how things happening inside and outside the room can overwhelm a person’s senses and cause them to be distracted or unable to focus. Here are some factors to consider:

- Smells can be very difficult for some people. Perfume, scented candles, and other smells can be hard for people with respiratory problems to tolerate. Consider making your office a scent-free place, or talk with people about limiting the scents they use.
- Uncomfortable chairs, tables, and other furniture can make it harder to work. When a person is comfortable physically, it is easier to focus. Having chairs in a hallway or outside the room can create a

welcoming environment. Some people choose to sit apart from a group at first. Having a choice of places to sit is comforting.

- People coming through the room, talking within earshot, and cell phone calls should be avoided. When people share a space, plan ahead to minimize these distractions. Agree to silence cell phones.
- Room temperature can effect concentration. If a room is often too hot, leave a fan in there. If it tends to be cold, get a space heater or small throw blankets for the room.
- Looking at clutter, over-flowing stacks of papers, closets, desks, and rooms can be confusing. Even if you don't notice it, some people will.
- Excessive patterns, decorations, and plants on walls, floors, and furniture can shift a person's focus away from what she needs to be doing. Some colors and patterns can even give people a headache.

Checklist: Reducing Noise

Here is a list of suggested ways to improve noise environments:

- Noises happen all the time, even when it seems quiet. Spend time in the room where you will be meeting or working. Listen for noises that aren't obvious, like lights buzzing and office machine cooling fans. These might need to be dealt with to prevent in the future.
- Avoid having meetings in places with distractions. Rooms near heating and cooling systems are not ideal for meetings. Meeting in public places can be nice, but it can be hard to listen and ask questions.

- If you can hear other people, they can probably hear you. If you need to talk about private things, find a private place to meet.
- There are simple things you can do to make a space quieter. Some examples are putting sound-absorbing materials on the ceiling, walls, or doors; sticking pads on the legs of chairs; or using storm windows and sealing window frames to block out street noise.
- There are also simple things you can do to make it easier to hear people. Have a microphone available during large meetings to help everyone hear and be heard.

Checklist: Adjusting Lighting

Here is a list of suggested ways to consider lighting that works for everyone:

- Many people are sensitive to light. Some people need brighter light. Others need dim lighting. Some prefer natural light. Give people a say about lighting if you can. Consider getting floor and table lamps in addition to (or instead of) overhead lights.
- Flashing and flickering lights can give people headaches and make it hard to focus. Check frequently and replace bulbs as needed.
- Reduce glare from the windows during meetings. Try to have even lighting in the room, so nobody is straining to see.
- Good lighting feels safer. A dark hallway can be scary. A bright window looking onto a busy street can also be intimidating. Depending on the meeting topic or audience, make sure the lighting helps everyone feel safe and comfortable.