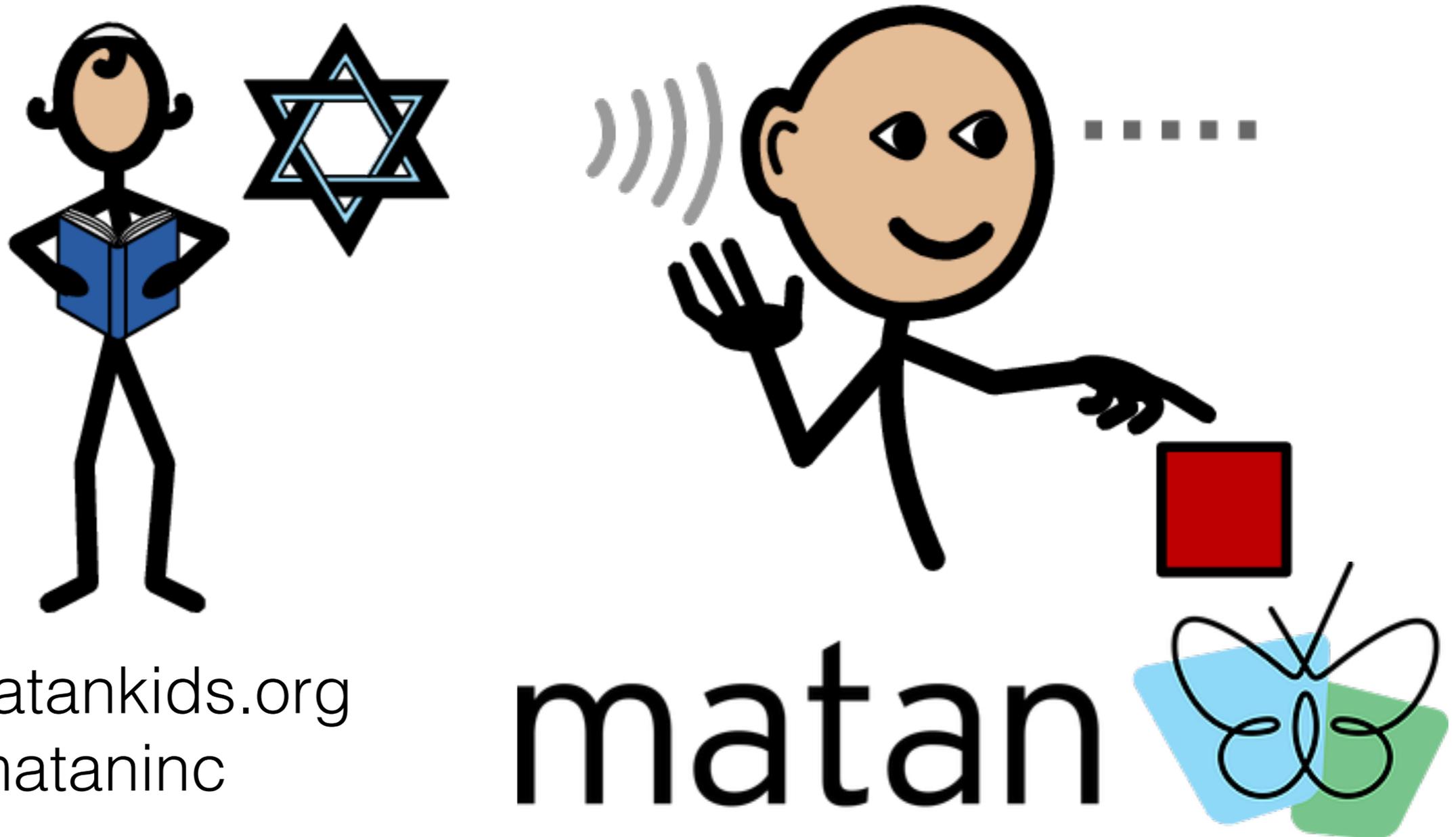


**Beyond Fidget Spinners:**  
***Making Sense of Sensory Strategies in***  
***Jewish Education***

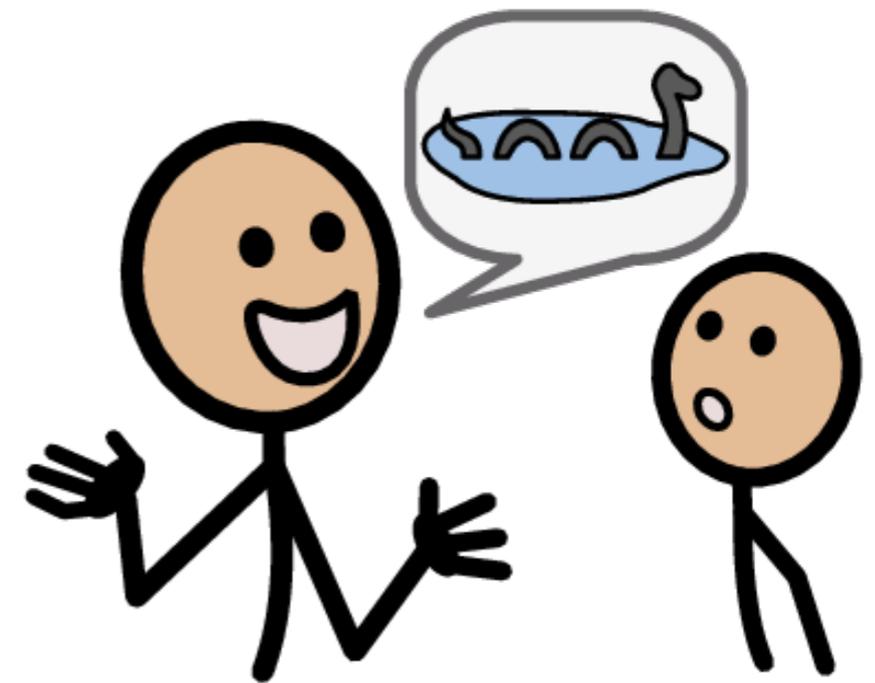
Rabbi Ruti Regan  
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# Myths and realities

- Sensory awareness is amazingly helpful for teachers and students
- Giving kids fidgets doesn't make inclusion easy.
- Using “sensory issues” as a euphemism can muddy the waters.
- We teach better when we acknowledge disability.



# We are better teachers when we think about sensory experiences.

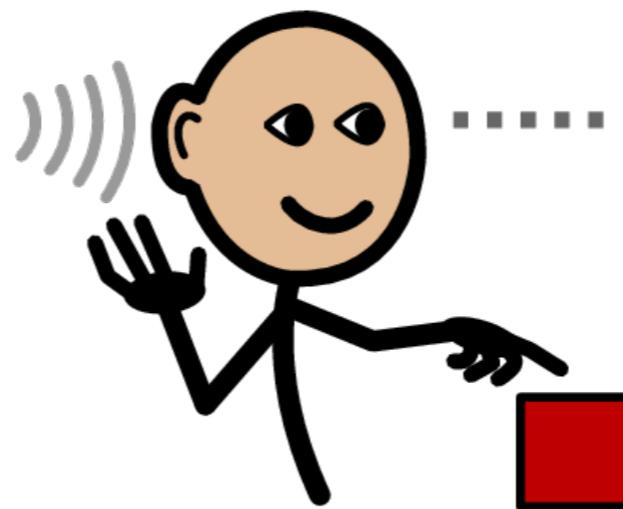
- What are our students experiencing?
- How do things feel to them?
- How could the learning environment be more physically comfortable?
- How could engaging the senses help students to learn?
- How might sensory strategies enable a wider range of learners to participate fully?

# Everyone uses sensory strategies

- Human beings aren't just made of words and ideas
- We also have bodies.
- Bodies are important, and all of our senses are important.
- We all use sensory strategies to do things and understand things.
- Disability can impact which sensory strategies are necessary, useful, and/or effective.

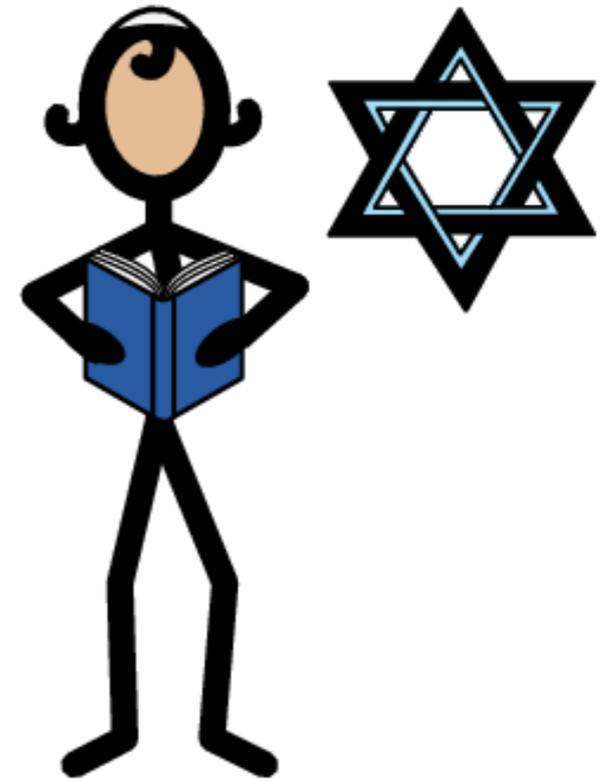
# Jewish culture uses a lot of sensory strategies!

- Prayer
- Multi-sensory ritual
- Beit midrash learning
- Talking with our hands



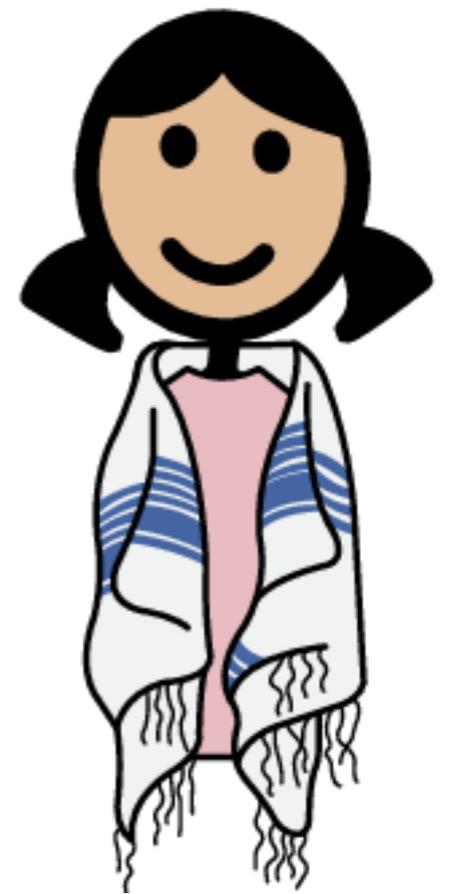
# In prayers

- Rocking back and forth.
- Music and repetition.
- Varying noise/volume levels.
- Wearing a tallit.
- Sitting and standing.
- Walking in and out.

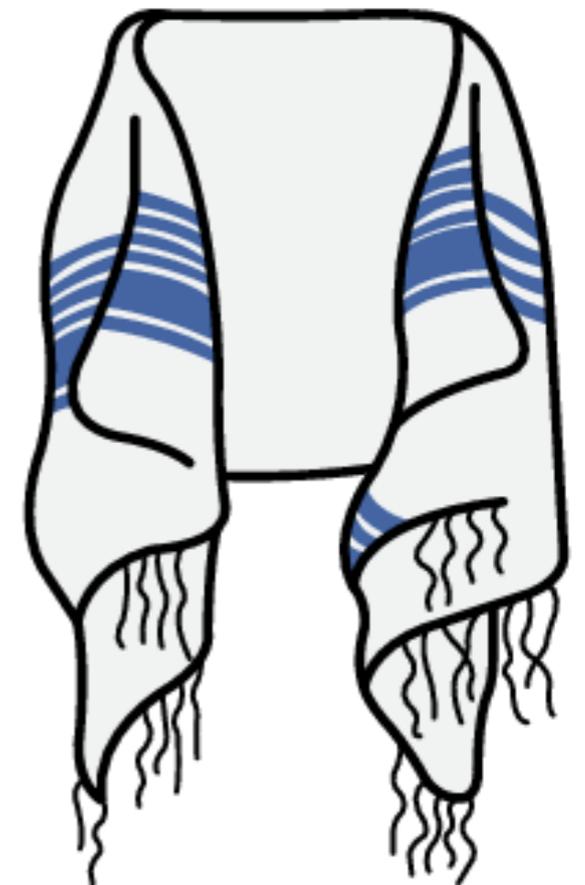




# Wearing a tallit

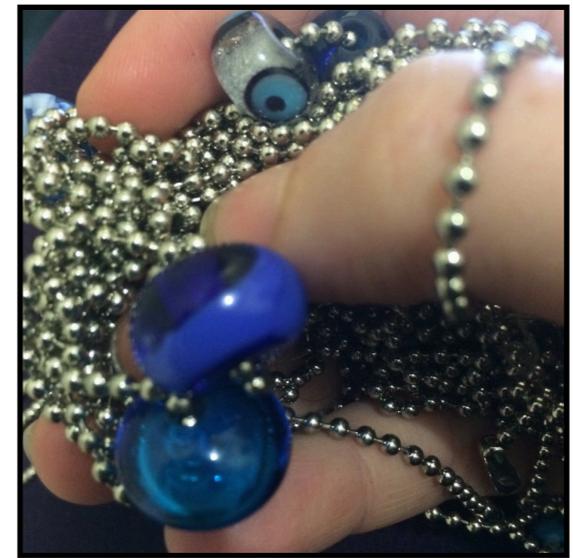


- Wearing a tallit affects the sensory experience of prayer.
- Wearing a tallit over your head shifts focus.





# Holding tzitzit



- Holding tzitzit
- Playing with tzitzit
- Looking at tzitzit
- Focus in prayer; praying with our whole body.



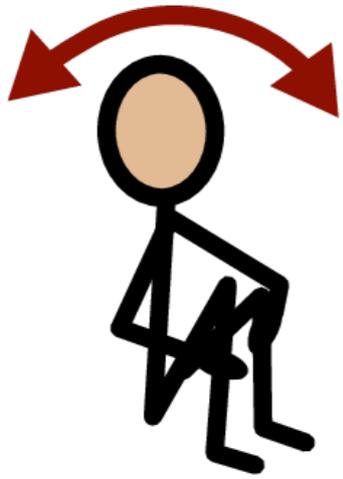
# Music



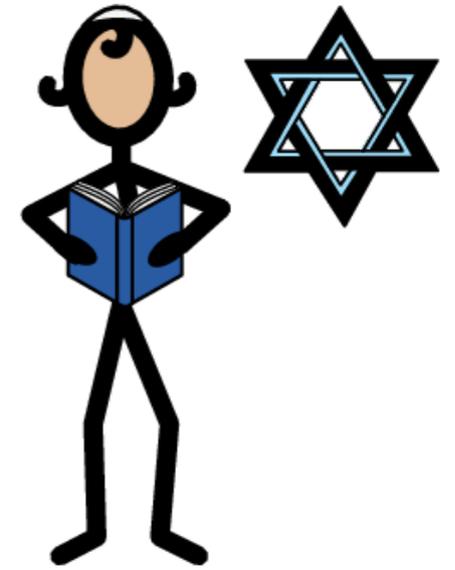
- The sensory experience of music carries meaning
- Musical transitions
- Varying volume levels
- Alternating between shared and individual sensory experiences
- Alternating between listening and singing together

# Walking around and taking breaks

- In most communities, it's acceptable to go in and out of services.
- This makes participation - and comfort - possible for a lot of people it otherwise wouldn't be possible for.



# Rocking back and forth



- Rocking back and forth is normal in Jewish prayer
- (including for the leader)
- Enabled focus
- Shared/individual movement
- Praying with our whole body.

# In the beit midrash

- Rocking back and forth
- Sitting in the same place every day
- Texture of sefarim (beit midrash books)
- Singsong learning tone

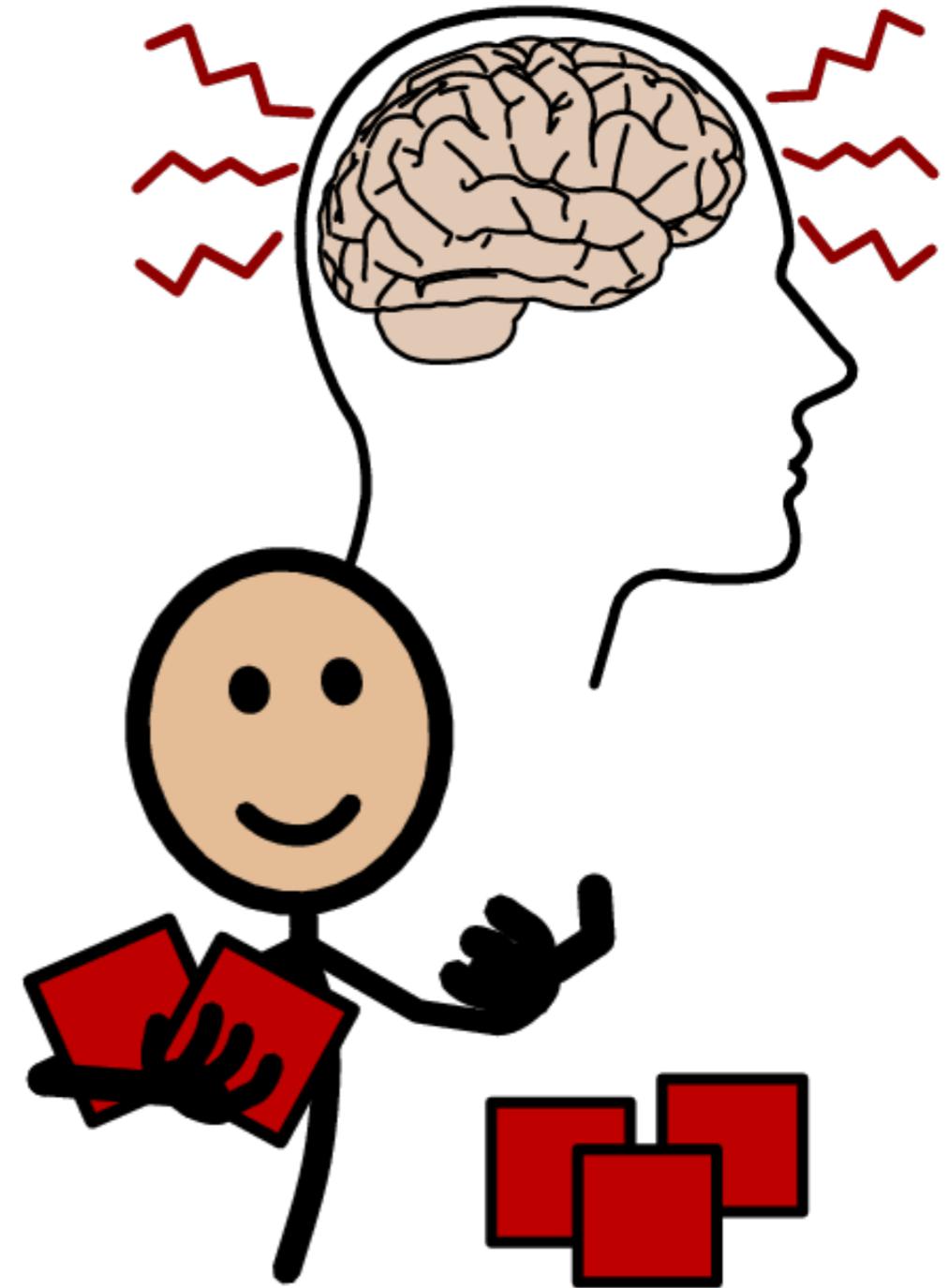


# Creating new sensory strategies

- Our tradition has given us a lot of really effective sensory strategies
- We don't have good strategies for everyone or every situation
- How do we invent our own?
- Let's look at how sensory strategies work.....

# Two kinds of sensory strategies

- Comfort strategies: Make an environment more comfortable, or more tolerable
- Expansion strategies: Harness sensory experiences to make things more effective or more possible
- Some strategies can do both
- Remember: Everyone uses sensory strategies!

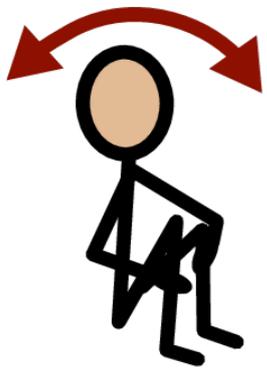




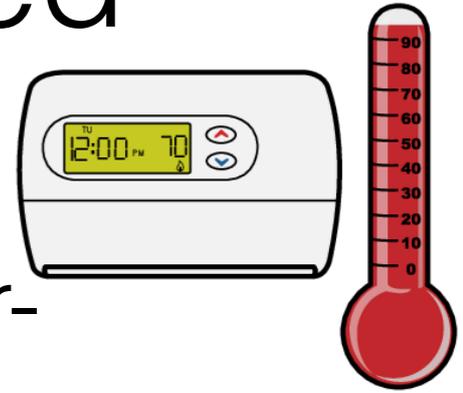
# Comfort strategies



- Comfort matters because pain is both unpleasant and distracting
- When people are in pain, it's much harder to learn
- Being comfortable can make a lot of things possible.
- Sensory awareness can often allow us to make a situation more comfortable or less painful.
- Comfort strategies can sometimes also relieve emotional or cognitive pain



# Some common comfort-related sensory strategies:



- Setting the heater or air conditioner to a weather-appropriate temperature
- Wearing layers when you expect the temperature to change
- Taking a deep breath to calm down
- Rocking back and forth when things are overwhelming
- Using noise-cancelling headphones in noisy environments
- Wearing shoes and socks that fit



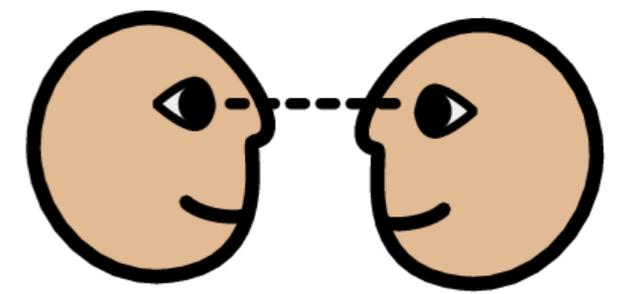
# Comfort strategies are different for different people

- Disability can mean that your body or brain hurts when other people are comfortable
- Differences in life experiences can also lead to different sources of emotional pain
- A strategy that most people find comforting may be painful to others
- Conversely, something that most people find unpleasant may be desired by someone whose sensory processing is different

# Expansion strategies

- Expansion strategies harness sensory experiences to make things more effective or more possible
- Eg: Using a fidget to help yourself focus
- Eg: Singing a song to memorize something

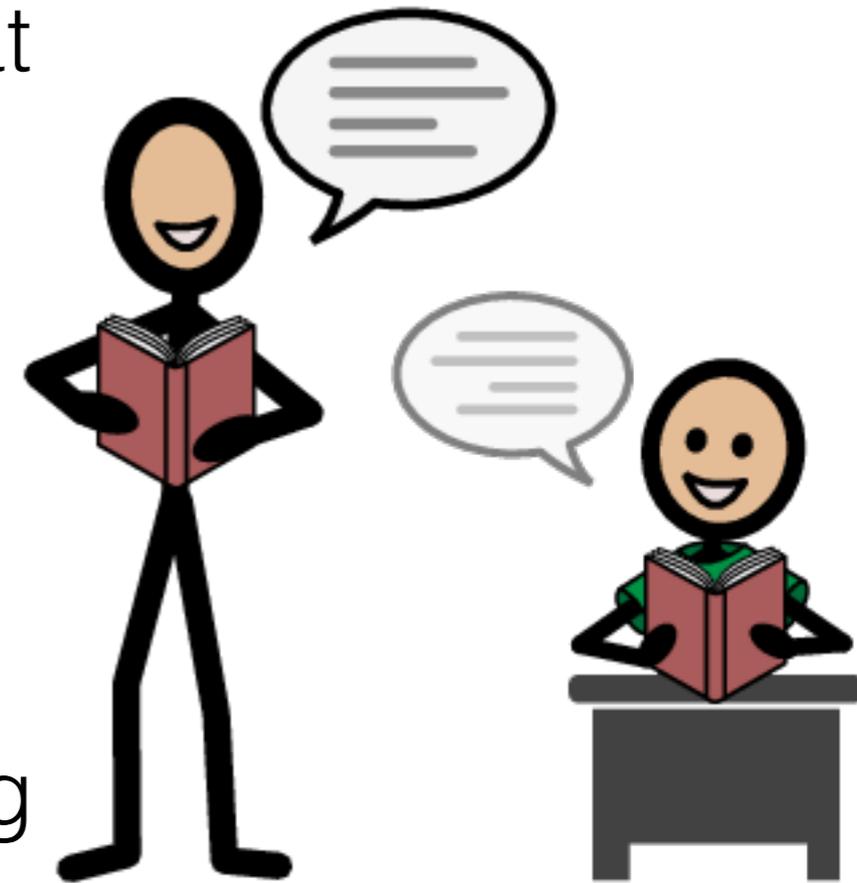
# Eg: Eye Contact



- For most people, making eye contact is an effective sensory strategy
- Most people find it easier to pay attention when they are looking at someone's face.
- Most people find it easier to stay engaged in a conversation with someone when they are looking them in the eye.
- Most people find it easier to feel respected and heard when someone is looking at their face.
- This sensory strategy does not work for everyone.

# Call and response - a sensory strategy for teaching

- Sometimes teachers have students repeat things in unison
- Or recite a response to a prompt.
- Or sing a song together
- This can be a very effective way of getting people to maintain focus and retain information
- Again, it doesn't always work for everyone.



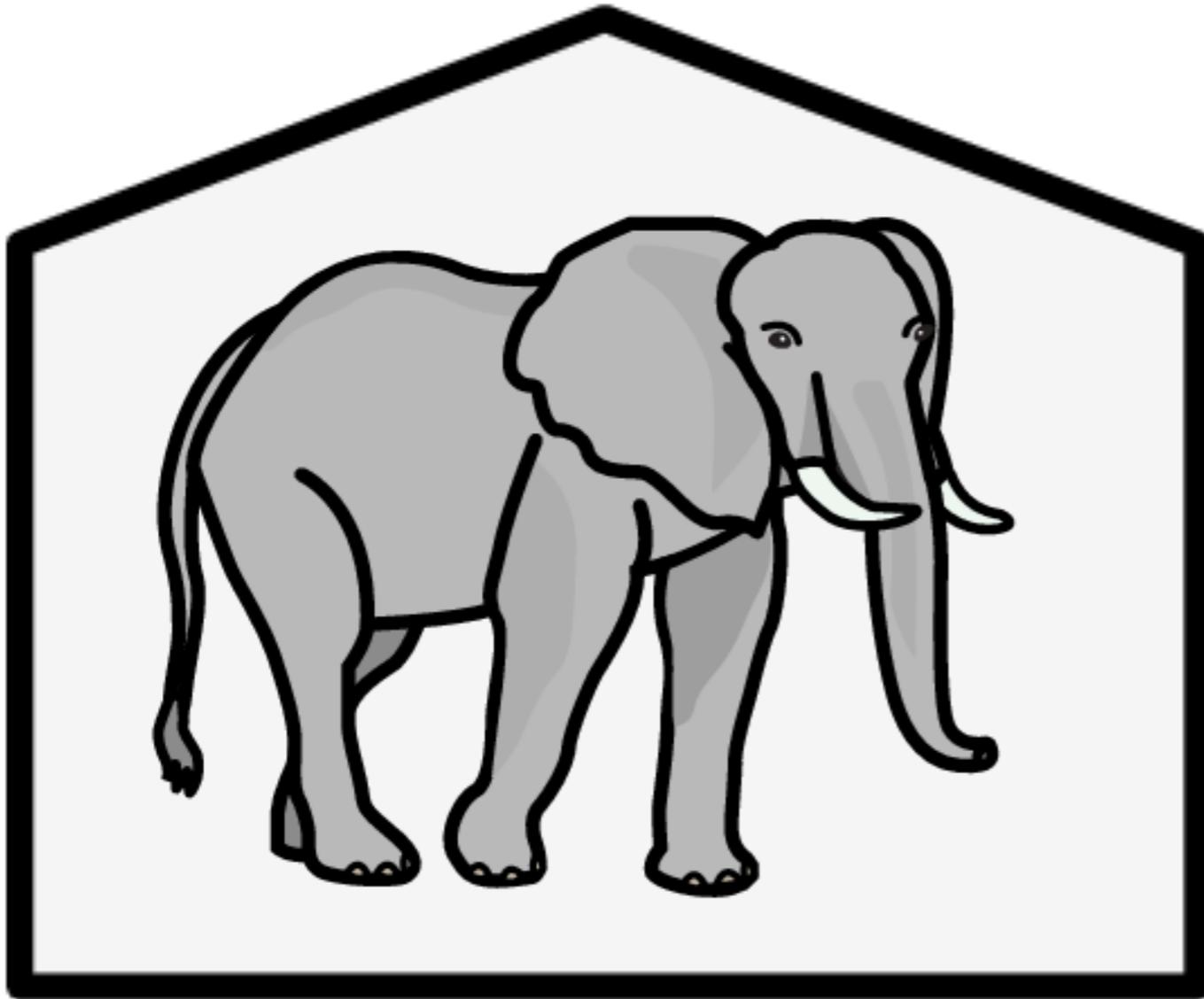
# Eg: Standing to answer a question

- Standing can direct focus
- And show whose turn it is
- And maintain certain energy
- Also doesn't work for everyone!

# Eg: Quiet libraries

- Making libraries quiet is a sensory strategy for focus and seriousness
- It can also be a comfort strategy — most people find it more comfortable to read in quiet spaces than loud spaces.

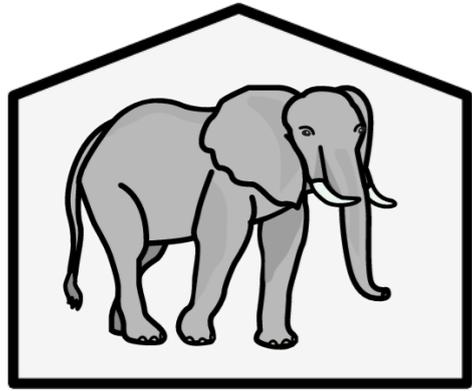
And now, the elephant in the room



# Giving people fidget toys doesn't make inclusion easy.

- People still have disabilities when they also have fidget toys
- Fidgets introduce their own complications
- Classrooms full of fidgets are still classrooms full of inclusion challenges.

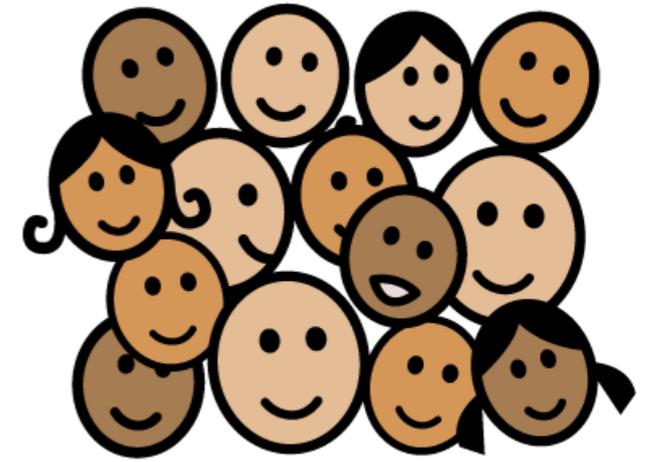




# Sometimes “sensory” is a euphemism

- Sometimes we say “sensory issues” because it feels more acceptable than the real problem
- Not everything that gets called a “sensory issue” has anything to do with anything sensory.
- Sometimes we say “sensory issues” as a way to avoid saying “bad behavior” or “disruptiveness”
- Sometimes we say “sensory issues” as a way to avoid saying “disability”.

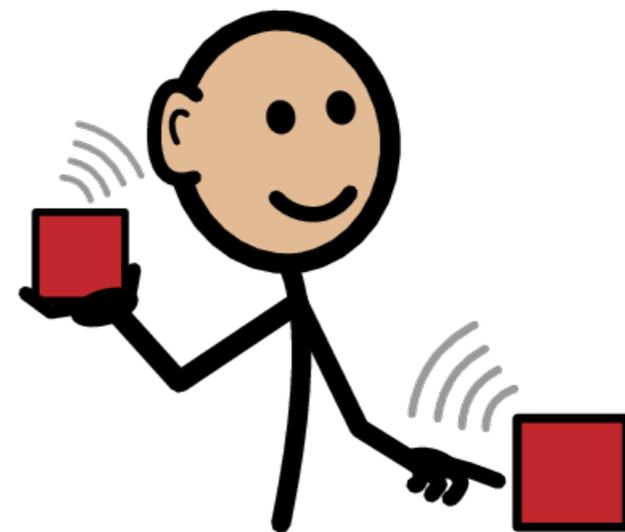
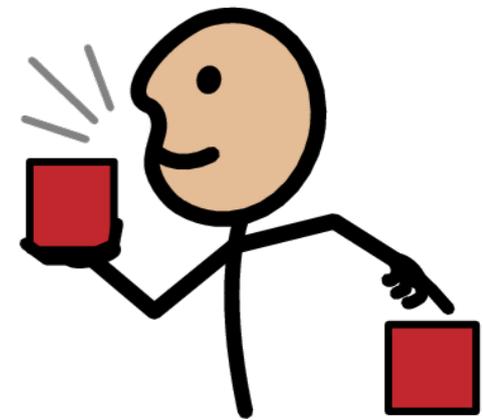
# “Do fidgets work?” is the wrong question



- It's not so black and white.
- Fidgets and other objects are really helpful for some people under some circumstances.
- Fidgets can be make-or-break important for some people.
- They're not a universal solution to every problem.
- They're rarely a \*simple\* solution to any problem.

# Multi-sensory teaching is not the same thing as accessibility

- Engaging kids with all of their senses is a good teaching strategy
- It's *\*not\** inherently more accessible or inclusive than anything else.
- If we want to fully include kids with disabilities, we need to talk about accessibility and disability
- We also need to accept and acknowledge differences that stay significant.



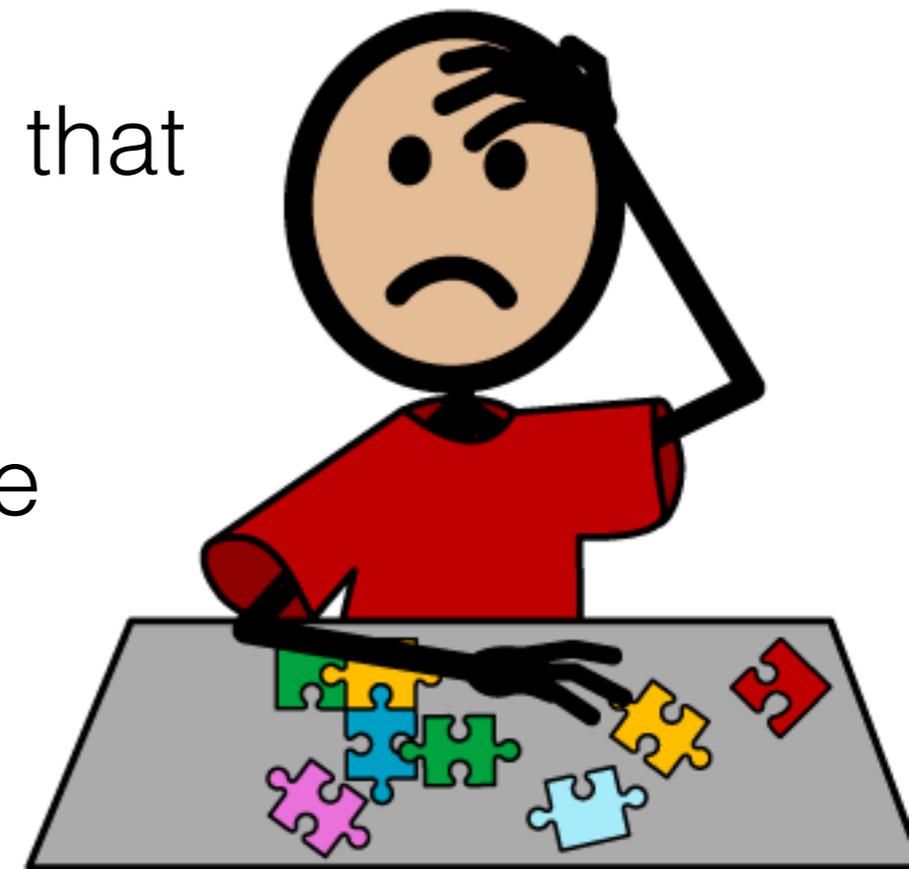
# There are no easy answers in inclusion

- Inclusion is often hard
- Inclusion takes a lot of trial and error
- Every potential solution to a problem can create new problems
- We need to keep trying



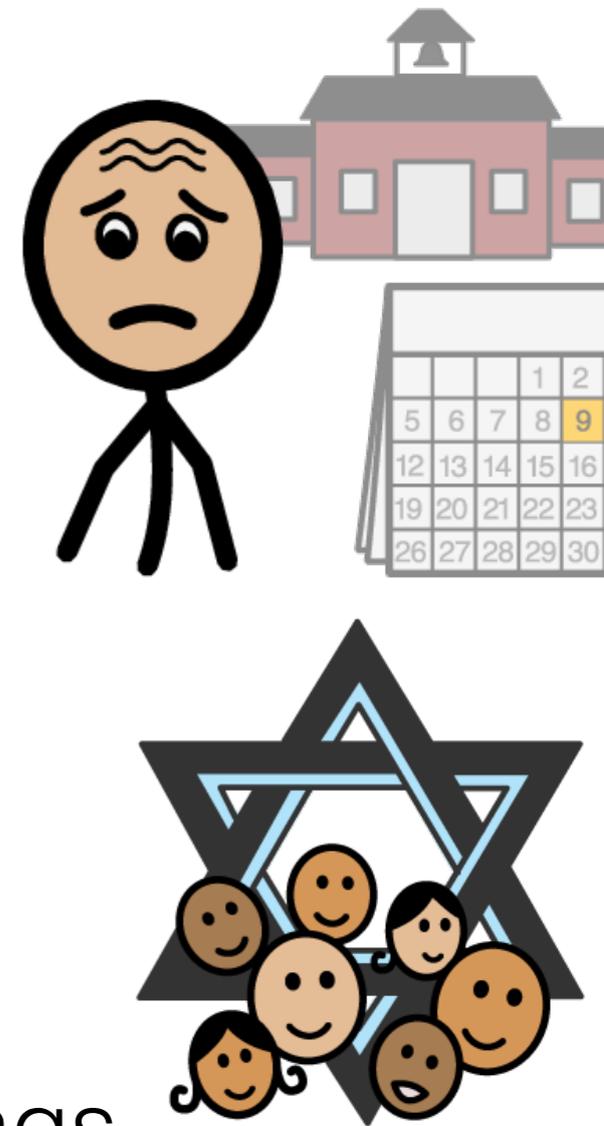
# Not everything disruptive is an unmet sensory need

- When kids do things at school that teachers find disruptive, this could be a sign of sensory issues — or of other problems, eg:
- Developmentally inappropriate expectations
- Tourette syndrome, OCD, or a disorder that causes frequent coughing
- Frustration with confusing or impossible instructions
- Not wanting to be at Hebrew school



# Sometimes the issue is identity

- Hebrew school is a difficult educational setting on a number of levels.
- Kids and families often have very complicated feelings about the burdens of being Jewish.
- Kids who go to Hebrew school know that their non-Jewish peers don't have to go — and that most of them don't have to think about the Holocaust or terrorism
- When a kid is working through conflicting feelings about what it means to be Jewish and the price Jews pay for being Jewish, it is not helpful to treat this as a sensory issue.





Jewish kids with disabilities have \*three\* identity problems



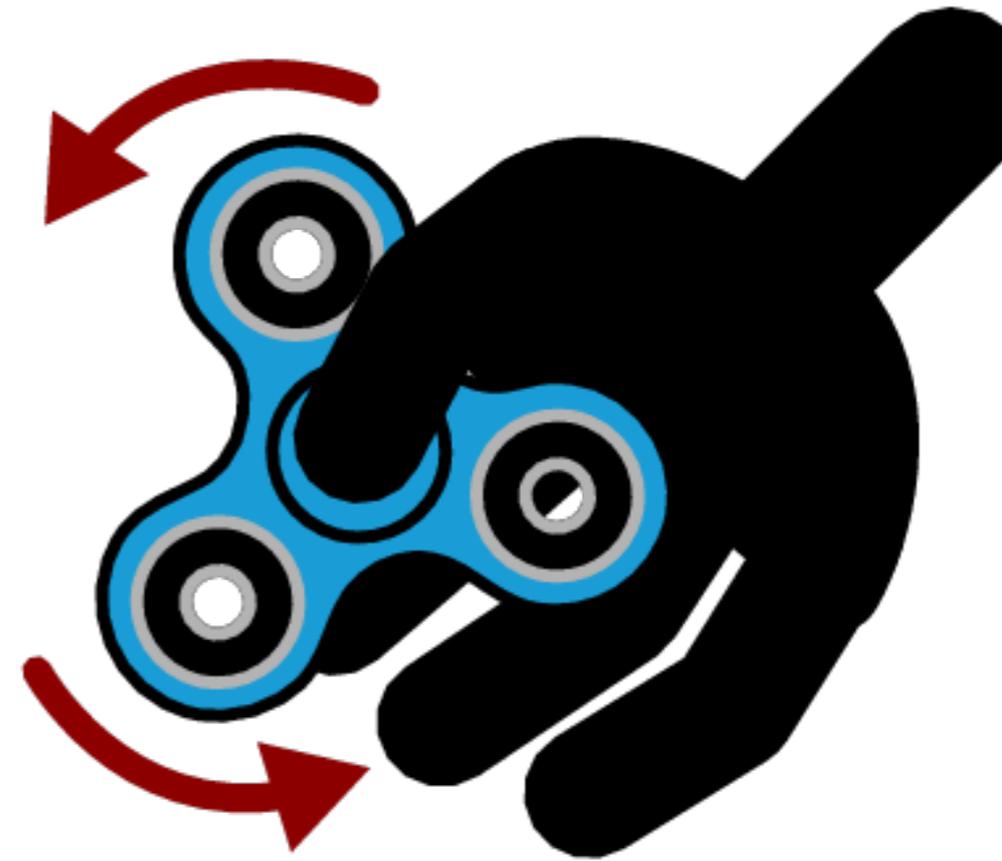
- Forming a Jewish identity in an often-antisemitic world
- Forming a disability identity in an often ableist world
- (Ableism is discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities)
- Coming to terms with being both at the same time.
- Accommodating sensory issues will not resolve the identity issues.

# Sensory strategies are not the right solution to every problem

- Sometimes kids need clearer instructions
- Or accommodations for motor skills impairments
- Or work on a more appropriate level for them (possibly more introductory; possibly more advanced)
- Or large print. Or medication. Or a different teaching strategy.
- Or emotional scaffolding and long-term patience.
- (Sometimes, people need all of these things).

# Giving people fidget toys doesn't make inclusion easy.

- Giving a room full of distracted kids fidget spinners does not get you a room full of kids who are paying attention.
- Fidgets introduce their own complications
- Tools don't create skills
- Disability — and accessibility — can be very complicated.



# How does disability affect sensory strategies?

- People with disabilities have bodies and brains that work differently
- Bodies stay important when they are different
- Some strategies usually that work for nondisabled people may not work for someone with a disability
- Someone with a disability may need sensory strategies that most people don't need

# Sensory processing

- Sensory impairments are sometimes brain-based rather than body-based.
- Sensory organs may be typically-functioning, but sensory experiences are not.
- Eg: Some people who have technically normal hearing need captions in order to understand movies.
- Eg: Someone may have 20/20 vision but also get visually disoriented in a crowd.
- Some people have both types of impairment, and it's not always possible (or important) to tell which is which.

# Differences in sensory experience

- Sensory strategies depend on how things feel and are experienced
- If things feel different, the strategy may not work.
- Eg: Music probably won't help people focus if it feels painfully loud
- Eg: Visual strategies probably won't work for a blind person

# Sensory overload

- Many people with disabilities experience sensory overload
- Too much overwhelming sensory input
- Often in circumstances where other people aren't bothered or aren't very bothered by
- It's not always just loud spaces — some people are more overloaded by quiet spaces.

# Some common sensory overload strategies

- Wearing noise-cancelling headphones
- Wrapping yourself in a blanket or sheet
- Rocking back and forth
- Using a fidget or grounding object
- Sitting on the edge of the room rather than the middle
- Taking breaks
- Making sure that flickering lightbulbs are replaced promptly

# A caution about breaks

- People who experience sensory overload often need to take breaks
- They also need to be welcome in spaces they find overloading.
- A person using a visible sensory strategy like covering their ears is not necessarily someone who needs to leave.
- Sometimes, it's what they're doing in order to stay.

# Different experiences in general

- The same space or activity may be experienced very differently by students with and without disabilities.
- Even when this isn't caused by sensory differences per se, sensory strategies can sometimes be helpful.
- Eg: If someone is often frustrated by inaccessible activities, a stress ball might help
- Eg: Someone with memory impairments might benefit from sensory mnemonic strategies

# Fidgets and stim toys

- The education community tends to call handheld useful objects fidgets
- The autistic community tends to call handheld useful objects stim toys
- If you want to find first hand autistic perspective on sensory strategies involving objects, “stim toy” is a better search term.

# Some uses of fidgets/stim toys

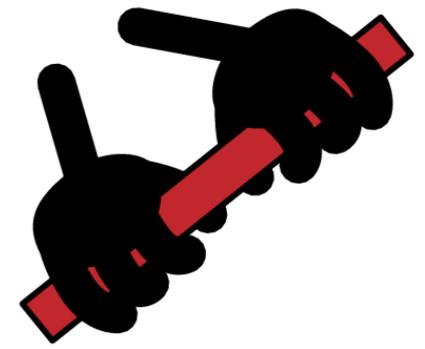
- Fidgeting with an object in order to maintain focus and reduce distractibility
- Constant movement to maintain body awareness or voluntary movement
- A pleasant sensory focus as a distraction from physical or emotional pain
- Grounding objects as a way to avoid disorientation or dissociation
- Something that stays the same across contexts, and remains familiar in unfamiliar environments.



# Some sensory strategies involving being distracted

- Distraction can be a good and necessary thing!
- Eg: Distracting yourself from a PTSD trigger in order to avoid a panic attack
- Distracting yourself from pain.
- Taking a brief sensory break without having to actually leave the room.
- Filtering out background noise.
- Distracting yourself from an off-topic conversation with peers so that you can get back to focusing on your work.

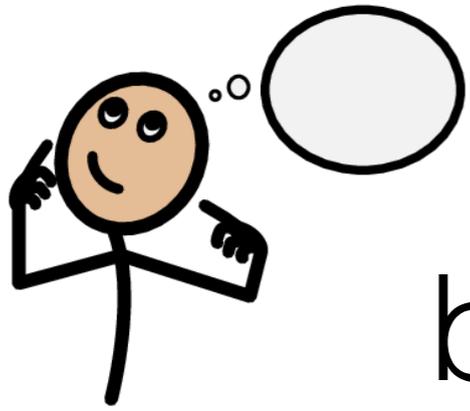
# Eg: Grounding objects



- People with PTSD or similar disabilities sometimes use objects to cope with triggers
- Distracting yourself can sometimes prevent a full-blown panic attack
- Grounding objects can also help you to understand that you're in the present in a safe situation not in the dangerous situation you're remembering
- This can look similar to the way some people use fidgets for focus or sensory input
- In Jewish terms, one might understand this as a form of “It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it.”

# Sensory objects aren't interchangeable

- People who need sensory objects often need \*specific\* sensory objects.
- The need is often more complicated than “they need something to fidget with”.
- You can't assume that people who use rocks could just as easily use silly putty or a piece of foam.
- It often takes a lot of trial and error.



# Fidget spinners usually work better for distraction than focus

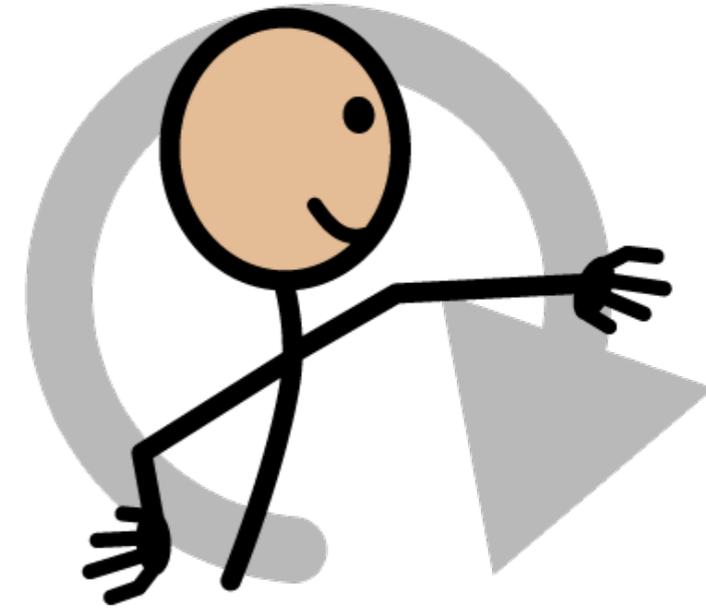
- For most (not all) people, fidget spinners are distracting.
- People usually (not always) focus on the spinner while they're spinning it.
- For most people, fidget spinners are more useful for distraction strategies than focus strategies.
- Distractions can be good and necessary.
- It's important to use the right tools for every job.



# Disruptive and necessary aren't opposites

- Kids can use \*anything\* to be disruptive. Sensory tools are no exception.
- Just like any other school supplies, kids will play with them and use them inappropriately sometimes.
- People who need sensory tools will not use them correctly 100% of the time.
- It's not that the tools are bad. It's that kids are kids.

# The importance of trial and error



- Disability doesn't come with a manual.
- It's not always easy for teachers to find solutions to accessibility problems.
- It's not always even possible in the short term.
- Even the best strategies don't always work 100% of the time.
- It's even harder for the students who are living without access.
- We need to keep trying.

# Matan Jewish Disability Acceptance and Inclusion Pledge

- I acknowledge that ability, disability and humanity coexist, and I pledge to see my students as they are.
- I will not look past their disabilities; I will seek to understand. I will not overlook their abilities; I will seek to support them effectively.
- I will not ignore the humanity of my students; I will remember that they have individual interests and a perspective of their own and that they were each created in the image of God.

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