Many young people in mainstream secondary schools are neurodiverse, meaning they think, learn, and process the world in different ways. These differences are completely normal, but school environments are often not designed with neurodiverse learners in mind. This study explored how eight neurodiverse adolescents experience sensory challenges at school, using interviews, drawings, and conversations to understand their daily lives. As one student explained, morning stress often "starts the day off poorly," showing how early overwhelm can affect the whole day.

Students described school as a place full of sensory demands—busy corridors, loud classrooms, bright lights, and unpredictable noise. These everyday experiences often led to sensory overload, making it hard to concentrate, stay calm, or join in with lessons and social activities. Some students felt physically unwell or panicked when overwhelmed, while others froze or shut down. One participant described feeling "unsafe, out of control and withdrawn" when they could not access a quiet space.

Break and lunchtime were especially difficult because of crowds and noise. Many students avoided the dining hall and chose to stay in the Area Resource Base (ARB), which felt safer but also meant missing out on social opportunities.

The study also highlighted what helps. Students felt calmer in quiet, predictable spaces such as the ARB, library, or sensory room. Hands on subjects like PE and Design Technology supported regulation through movement. Simple strategies—like visual timetables, check ins from trusted adults, and clear signage—made the school day easier to manage.

Overall, the research shows that sensory overwhelm is a major barrier to learning and wellbeing for neurodiverse adolescents. Small, evidence based changes to school environments and routines can make a big difference. Creating calm spaces, offering movement opportunities, and improving staff understanding can help neurodiverse students feel safe, included, and ready to learn.