

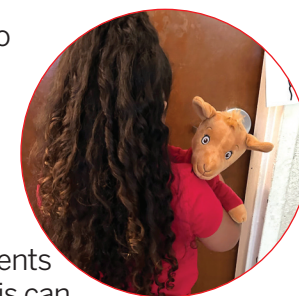
Tools and Resources to Manage School Fire Drills for Sensitive Students

For many students with anxiety and sound sensitivity, fire drills in a school setting can be anxiety producing and can cause stress. Auditory sensitivity occurs when individuals experience sensitivity to certain sounds or frequencies.

Meagan David, registered and licensed occupational therapist and Masters of Science in Education, provides some suggestions and resources on how to support students that have a difficult time with fire drills.



- Access to **comfort items** is an easy way to support students and reduce anxiety. The student can bring comfort items into school like fidget toys, a small stuffed animal to squeeze, weighted blanket/lap or shoulder pad, or stress balls.



- **Visual timers** are a great way to show students the length of time the sound will be loud. This can decrease the anxiety surrounding the unknown of the fire drill.



- **Weighted vests or backpacks** can give deep pressure (proprioceptive input) to the student. The weight can help support the body to be calm and can reduce physical anxiety symptoms. Teachers, staff, and parents can add something relatively heavy (2–5-pound weight or a ream/pack of paper) to the backpack. Students can also keep fidget toys, ear plugs/noise canceling headphones, and a comfort item in the backpack for easy access.



- Have a **calming area** in the classroom or someplace that is quiet for students to go to feel safe when the fire drill is done. This will help them to self-regulate faster so they can return to learning.

- **Desensitizing students** to the sound of a fire alarm can help reduce anxiety by making them more familiar with the sound, where the sound is coming from, and what the expectation is when they hear the fire alarm. A few times a month, discuss with students why we have fire drills and the procedure for drills. Talk about the loud sound that the fire alarm makes. Play a video or audio of the sound on low volume and gradually increase the sound as the students become more comfortable.

- Introduce the idea of the fire drill **using a social story** as a reminder of the appropriate behavior during the drill.

A social story is a tool that describes important parts and appropriate behavior of a social activity or event using sentences that describe or direct behavior. Social stories can help students visually process and understand how to work through feeling overwhelmed by the sound of the alarm and the anxiety that it produces.



- Teach students to **cover their ears** with their hands or the hands of a support staff to muffle the sound of the alarm.



- **Noise-canceling headphones** and earplugs can help reduce overstimulation and auditory sensory overload. Having these available can reduce the anxiety surrounding fire drills.

Give students that have auditory sensitivities more opportunities to practice the routine and expectation of a fire drill. Teachers, play the video "Firefighters On Their Way" and invite the fire department to come in. Have firefighters explain to the students their role and what they will look like when they arrive at an emergency. This will help to desensitize students and support them to be more familiar with the fire alarm sounds and process.

