

# Alternative Seating

One of the biggest obstacles that an Occupational Therapist faces is convincing a classroom teacher that having students in any other position besides sitting in a chair or criss-cross at the carpet WILL NOT cause utter chaos. When an OT mentions “therapy balls” or “adjusting tables”, you can almost see most teachers cringe at the thought.

Like any other “new” thing, the first day or so with your new seating arrangements will cause a little excitement - it’s true. It’s new and cool and fun - of course your students are going to be a little excited - after all, they are kids!

An amazing teacher at RCSD School #42 - Heather DeCarlo - took a chance at alternative seating for her general education first grade classroom. When I asked her about her new set up, her exact quote was, “I thought it was going to be chaos, but the room has never been calmer.” And it’s true - adapting your classroom to meet all of your students’ sensory needs WILL indeed create a more calming environment. Students are less likely to seek out sensory input through distracting measures if they can get the input in a functional way.

Take a look at how easy it is to adapt your classroom to fit your students’ sensory needs, and check out how engaged these students are during an unplanned, unscripted, not posed photo shoot. I promise, I did not tell even ONE student to “look like they were working for the picture”.

Thank you to Mrs. DeCarlo for thinking outside the box, being sensory friendly and for allowing me to share your experience! Kudos to you!

## Mrs. DeCarlo’s Awesome Sensory Friendly Seating

### The “Carpet” Table

Lower the legs on your table so that the tabletop sits about 12-14 inches from the floor. This is a perfect height for students to kneel or sit criss-cross while they work. It is particularly perfect for your smaller students, whose feet don’t quite touch the ground in a typical classroom chair.





## The "Standing" Table

Heighten the legs on your table so that the tabletop sits about 30-36 inches from the floor (depending on how tall your students are). This allows your students to stand while working. Mrs. DeCarlo lets them prop their legs on chairs if they want. This is a perfect position for students that exhibit a retained STNR reflex - which may interfere with their ability to keep their hips in a flexed position while sitting in a chair.



## Lounging

Allowing students to lay on their bellies is a great alternative to sitting. Laying "prone" provides deep tactile input to the trunk, which can produce a calming, organizing effect on the neurological system. This position also works on strengthening upper back, neck and shoulder muscles - all of which are so important for fine motor skills like printing, drawing, coloring and cutting. Upward tilting of the head activates the vestibular system - which is linked to improvements in attention and arousal.

## The “Ball” Table

It is the most avoided alternative seating arrangement out there. I know, a bunch of huge bouncy balls in a classroom seems like a recipe for disaster - and it can be. But it can also be a wonderful opportunity for students to “wiggle” while working and enhance their attention and arousal level through vestibular input.

Here’s the thing - **you need to develop firm rules.** (We do not pick up, throw, roll or kick the balls; we do not poke the balls with sharp objects; we bounce gently and appropriately on the balls; we only sit on the balls). **You will need to demonstrate how to sit on, bounce on, and take care of the balls.** You need to monitor which students just aren’t appropriate for the balls (students with weak core muscles or poor balance or students that become overstimulated with movement). **You need to develop a strict schedule for whose turn it is on the ball to prevent fighting.** But once that is established - **THAT’S IT.**

Therapy balls are an amazing sensory tool. Try to sitting on one yourself to see how much more engaged you are. They exercise your core, put your hips in a neutral position and provide vestibular and proprioceptive input to the brain.

You can buy therapy balls at most stores (Walmart or Target) or online. Therapy supply websites have more durable versions, but a yoga ball works just fine and is less expensive. Stands are also available on line, but as you can see, a hula hoop keeps the ball in an area just as well.

