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## Providing a Safe Space for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

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Providing a Safe Space for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

Alexis Garcia

Western Michigan University: Lee Honors College

### **Abstract**

Health care professionals are continuing to learn about childhood trauma and the implications on health and development. With time, there has become a better understanding of how to determine and provide the resources needed for families and children who have experienced childhood trauma. Additionally, information about childhood trauma is slowly being understood throughout public school districts. This allows teachers to better understand children and accommodate their needs. This honors thesis will discuss childhood trauma and the development of a resource that can be used to provide elementary school-aged students with a place to go when they need assistance with regulation. This “Safe Space” can be used in schools to provide students with a place to go and regulate when school becomes overwhelming. The “Safe Space” manual at the end of this thesis will outline and provide guidance as to how to facilitate proper use of the “Safe Space” and how a professional can navigate through children’s emotions in a healthy manner.

### **Description**

Occupational therapists use meaningful activities to promote physical and mental health and well-being (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). These meaningful activities can occur in various settings with many different populations, from an outpatient clinic with older adults to working with children inside a classroom. Specialized services include children who have experienced childhood trauma. Childhood trauma refers to distressing events involving physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse and neglect, natural disasters, illness, and violence (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). It is common for a child to recover with time and opportunities for healing after experiencing an isolated traumatic event such as auto accidents, natural disasters, and parental divorce. However, a child who endures chronic interpersonal trauma often experiences complex trauma (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). Complex trauma has been defined as extensive, cruel events that occur in a child's interpersonal space (Van Nieuwenhove & Meganck, 2019). This can affect the child's development and increase the potential for acquiring a number of health issues related to stress and well-being, such as heart disease and depression (CDC, 2020; Van Nieuwenhove & Meganck, 2019)

When working with a child who has endured trauma, health professionals sometimes take into consideration the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) score. This is a short questionnaire based on ten critical traumatic events that lead to a summative score of 0-10. Scores above 3 suggest the need for further assessment and the likely need for intervention (CDC, 2020). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) explained that ACE scores have been linked to chronic health problems, mental illnesses, and substance misuse in adulthood (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), purport that in order to prevent ACE scores, various topics need to be addressed in society. These include

strengthening economic support within families, promoting social norms that protect against violence and adversity, ensuring a strong start for children, teaching skills within children and adults, connecting youth to caring adults and activities, and intervening to lessen the immediate and long-term harms of childhood trauma (CDC, 2020).

### **Impact on Development**

Developmental impact is something that should always be considered when working with a child who has experienced trauma. In 2013, The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and families (2015) stated that 679,000 children or 9.1 victims per 1,000 children were affected by child abuse and neglect. It was then estimated that the sequelae of childhood maltreatment, including PTSD, cost the USA over \$500 billion dollars annually (Herringa, 2017). This can include various therapies such as occupational therapy, health care cost, and loss of productivity. When a child is exposed to a traumatic event and/or complex trauma, it impacts development in multiple ways.

Complex trauma affects multiple areas of occupation. These areas include social participation, activities of daily living (ADL's), education, work, play/leisure, and sleep/rest (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). Much of the information provided about long-term developmental effects is from cross study of the adult population who have previously experienced trauma (Bellis & Zisk, 2014). Information that we do know regarding brain development in the pediatric population are the levels of neural development and the neurotransmitter chemicals that regulate responses to environmental stimuli (Zilberstein, 2014).

For the first few years of life as an infant and toddler, our brain develops in three primary brain areas from lower, primitive levels to higher cortical levels (Zilberstein, 2014). In the lower level, there is the limbic system, which forms memories and coordinates self-regulation with

cortical areas that drive executive function. Then, the stress response system is impacted. To put this into perspective, some functions of the cortical system, such as the inhibitory control over emotions, do not fully develop until early adulthood. This means that infants and children at a young age are much more vulnerable to environmental factors, like events that are considered traumatic. When a child is exposed to a traumatic event or complex trauma, these interrupts and overwhelms the neural pathways in the brain that are still developing and can't withstand the stress (Zilberstein, 2014).

### **Providing Support**

One of the main goals for working with a child who has experienced trauma is to remediate the impact of life experiences on development. Children who have experienced trauma can have deficits in attention, executive functioning and social skills (Cook, et. al., 2003). When a child struggles in these areas, it can be difficult to benefit from the academic opportunities provided through public education. Support is critical to achieve academic outcomes despite their traumatic histories.

Safety, predictability, and having “fun” are necessary tools when working with a child who has experienced trauma (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). A child who is recovering from trauma needs to be in an environment that is structured, supportive, and encouraging while learning to regain a sense of self and adapting to challenge. An occupational therapist creates client-centered interventions with children who have experienced trauma. Some strategies include providing activities at the “just-right” challenge, allowing age-appropriate choices, and recommending stress management strategies (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015). The purpose and goal of this honors thesis is to design a Safe Space tool that provides an accepting environment for children to

process big emotions that they have inside them with a professional's help. Also, to develop age-appropriate strategies to manage these emotions.

### **Safe Space Introduction**

The Safe Space, is a small, inviting area that will allow children who become dysregulated in the classroom to regulate and re-focus. The activities provided in the Safe Space aim to target the major senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch). As stated above, children who have experienced trauma can be developmentally impacted. This space will provide a tool to increase safety, connection and regulation for children who have experienced trauma with help from teachers, paraprofessionals, occupational therapists and even special education teachers. The “Safe Space” has 2-3 purposeful activities that children can choose from with guidance from a professional. This manual provides detailed instructions as to the dimensions of the Safe Space and what activities are provided for each of the senses.

The Safe Space will assist professionals in the school system to navigate children’s behaviors. Children who experienced trauma can be labeled as “bad kids” when their dysregulated behaviors cause a disruption in the classroom. The aim for this “Safe Space” manual is to provide guidance and reassurance among the professionals working with children who have experienced trauma. This resource for professionals will increase understanding of how to accommodate each child’s needs.

# **Safe Space Manual**

**Providing a “Safe Space” For  
Children Who Have  
Experienced Trauma**

Alexis Garcia

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**Western Michigan University~ Lee Honors College**



## Table of Contents

### Safe Space Frame and Storage Material Options

I.	Visual Representation of Safe Space Frame.....	pg. 19
II.	Frame.....	pg. 10
	a. PVC pipe Measurements	
III.	Storage Options.....	pg. 10
	a. Purpose	
	b. Materials	
IV.	Lighting Options.....	pg. 10
V.	Seating Options.....	pg. 10
VI.	Flooring Options.....	pg. 10

### Sight

I.	Sensory Bottle.....	pg. 12
	a. Purpose	
	b. Materials	
	c. Directions on use	
II.	Books.....	pg. 12 & 13
	a. Purpose	
	b. Book Options	
III.	I Spy Bottle.....	pg. 13
	a. Purpose	
	b. Materials	
	c. Directions on use	

### Smell

I.	Essential Oil Diffuser.....	pg. 13 & 14
	a. Purpose	
	b. Materials	
	c. Directions on use	
II.	Aroma Therapy Play Dough.....	pg. 14 & 15
	a. Purpose	
	b. Materials	
	c. Directions on use	
III.	Scented Salt Tray Activity Container.....	pg. 15
	a. Purpose	
	b. Materials	

- c. Directions on use

## **Taste**

- I. Hard and Crunchy Snacks.....pg. 15
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Potential Options
- II. Soft and Chewy Snacks.....pg. 15
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Potential Options

## **Touch**

- I. Digging through Dirt Activity Container.....pg. 16
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Materials
  - c. Directions on use
- II. Buttoning A Story.....pg. 16 & 17
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Materials
  - c. Directions on use
- III. A Sensory Block.....pg. 17
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Materials
  - c. Directions on use

## **Hear**

- I. Headphones with Music.....pg.18
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Music Options
  - c. Directions on use
- II. Calming Rain Stick.....pg. 18
  - a. Purpose
  - b. Materials
  - c. Directions on use

## Safe Space Frame and Storage Material Options

- I. Dimensions: 85inX60inX65in \*diagram located at the back of the manual\*
- II. Frame can be used with PVC pipe and/or wood with pegboard.
  - a. PVC pipe measurements: 10 (120in) PVC pipes, and 8 PVC pipe elbows.
  - b. To create walls to the frame, heavy duty fabric can be used by fastening the fabric with snaps or Velcro to the frame to ensure it can be cleaned. Additionally, wood pegboard can be used as the walls of the frame which is easy to clean and secure to the frame. Depending on the size of the pegboard will depend on the amount of pegboard needed to create the walls of the frame.
- III. Storage options
  - a. Purpose: with limited space, it is essential to include [storage options](#) to allow the user to choose what best fits the child's needs with limited distractions. Hyperlinked are some available [storage ideas](#). Depending on space, the storage options can be placed inside The Safe Space, or right outside to decrease the appearance of clutter.
- IV. Lighting
  - a. Depending on the location of The Safe Space, [lighting](#) may be beneficial to allow the user and child to complete various activities. Lighting that is flexible with brightness, does not increase in heat when turned on, and cannot be easily shattered is something to keep in mind when working in this population and setting. Hyperlinked is an example of lights that can be used at the top of the space and can be strunged through the pegboard if desired.
- V. Seating
  - a. When working with this population in this setting, it is beneficial to include optimal seating [options](#) for the child and user when in the space as it may provide comfort for the child. Space needs to be considered when purchasing seating so that it can fit both the child and user comfortability with additional floor space. Below in a link for a possible seating option.
- VI. Flooring
  - a. Flooring is not deemed essential for The Safe Space but can provide a warm, inviting atmosphere for the children who will be using this space. When choosing flooring, there are many options such as [foam mats](#), [interlocking wood flooring](#), and even [rugs](#). Below are some links for some potential flooring options.

Overall, when choosing the frame, storage, lighting, seating, and flooring options, ensure that this is an inviting, clean, comfortable space that will not overwhelm a child. This space should allow the child and many different professionals to explore options of self-regulation in an age-appropriate way. If it helps, create a theme to the space, sketch the layout, take pictures, review things with a professional who may work with that population and in that setting which will allow clarity and adjustments to The Safe Space to best fit the needs of those children. But most importantly, have fun with it and be creative!

## Sight

### I. Sensory Bottle

- a. Purpose: The sensory bottle can be used to calm a child who may be upset and includes various materials that attract a child's attention. This allows them to focus on the bottle for an extended amount of time. The child can also be involved in this activity by choosing the color they want and shake the bottle themselves. This allows visual support by the rapid swirling of the materials in the bottle and tactile support by allowing the child to shake the bottle themselves.
- b. Materials: [Plastic bottles](#), [glitter glue](#), [regular glitter](#). Links to potential options listed below.
- c. Directions: Encourage the child to choose the color of the bottle. Then, demonstrate the use of the bottle with verbal cues such as *"look at the glitter swirl around the bottle"* and *"watch it all swirl to the bottom"*. These verbal cues engage the child's attention to focus on one object rather than increasing the potential for adverse emotions from external environmental distraction. Depending on the child it may take 1-2 minutes before they are ready to return to a calm state of emotions. After, engage the child in conversation with questions such as *"did you like shaking the bottle and watching the glitter swirl around?"* and *"some kids say they feel calm after this game, do you feel calm?"* These simple questions allow the child to reflect on their prior emotions and assist them in determining what they can do to return to those functioning, calm emotions. Lastly, verbalized encouragement such as *"I liked how you shook the bottle and placed it on the ground"* and *"great choice of bottle color! That's my favorite color too."* This reinforces those positive behaviors that the child can understand and continue through the stages of development.

### II. Books

- a. Purpose: Books serve the purpose in The Safe Space, by allowing the child to recognize and understand their emotions. At a young age, emotions can be hard to describe to an adult, especially if the child has a developmental delay, sensory deficit, or a behavioral disorder. This also helps a child understand that their emotions are normal rather than making them feel like an outcast. These book options allow the child to reflect on their feelings, validate that it is normal process of developing and then allows them to verbalize those feelings to an adult.

- b. Book Options that would be beneficial to the safe space which all vary in complexity include;
  - i. [How do Dinosaurs Say I'm Mad?](#)
  - ii. [Waiting is Not Easy](#)
  - iii. [The Great Big Book of Feelings](#)
  - iv. [The Color Monster: A Pop-up Book of Feelings](#)
  - v. [Sometimes I Feel Like a Storm Cloud](#)

### III. I Spy Bottle

- a. Purpose: Much like the sensory bottle, the I Spy bottle can be used to increase a child's positive emotions. The I Spy bottle has various little trinkets inside that are designed to challenge the child in searching for listed objects in the bottle which are surrounded by rice. This may benefit a child who is under-responsive as this increases their awareness, and verbalization.
- b. Materials: Plastic bottles which are linked above, [colored rice](#), and 5-10 small trinkets to put inside the bottle which can be found around a home and/or at Dollar Tree.
- c. Directions on use: Before starting the activity, explain the expectations such as *"you are to shake the bottle and place it back on the table or hold it gently in your hand"* and *"try to find all the objects listed on this paper."* These set the boundaries and help the child understand the purpose of this activity. After, allow the child 3-4 minutes to search for all the items on the paper. Afterwards congratulate the child with words of encouragement such as *"you did a great job at following the directions"* and *"Wow! Look at how smart you are, you found all the tiny objects in only 3 minutes."* This reinforces those positive behaviors and can increase a child's positive, engaging responses.

## Smell

### I. Essential Oil Diffuser

- a. Purpose: An essential oil diffuser can be used to calm a child and increase positive emotions. With the listed essential oils below, they can elicit specific moods which can normalize behaviors in children. This may not work for all children but is something worth trying. Be aware that some children have a hard time processing smell. If so, this can increase more negative behaviors especially if the child finds the aroma offensive. If that is the case, smell focused activities may not be beneficial.

- b. Materials: [Diffuser](#), and [Essential Oils](#)
  - c. Directions: This “activity” is something that does not require too much of the child. Begin by filling the diffuser with a desired oil(s). The guide on the outside of the bottles can be used to decide which oil is wanted for the day. With the diffuser being a device that can be damaged and knocked over, place it in an area around the Safe Space that the child cannot damage or knock over. When the child or children throughout the day utilize the space, they can smell the oils and hopefully gain a sense of relief and calmness. The child does not necessarily have to comment on the aroma, just experience the aroma as they are completing other activities in the space. If the child is older and is gentle with fragile items, the adult can give them the option of choosing an oil and even putting it in the diffuser. An older child may find their relief from watching the steam seep out from the top of the diffuser.
- II. Aroma Therapy Play-Dough
  - a. Purpose: Much like the diffuser, the oils assist with calming a child while having the ability to touch and manipulate the playdough. This activity provides tactile support for the child which can provide positive emotions in the child as they squish, smash, and pinch the playdough.
  - b. Materials: Playdough, [essential oils](#), [assorted beads](#) and [containers to put playdough in](#).
    - i. Homemade Playdough Recipe:
      1. 2 cups of all-purpose flour
      2.  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of salt
      3. 4 teaspoons cream of tartar
      4. 2 cups of lukewarm water
      5. 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil (or coconut oil)
      6. Food coloring (optional)
    - c. Directions: Each playdough container should have a different essential oil. Depending on the child’s mood, they can pick the desired color that they want. Explain that they have to remove all the beads from the playdough before they can move on. You can add beads to increase the challenge or remove beads to make it easier. Once the child has removed all the playdough, they can either be done with the activity or use the cookie cutters to make shapes and continue to play with the playdough. The child may need help with the first few, and that’s okay. By the end of this activity, the child should have regulated emotions. If not, continue with another activity. Note: Each essential oil is tied to a

different emotion, this is a great way to incorporate colors with emotions, for example, the lemongrass oil can be used to help release negative energy. That playdough color could be blue which indicates sadness. This pairs the smell with the color.

### III. Scented Salt tray

- a. Purpose: This activity can be used to calm a child down as they receive tactile stimulation with the help of the salt with infused essential oils. Many children can have a hard time staying still during calm-down activities. This activity permits the same results but allows the child to touch and feel and move the salt around with his hands.
- b. Materials: [Salt or Rice](#), essential oils, [paint brush](#), [trinket toys](#) and [container to put activity in](#). NOTE: if you decide to use salt ensure its non-toxic. You can also use [kinetic sand](#).
- c. Directions: With an activity like this, ensure the child understands that they must keep the salt in the container. When they do so, congratulate and compliment them. With this activity, the child can use the tools to scoop the salt around in the buckets, use paint brushes to move the same around, or even use their hands to play with the salt. With this activity, the child will be utilizing fine-motor skills, grasping techniques, and overall sensory processing skills when interacting with this activity.

## Taste

- I. Many children crave and find a sense of calm when eating and chewing, crunching, and sucking on various foods. By giving the child a snack to engage in another activity in this manual, may allow the child to focus better on their emotions when engaging in that additional activity. This can also help you determine what the child needs to succeed in the classroom environment. Additionally, providing the child with one of the snacks listed below can also involve oral motor skills that the child can improve upon. Below is a small list of suggested snacks which include [hard and crunchy](#), and [soft](#) and [chewy](#) consistencies. When giving the child a snack ensure they do not have any food allergies or ingredients that will heighten their adverse reactions like refined sugars and certain color dyes.



## Touch

### I. Digging through dirt

- a. Purpose: This activity will allow the child to engage in tactile stimulation. This activity benefits a child that may seem tired, unmotivated, restless, or a child who enjoys tactile stimulation. This activity will allow them to focus more deeply on that task. If a child has a difficult time touching and feeling certain consistencies, this activity will improve those skills. Additionally, this will facilitate fine motor skills and grip/pinch strength when digging through the dirt and finding the plastic insects.
- b. Materials: [Sand](#) and [outdoor bug kit](#).
- c. Directions on use: First, present the child with the activity. Show them that the purpose of the activity is to “dig through the dirt” and find a plastic bug.t. After demonstrating, give the child the option to either use hands to find the bugs in the dirt, or use child-friendly tweezers.

### II. Buttoning a story

- a. Purpose: This activity will allow the child to engage in tactile stimulation with this personalized, hands on activity. Additionally, this activity will allow the use of imagination while buttoning the story onto the soft, felt book. This may benefit a child who shows a lack of motivation or enjoys tactile and visual simulation through different materials and colors of the felt. For a visual of this activity, there could be a book-sized piece of Velcro with stacked Velcro in certain areas to create a background (playground, school, home, bathroom) on this background would be buttons or Velcro spots where the child can place other Velcro characters onto that background to create their story. The options are limitless when it comes to the backgrounds and the felt characters! Reading a story book may help with creating a background and coordinating characters.
- b. Materials: [Felt](#), [buttons](#), or [Velcro](#). You can find almost any color of felt online or in a local craft store.
- c. Directions on use: Initially, like any other activity, you want to communicate the expectations and rules. These should be he specific to the individual needs of the child. Examples of expectations include, *“please do not throw the felt buttons”, or “please do not put any of the pieces in your mouth”*. Make sure to communicate to the child to pick a fun, colorful felt background and then button on the individual pieces to make a story. Determine the level of assistance needed as this activity

can be altered to fit each child's needs. After the child is done with the activity, ask questions or listen to the child discuss their story. Doing this makes the child feel valued and that indicates that emotions are being recognized. If the child does have a difficult time with self-expression, this strategy helps you understand how they are feeling at that present time. NOTE: if you feel that there are felt pieces that might be missing to help with self-expression, the materials listed can help you create an additional felt piece to add to the activity.

### III. Sensory block

- a. Purpose: This object will assist a child in focusing in on more challenging, hands-on activities. This is not a large activity in itself, but more of a tool that can be used with one of these many activities, or in a classroom. For a child that is potentially sensory over-responsive, this could be made into activity to allow them to take that first small step into detecting the many different textures on the sensory block. This will give the child a way to divert energy to a tool that will help them concentrate or give them an outlet to for productive expression of energy. This may be more beneficial to a child that is frequently craving sensory simulation who has a hard time sitting still or is disrupting other children in the classroom.
- b. Materials: Wooden blocks, buttons, sandpaper, pom poms, foil, cotton ball, yarn, glitter, super-glue.
- c. Directions on use: You will want to verbalize the expectations of this tool such as "*please do not throw this cube*" or "*please do not put this in your mouth*". This tool can be used either in the classroom to assist the child in focusing or in the Safe Space. Go through the cube with the child and feel each side and describe how it feels. There is a chance that the child only likes one of the sides, and that's okay. This is an option to see if the child can use this tool in the classroom to help them focus during quiet class activities that require sitting still. If this is an option that is being introduced to a child that is over-responsive or doesn't like certain textures, you will want to be gradual and gentle with your approach. Since the block is smaller, this could be a steppingstone to introducing additional textures and assisting the child in regulating how they respond to adverse situations.

## Hear

## I. Headphones and music

- a. Purpose: The purpose of the headphones and music in the Safe Space, is to allow children to regulate any negative emotions they may be having. This may benefit a child who enjoys listening to music while completing an activity. Or a child that can easily become overwhelmed in large, loud crowds. This may also benefit a child that is sensory seeking as you can have the child listen to music and complete another activity in the space simultaneously.
- b. Materials: [CD radio](#), and [CD](#)
- c. Directions on use: This is an activity that can be used alone or with another activity. You can start by turning on the music and setting it in the background for the child to walk into. Or you can communicate with the child and allow them options of music to listen to. By the end of the activity, you should notice a difference in the child's mood.

## II. Rain stick

- a. Purpose: The purpose of the rain stick is to allow the child control over what sound they hear, for what period of time while being able to hold the object that is making the noise. This could be used with a child who is sensory craving but needs a more appropriate way of expressing their sensory needs. This could also be for a child who is frustrated and showing signs of anger as the noise can be soothing and gentle.
- b. Materials: [Long, See-through container](#), sticks, [rice](#), [beans](#), and [birdseed](#).
- c. Directions on use: Before beginning the activity, allow the child to look inside the bottle and discuss what is going to make the "rain sound." There will be different "rain sounds" the child can choose from such as bird seed, beans, and rice. Depending on the child's comfortability, you can flip the container over and listen quietly as you can hear the rain sounds coming from the materials inside. This activity can be done for 1-3 minutes or until the child is done and ready to move onto the next activity.

### Model of Safe Space

Length= Blue  
Width= Red  
Height= Green

#### Walls

- Pegboard
- Fabric Walls

#### Storage

- Toy storage bins

#### Lighting

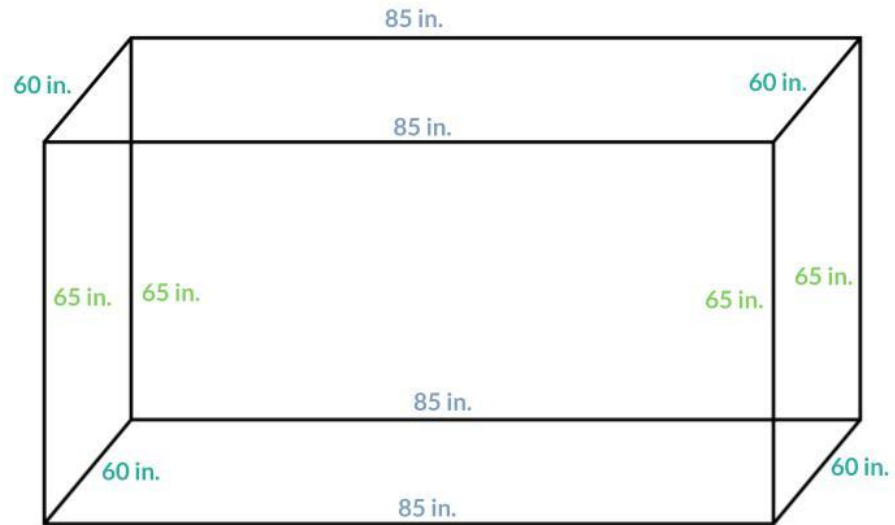
- String lights

#### Seating Arrangements

- Beanbags (2)

#### Flooring Options

- Rug options
- Foam mats
- Interlocking wood flooring



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