**School Sensory Rooms**

**What is a sensory room?**

Sensory rooms use sensory equipment to create a controlled sensory-focused environment. These environments allow sensory experiences to be individually tailored to meet the specific needs of an individual. Good sensory rooms are well structured so that the amount and intensity of a sensory experience can be easily controlled and monitored.

**What is the purpose of a school sensory room?**

These rooms can serve multiple purposes. They can promote self-organization, be a calming area, provide leisure, help with sensory integration, or act as skill training centers. A well-designed room can also serve people of all ages, multiple disabilities, as well as facilitators, teachers, parents, caregivers, and therapists.

**Why have a sensory room?**

Those with multiple disabilities often have sensory impairments. By controlling sensory input in the room, it is possible to eliminate distractions and assist people to attend to specific objects that may help them make sense of their external environment. A sensory room can also provide these additional benefits:

* Modulate the environment so that you can reduce the opportunity for over-stimulation.
* Creates a safe space with tools students can use to self-regulate and manage anger, over-stimulation and stress.
* You can create a controlled space to assess the type of environment a student is most comfortable in and the sensory activities a person is most responsive to.
* You can create a comfortable space for students to relax in to help them interact with others.
* Provide a safe crisis and de-escalation area.

**What is the research on sensory rooms?**

Research on sensory rooms is ongoing. So far studies have shown they are useful for reducing and managing stress and aggression. Therapists have also used the room for “supporting reflective learning during critical incident debriefing" 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 They can also reduce stereotyped/repetitive behaviors in adolescents and adults. 3, 5, 6  Use of the room can also increase attention and focus. 8

**How do schools and mental health facilities use sensory rooms?**

1. Reduce Stress
2. Reduce Stereotyped/repetitive Behaviors
3. Reduce Aggression
4. Increase focus
5. Motivate Learning
6. Increase interaction
7. Assist with sensory integration therapy.

**How do you set up a sensory room?**

Before designing the room, it is important to consider:

1. The individual needs of the clients who will use the room. What are the ages, abilities, and needs of the individuals who will use the room?
2. How many individuals will need to use the room at the same time?
3. How the room will be used. Will the room be a calming area? Will it be used for therapy sessions including occupational therapy, speech, sensory integration therapy, or one on one instruction?
4. Keep in mind the long-term use of the room. If all of your equipment is static, students can become bored. A good goal is to create a flexible space that allows you to create different scenes or moods depending on the emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of the students. How will the room be adapted to meet changing needs and keep it interesting?

**Common Components of a Sensory Room**

* Bubble tube
* Fiber optic sprays, or lighting
* Beanbag chairs
* Interactive Wall Boards
* Rocking chairs & glider rockers
* Comfortable rug
* Stereo or MP3 Player with Headphones
* Therapy balls
* Lighting/projector that can display various colors & patterns
* Weighted blankets or weighted lap pads
* A flowing water fountain
* Bins with assorted sensory activities
* Aromatherapy diffuser kit

**What color to paint the room?**

Traditional thought is to paint a sensory room white. This allows different visual effects to show up better when they are projected on a wall. A note about an all-white room. Some sensory rooms are completely white with white walls and white soft flooring. This can be a challenge for those with visual impairments. It limits the number of visual cues making it difficult to differentiate between the walls, floor, door, and doorframe. Also, this can make keeping the room clean difficult!

**More Set up Tips**

* Before ordering equipment make sure you have budgeted money for installation. Check to make sure the room is set up with adequate electrical outlets. Depending on the equipment you order, you may need to include a contractor and/or electrician in your budget.
* Smaller areas within a larger sensory room can be created that give students an opportunity to explore objects and people close to them. You can divide up the space using sound sponge dividers or hanging curtains with different materials.
* Windows may need to be darkened if light effects are going to be used. You can cover them with dark paper, use blackout curtains, or install blinds.
* Think about your floor coverings. Some room designs cover the entire floor with wall-to-wall mats. However, this creates an unstable surface that can be difficult for some individuals to move independently and may limit wheelchair access.
* Carpet: go for plain colors if the floor is highly patterned it will detract from other features in the room.
* Any equipment with a heat source should be positioned where there is plenty of ventilation so that the equipment does not overheat.

**Staff Training is a Must**

Unfortunately,  chaotic and unpredictable environments are sometimes created when a room is poorly designed or personnel are not trained how to properly use the room. It is essential that the support personal understand how to use the room itself, not just the equipment inside it.

It is more important how you use the space not what you have in it. One of the most common mistakes is to go into a sensory room and turn on every piece of equipment. This can be very over stimulating for some. If used incorrectly students can exhibit self-injurious or aggressive behavior. Remember the equipment is only as good as the person using it.

**References:**

1. Brosnan J, Healy O (2011) A review of behavioral interventions for the treatment of aggression in individuals with developmental disabilities. Research in Dev. Disabilities, (2):437-46.
2. Champagne, T & Stromberg, N (2004). Sensory approaches in inpatient psychiatric settings: Innovative alternatives to seclusion and restraint (CE Article). Journal of Psychosocial Nursing, 42(9), 35-44.
3. Forsyth AS, Trevarrow R (2008) Sensory strategies in adult mental health: A qualitative exploration of staff perspectives following the introduction of a sensory room on a male adult acute ward. Int J Ment Health Nursing, (6):1689-1697.
4. Novak T, Scanlan J, McCaul D, MacDonald N, Clarke T. (2012) Pilot study of a sensory room in an acute inpatient psychiatric unit. Australas Psychiatry, (5):401-6.
5. Hill, Lindsay; Trusler, Karen; Furniss, Frederick; Lancioni, Giulio (2012) Effects of Multisensory Environments on Stereotyped Behaviours Assessed as Maintained by Automatic Reinforcement. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, v25 n6 p509-521.
6. Novakovic N1, Milovancevic MP2, Dejanovic SD3, Aleksic B4. (2019) Effects of Snoezelen-Multisensory environment on CARS scale in adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorder. Res Dev Disabil. Jun;89:51-58.
7. Case-Smith, J. (2009). Relationships among Psychology, Stress, Behavior, and the Environment. OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health, 29, 146-147.
8. Thompson, C. (2011). Multi-Sensory Intervention Observational Research. International Journal of Special Education , 26, 202-214.