

BENEFITS OF THE SENSORY ROOM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract: *This paper examines the influence of multi sensory environments as a specific educational strategy and/or therapy used for the development of children with special educational needs. For achieving specific and measurable educational and therapeutic goals, these rooms must be designed and equipped to stimulate the senses, relax and relieve stress and anxiety. Multi sensory stimulation provides opportunities for bridging the barriers of children with special educational needs.*

Key words: *special needs, educational strategies, sensory rooms, equipment, benefits.*

*„There are no guarantees in life, except that everyone faces struggles. This is how we learn (and grow). Some face struggles from the moment they are born. They are the most special of all people, requiring the most care and compassion and reminding us that love is the sole purpose of life.”
(Elisabeth Kübler-Ross)*

An important factor in assisting children with special needs is to identify the most appropriate educational strategies. In this context, „it is absolutely necessary for the specialists in the field to know the classification of didactic technologies, the ways of their adaptation to the needs of the children, to monitor and estimate the impact of using a certain method / procedure in the work with the child and, respectively, to decide which ones the most relevant, more effective, to promote them in educational inclusion activities” [1, p. 9].

We consider that sensory room is a special strategy used in order to help develop the abilities of children. Before speaking about sensory room benefits and its purpose, let's first discuss what a multi-sensory room is. According to Experia, the home of sensory Equipment in the UK, one of the UK's leading designers, manufacturers and installers of sensory equipment, sensory room is a „specially designed environment designed to give a sensory experience for people with various abilities” [4].

„Sensory rooms are specially designed environments created in order to give an immersive sensory experience for people with various abilities” [5].

„A multi sensory environment is a dedicated space or room where sensory stimulation can be controlled (intensified or reduced), presented in isolation or combination, packaged for active or passive interaction, and matched to fit the perceived motivation, interests, leisure, relaxation, therapeutic and/or educational needs of the user” [8].

„Sensory room is a special room designed and equipped to stimulate the senses of hearing, sight, touch and smell. It is a place where people with sensory integration

disorder can explore and develop their sensory skills, but also where they can relax and relieve stress and anxiety” [3].

Thus, a multi-sensory room is a special designed environment providing sensory integration – „the ability to take in information through senses, to put it together with prior information, memories, and knowledge stored in the brain, and to make a meaningful response” [ibidem], therapy. This type of therapy is suitable for children and adults with autism, concentration disorder, for those with sensory impairments, for people with mental development or insufficient development problems, speech difficulties, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. A sensory room can be used to meet multiple objectives, depending on each student’s needs.

Sensory products and rooms, designed in partnership with occupational therapists and health professionals, create relaxing and calming yet stimulating environments that work to develop users’ sensory needs [2].

Traditionally, sensory rooms were used for relaxation and de-escalation, when people with autism, emotional and behavioural difficulties, sensory processing disorder, or other special needs would find themselves overwhelmed and in need of a safe and distracting place to return to a state of calm. They are very often still used for calming today, but with advances in technology the best multisensory rooms can do so much more [6].

The development of sensory rooms began in the Netherlands in the 70’s. The initial idea was to deliver stimulation to the various senses, both to relax and calm, while engaging or prompting the people with special needs to take notice of their surroundings. The design of multi-sensory room is a special one, and there are some things to take into consideration about it: location - away from busy thoroughfares where external noise could be an issue, it is advised to select a room without windows if possible; size – an enough large space to interact with multiple sensory objects; shape – avoid circular rooms; ventilation, heating, cooling - due to the heat from electrical lighting products, it is advisable to include an air conditioning unit or a venting system that allows for an adequate flow of fresh air; lighting - avoid any fluorescent lights, that create an undesirable noise which may often increase stress of the users in the room; sound insulation- providing sound insulation in the room helps keep unwanted distractions (noise) from entering or leaving the room; color of walls, ceiling and floor - wall color is a and may vary depending on the room’s overall design, many sensory rooms include projectors with various colors, dark colors are better for creating a more focused area in which to use fluorescent effects; floor coverings – floor coverings should depend on what the room is being used for, who is using the room, and the overall used effect. If individuals in wheelchairs will be using the room, consider including a durable floor covering that doesn’t stop the wheelchair from moving about; electrical – it is advised to run a separate switched circuit for each product, with the outlets located near each piece of equipment, and the switches located together in an optimal place in the room.

The special equipment is also required: bouncing balls, whiteboard, light wall, punching bag, and battle ropes, mirror wall, lego wall, bubble tube, body socks, tactile center, rowers, platform swing, different sprays with essential oils, musical gloves, music chair [4, 7].

Some benefits sensory rooms include:

- Sensory stimulation: when users engage and explore their surroundings, they are beginning to learn how to react and interact with the much larger world around them.
- Increased learning and play: sensory stimulation engages different areas of the brain and helps children better absorb and retain information.
- Improved balance, movement, and spatial orientation: sensory rooms can help develop users' visual processing abilities as well as their fine and gross motor skills, facilitating day-to-day living.
- Helps tackle behavioral problems: multi-sensory environments can be highly absorbing, providing a moment of comfort and calm for overactive and distressed individuals, and helping inactive individuals to feel better engaged.
- Helps children become more aware of their body.
- Helps children focus more time and develop stability of attention.
- Improves perceptual capabilities.
- Children become more aware of the external environment and more active in their handling.
- Improve coordination between movements, but also coordination between hand and eye.
- Aggressive behaviors are reduced.
- Creativity is stimulated.
- Improves brain functions, social relationships.
- Produces a state of physical and mental relaxation.
- Promotes children's self-help skills as well as spiritual, moral and cultural development [3, 4].

These rooms are interesting, not only to children with disabilities who use it for therapy, but to other children as well. In fact, it is believed that there is no child who can stay indifferent to such an unusual space. Sensory room is a new concept in Republic of Moldova, but it deserves to be developed because its benefits for developing the skills of children with special needs are visible from the first sessions.

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