

Sensory

Sensory Rooms - Snoezelen

White Snoezelen

Snoezelen and other multi-sensory therapies provide stimuli to the primary senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Developed in the Netherlands as a leisure resource for children with learning disabilities in the 1970s the popularity of Snoezelen has spread and is now frequently used in fields as diverse as paediatrics, midwifery, mental health, special education and pain management. Traditionally Snoezelen was delivered in a dedicated room designed specifically for this purpose using a variety of lights, moving objects, music, aromas, and tactile objects. Our School has such a white Snoezelen and also a black Snoezelen used for training visual tracking especially for students with cortical vision impairment. Many Snoezelen environments now incorporate the use of 'high tech' fibre optics, bubble tubes, strobe lights, aroma steamers, image projectors and ceiling mounted mirror balls. More recently, the sensory experience has been provided via mobile equipment set up in classrooms or in the form of an outdoor Snoezelen garden. Anecdotally, the use of Snoezelen and multisensory therapies has become increasingly popular in with students who may exhibit behaviours that staff find challenging. These behaviours include wandering, restlessness and aggression.

Envision walking into a room designed by the King or Queen of Imagination and endless possibility. The room is dimly lit and you feel safe and calm. Its white walls bring a sense of peace and tranquillity that you have never felt before. Your eyes follow the lights as they dance across the walls to the ceiling where they meet the starry sky while celestial bodies orbit the room. You hear soft, ambient music playing in the background—a harmonious symphony to the ears. Clear glass tubes standing along the room are filled with colourful bubbles slowly rising. As you gently hold strands of fibre optic threads, they light up and change into an array of colours. There are plush, white beanbags on which you sit as all of the magic of the room is reflected in the mirrors around you. You're standing in a Snoezelen (pronounced SNOOZ-eh-len), which comes from two Dutch words: "snuffelen" (to sniff or explore) and "doezelen" (to doze or to relax). The room is a special environment designed for those with profound special needs or sensory challenges. It has the extraordinary power to soothe the overly excited or stimulate the typically unengaged. Participants select and receive sensory input (tactile, visual, and auditory) through the different objects in the room, allowing them to claim their independence and experience the immediate consequences of their actions. The Snoezelen concept was developed in the Netherlands in the 1970s and is becoming increasingly common throughout the world, including many Canadian elementary and secondary schools. It is hard to imagine how simple lights and sounds can greatly help a student with special needs without considering some of their specific challenges. A day in the life of a child with sensory sensitivities is full of obstacles—and that is before they even arrive at school. Someone who is hyper-sensitive to touch may refuse to get dressed because they experience pain from wearing clothes. On the other hand, hypo sensitivity may cause others to constantly touch objects because their sense of touch is not very responsive. Once at school, everyday sounds like the ringing of the school bell or the dragging of classroom chairs can be painful and alarming to those suffering from auditory sensitivities. The sense of smell is no different. Eating lunch among peers may prove a challenge to a student with a heightened sense of smell; just one sniff of a bologna sandwich may upset them.

How can an educator or caregiver tackle these challenges faced by their students? A Snoezelen is a great accommodation because every object in it is designed to aid sensory challenges. For a student who is afraid of touch, they are inclined to touch everything in the room. Another student who is prone to seizures or angry outbursts suddenly feels relaxed. For the students who are very mellow, suddenly, they want to explore the room freely. Some of these students cannot speak nor articulate how to relieve their pain. In a Snoezelen, however, the opposite effect is experienced. Students can communicate their excitement and pleasure. They wear precious smiles on their faces, or their eyes sparkle as they gaze upon the dazzling lights. It is always easier to express one's happiness than their pain.

The magic of a Snoezelen is in its contents allowing the student to act independently. Unlike a conventional classroom setting, there are no teachers telling them what to do or what to look at. Their eyes move around the room. They grasp the objects, changing and moving them. They explore the environment.

The room calls out for interaction and movement. So many objects have different settings that make each experience unique. The speeds of the bubble tubes, for example, can be adjusted as fast or slow.

The fibre optic light threads can be manipulated in multiple ways: braiding them, running fingers through them, or a teacher can help by using the lit ends to help students with visual tracking. A Snoezelen is not treatment, therapy, or a place specifically for learning. It is simply a spa for the senses.

Students experience choice in a Snoezelen and see the outcomes of their decisions. The activities inside the room help them to recuperate and relax from their sensory sensitivities and other challenges. There is, however, significant research supporting the seemingly magical effects of the Snoezelen. One of the more interesting studies appears in the North American journal, *Research in Developmental Disabilities*.

Researchers looked at whether changes in behaviour of participants in a Snoezelen session carried over to a five-minute activity that followed it. The experiment involved participants who received occupational therapy (OT) in a Snoezelen versus non-Snoezelen OT. Snoezelen OT refers to directed, tactile, and visual sensory input to effect arousal change. The participants used bean bag chairs, a stationary rocker, projector, light box, ceiling and floor chase lights, fibre optic spray, bubble tube, black lights, and new age music synchronized to the light box. Non-Snoezelen OT included: proprioceptive calming exercises, which aim to stimulate the proprioceptors in the body. A proprioceptor is a receptor found in tissues of the body for example, in muscles, tendons, and joints. They respond to stimuli produced within the body; vestibular exercises, that focus on the inner ear; and the use of rubber stamps and coloured pens to make picture communication boards.

<https://teachmag.com/archives/1016>

Black Snoezelen

The dark, quiet Snoezelen, with bright light-up elements which can be controlled through various technologies, has been found in research projects to be a very motivating space for students with cortical vision impairment (CVI) and other vision issues to work in! What is very exciting from the published literature, is that with the right environmental adaptations and stimuli, with repeated exposure to appropriate elements that the brain **does** recognise, and by slowly expanding on those recognised objects, the vision of people with CVI can **progress** up this scale and achieve notable improvement in functional vision. This has profound implications on one's ability to engage with the environment, and often the ability to access communication systems or assistive technologies.

There are certain characteristics of CVI, including: having a strong colour preference, having difficulty with visually complex environments, enjoying looking at lights, requiring an element of movement in order to initiate focusing, and other traits, that when adequately catered for and accommodated, can lead to an improvement in the person's visual processing ability.

Snoezelen and the equipment often included in them, provide an ideal environment in which to cater for these needs. When a child presses a coloured button, and all the lights in the room change to that colour, that is a very strong, immersive learning experience – **like the lights in our interactive ball pond above!** If a person who cannot use their hands, uses an eye tracking computer to look at a large picture of a Bubble Tube on their screen, which then sends a remote-control signal to the real Bubble Tube in the corner and switches on the humming, bubbling, colourful activity, it is rewarding and creates an amazing sense of achievement. It is also just fun! When vision is complex, and typical visual AAC communication demands are beyond the abilities of an individual, one can adapt the system (by simplifying the collection of symbols, using high contrast symbols and fonts etc.) However, one can also create an entire *environment* which supports and provides opportunities for visual growth. Whilst people who are blind of course still experience a rich sensory world and have full access to learning, for those who do have the ability to improve their vision, sensory rooms provide a valuable environment within which to maximise that possibility. <http://inclusivesolutions.co.za/sensory-rooms-visual-impairments-and-cvi/>