**DESIGNING A MULTISENSORY PLAYROOM FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM**

Multi-Sensory Environments (MSEs) are designed with two goals in mind: to promote intellectual activity and to encourage relaxation.

Children's moods are strongly affected by lighting: for some it provides a calming, soothing effect and for others it acts as a stimulant. Harsh lighting can often hurt the eyes of a person with autism. Flickering, humming lights can be very distracting and sometimes painful. It’s often advised to use adjustable lighting to create a calming effect.

Certain light levels and colors can be beneficial and the ability to control visual stimuli within the space is important. Creating a sensorially rich room can aid in stimulating, develop and balance a person’s sensory system. Sensoric rooms can include: soothing music, vibration cushions, fiber optics, mirror balls, bubble tubes, water beds, tactile walls, disco lights, projectors and equipment that is activated by switches, movement, sound or pressure, so that a child can learn about cause and effect.

With Autism now affecting 1 in 110 children and 1 in 70 boys, it’s imperative that architects, interior designers and color professionals be aware of the specific design requirements, for this growing population. Special consideration needs to be given when selecting colors and finishes, particularly for public spaces where children frequent such as playrooms.

Autistic children frequently have difficulties with sensory integration, which are the senses that are experienced through sight, touch, sound, taste and smell. They rely on their visual senses to tell them what is happening since they often difficulty decoding verbal cues. Here’s another important fact that we need to keep in mind, when selecting color for children’s spaces: Researchers have found that autistic children’s eyes and faces (components of the eye) have changed due to chemical imbalances or neural disfunctions. Colors appear more vibrant to autistic children. Of the autistic children tested, 85% saw colors with greater intensity than non-autistic children. Red for example, looks fluorescent and vibrates with intensity.

Bubble Tubes and Lighting

People with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) get a positive response when watching bubble tubes in action, since they provide a tracking activity that helps to improve visual development, color recognition, visual perception and communications skills. The bubble tubes themselves can promote and enhance children’s level of relaxation, creating a calming effect.

Bubbles tubes and ball pit with lighting effects turned off.

**TIPS:**

- Use non-defined patterns in fabrics, flooring and wall covering.
- Color schemes should minimal hues, mixed colors are preferred.
- Pat books, toys and other distractions out of sight: place them behind cabinet doors.
- Draperies and shutters are distracting; use simple, inside mount blinds.
- Although color preferences vary from individuals, studies have shown that many autistic children favor pastel pink.
- Reduce the use of primary colors to light weight toys, which can be removed from the space if needed.
- A monochromatic color scheme instantly creates a peaceful environment.
- Cool colors such as blue and green typically have the most soothing effect.