TOP Sportsability

Multi-sensory environments are recognised as particularly effective when working with young people who have profound, multiple and complex needs.

Ideas & Strategies

Benefits of using multi-sensory environments

Young people who have profound and complex needs often face the world with multiple barriers interrupting or blocking the flow of information from their surroundings; these obstacles can be sensory, cognitive physical or medical – frequently combinations of all four.

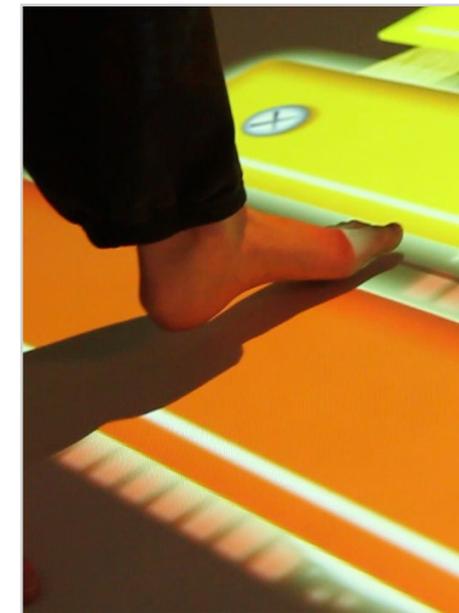The benefits of interacting with multi-sensory environments include:

- movement stimulation and increased mobility;
- improved focus, alertness and awareness;
- increased interaction with the environment;
- enhanced perceptive capabilities;
- development of inter-personal communication – vocalisation, verbalisation, reaction to others;
- reduction in stress levels.

Activity

Interaction with a multi-sensory environment can be informal, enabling young people to explore, react and influence their surroundings. It can also be formalised and guided, as in the application of a movement/sensory curriculum, the key principles of which include:

- predictable, soundly established routines, reinforcing learning and enabling anticipatory behaviour to develop;
- using a familiar, secure environment and support staff;
- utilising the widest possible range of communication methods to establish preferences and develop response;
- a multi-disciplinary, multi-faceted approach.

Think about – personalised programming ensuring that young people are at the centre of the process.

STEP

Space

- A young person's relationship with the space around them, and with other people occupying the same space, can develop through self-experimentation or through prompting; for example, encouraging movement to another part of the environment through sound or light. Light or sound 'trails' can lead a young person on an exploratory journey around the room.

Task

- Some multi-sensory equipment moves through a programmed sequence; this can begin to develop anticipation as a young person waits for a favourite sound/light sensation to be repeated.

- Many environments, however, enable young people to learn to control their environment by operating simple switches, interrupting light or sound beams or through vocalisation. Empowerment through interactive play is a fundamental principle.

Equipment

- There is an ever-increasing range of multi-sensory equipment available, much of it portable enabling its use in a variety of settings. There are even 'pop-up' multi-sensory rooms that can be erected and dismantled as required.

- However, multi-sensory experiences can be achieved through the imaginative use of ordinary household items. For example, torches can be used to create special effects if shone through translucent or semi-opaque materials. Or a radio or music player inside a box (or a number of boxes) can intrigue and encourage a young person to find a way inside.

People

- An effective multi-sensory environment will create numerous access points for young people, enabling them to interact with their surroundings. For example, where hearing or vision is impaired, tactile stimulation, such as vibration, can create an effective 2-way entry point.

Safety

- Regular maintenance and cleaning of interactive equipment is essential in terms of safety and hygiene.

How to improve

- A 'simple to complex' approach can be applied, starting with equipment that provides one basic form of stimulation before moving to more sophisticated multi-sensory devices enabling young people to 'grow' their senses.

Communication

- Multi-sensory equipment can develop communication through a targeted approach. Bombarding young people with multi-layered, multi-sensory stimulation could be confusing. Take note of what works best for each young person

Links

For more information, see the Links section.