

Family Friendly Case Study: The Shire Hall Gallery Multi Sensory Room

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Why the project began

In 2006, we investigated methods of engaging with and encouraging visits by those with disabilities. Our brief was to develop a free, interactive experience which could link to the programme of exhibitions in the Gallery. One of the best and most practical solutions was to set up a Multi-Sensory Room.



Originating in Holland as 'Snoezelen', the purpose of a Multi-Sensory environment is to provide exploration, relaxation and sensory development. Our research revealed that there was only one Sensory room available for public use – and that was not in an arts setting. Most rooms are available within specialist healthcare or educational environments or have cost implications for the user.

What we did

We consulted with a range of specialist suppliers before commissioning Spacekraft to recommend and install permanent equipment in a small, easily accessible room within the gallery space which had been used as a store.

Next, we visited a special needs school to talk to teachers and find out more about activities the children enjoyed, and invited Judy Denizloe, a sensory environment expert, to train our Front of House and project staff. We also consulted with museum staff and asked them to provide a series of images which would stimulate reminiscence sessions for older users.

The Sensory Room opened in November 2006 and has been growing in popularity with visitors ever since. The room is available free of charge for private sessions during normal

opening hours. Equipment in the room is changed slightly every 8 weeks to reflect the theme of each new exhibition.

What went well?

We collected feedback from our users through simple visitor surveys, printed in a large font with space to draw, as well as write. Response from the public has been fantastic. Many new visitors have never used a sensory room before but rate the facility as good/excellent. We have built up a new visitor base and are now seeing lots of familiar faces!

Visitors are very keen to feed back to us and share their ideas. We've learnt a lot from them and worked to adapt the room based on their suggestions. Where possible, we've added equipment that they've requested and taken away items they did not find suitable. Although we are occasionally asked for 'more toys', we've been very careful with the content of the room and only added items which have a sensory value. This has kept the room relevant to all age groups.

We get a lot of support for the room through donations – we have very generous visitors who want to support the facility and recommend it to their friends and families. We are also visited by a number of local nurseries who bring children along to play and recommend that the children return with their families.

Visitor Feedback

"This Sensory Room has been an invaluable resource for us. Our son has special needs so we use the room frequently and I can't begin to tell you how much we appreciate the use of it. Equipment is great. On first using this room, our son had very little speech, poor eye contact and struggled with interaction. He also has sensory issues. He loves the lighting. The room has enabled us to gain interaction with him. His eye contact has improved immensely, he learnt his colours through use of the bubble column, which he is intrigued by. The large pebbles you used have taught him the difference between cold/warm and smooth. Benefits have been immense and I could go on and on. Well done and thank you."

"We have some good ideas to take back to nursery."

"We had useful instruction from a member of staff."

"It was exciting finding out for ourselves."

"[The suggestions were] very helpful, especially if you haven't used a sensory room before."

"The sensory drawers were fantastic. A great, effective idea."

"Very nice to have complete privacy."

"A good selection of tactile toys - I loved the glowing eggs."

"We appreciate being left to find way round after initial expectations."

"The Multi-Sensory Room is a fantastic idea and much appreciated. I'm sure it will be beneficial to lots of people and I hope it proves very successful."

"The kids really enjoyed themselves exploring - and I found it relaxing!"

"The children both enjoyed it (one with special needs and one without). Lots of things they had not used/played with before."

"It's fantastic that everyone will be given the opportunity to engage in a sensory experience."

"My 18 month old found the room scary at first, but minutes later he was enjoying it."

"Lovely to have a free facility such as this."

What have we learned?

There hasn't been as much of a crossover between the sensory room and the exhibition space as we had hoped. Although parents often stay to use the Children's Zone with babies and toddlers, visitors with special needs or disabilities do not tend to explore the exhibitions as often.

Different visitors want different things which means we have to make compromises within the space – wheelchair users need hard flooring but parents with young children would prefer soft flooring so we have removable play matting. We've done what we can to accommodate each user group, but we can't please everyone!

Sometimes it's hard to keep the room clean. We provide a childproof box full of detergent wipes and tissues in case of any little accidents but we've found boiled sweets, dirty nappies and crisps left in the room. (It's also very important to keep checking for broken toys and dead batteries and many users do not report these.)

When we originally opened the room, we only offered half hour sessions. Since then, we've had to begin offering a choice of half hour or hour long slots as this is not enough time for many visitors. We also find that adults can bring along up to six children and have to swap groups over in the middle of their sessions!

We have sensory drawers which are full of interactive objects to represent 'touch', 'hear', 'feel', 'see' and 'do'. When we first opened the room, our visitors made us aware that most of our permanent equipment was quite visual, and therefore unsuitable for blind visitors. The addition of more musical instruments and vibrating and textured objects has helped this problem. After inviting advisors from Staffordshire Blind Centre to visit the room and tell us what they thought, we have also revised all of our signage and produced large print versions of CD inlays to make music selection easier.

Visitors also complained that we weren't catering for 'taste'. Although we can't provide food for hygiene reasons, we've now added a list of taste suggestions to bring in or try at home. Smell has been the most difficult sense to tackle. We experimented with aromatic oils (which overpowered the room and needed refreshing on a regular basis) and aroma blocs

(which are quite potent and eventually all smell the same) before we found the solution – small bags filled with herbs and spices!

Sensory equipment doesn't have to cost a lot! We've found pet toys, kitchenware and baby toys - and we've found great things in DIY stores, fabric shops and garden centres! You should never underestimate rubber gloves and space blankets!

What would we do differently next time?

We're very pleased with this project, and as we're constantly changing and adapting it we haven't had many issues that we couldn't overcome. However, if we were to do this project again, we would certainly invest in proper soundproofing during the development stage, as the noise from the room does tend to carry and echoes from the high ceilings in the gallery space!

We would also consult with local users as well as experts before fitting the room as to ensure that the equipment we have invested in is right for our users. The room contains an 'infinity tunnel' which was installed at floor level and had to be raised up to make it accessible to wheelchair users. Fibre optics would have been a far more popular choice in this location (and are one of our most frequently requested items).

When we opened the room, we held a small launch event for SEN teachers and advisors and local councillors. Our current user demographic suggests that we would have had a faster bookings uptake if we had also invited nursery and residential care staff.

Although we tried to keep the walls of our sensory room clean and pale to avoid over stimulation, we've found that users need signage. We've had to add equipment instructions, toilet directions, a clock to stop sessions overrunning, coat hooks and so on. Providing all of these things has been a great help to our visitors and new users – you can't always do things by the book!

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