

Snoezelen for people with Autism.

Overview

Autism describes a spectrum of disorders that range in severity of symptoms and presentation of features. These features impact on a person's ability to interact socially, relate to others and communicate. People with autism may also experience over or under sensitivity to sound, touch, taste, smell and light. In most cases the characteristics of autism emerge between 12 to 36 months of age. There are over half a million people in the UK with autism (Baird et al., 2006) and the prevalence of autism has been on the rise since the early 1990s. There is a need to provide appropriate sensory stimulation in order to facilitate and develop communication, whilst providing a sensory environment that addresses sensory processing needs.

For the person with autism interaction with others may be challenging and their sensory environment around them may feel overwhelming. As a result there can be an increase in stereotypical and behavioural problems. By modifying the sensory demand and focusing on abilities these abnormal behaviours may be reduced. This modification can also assist in sensory and information processing leading to fewer problems in adulthood. If the child has difficulty interpreting a sensory experience, it is easy to understand why they see the world differently to us. One such tool that may help with sensory processing is the Snoezelen environment. The Snoezelen provides a range of sensory stimulation that may be tailored to meet the needs of people with autism in order to manage sensory processing and assist in the preparation for engagement in meaningful activity.

The behaviour exhibited by people with autism incorporates three main components. That of impaired social interaction, impaired communication and impaired sensory processing.

* In social interaction there is limited eye contact, facial expression and social gestures. Snoezelen does not rely on direct social interaction therefore is accessible regardless of the level of social skills. Sessions can be adjusted to facilitate independent, parallel and co-operative interaction.

* Impairment in communication, children with autism frequently show delays in learning to comprehend language and to speak. The Snoezelen can be used with switches to reinforce communication and learning using a sensory approach.

* Impairment in sensory processing can mean our sensory world can feel overwhelming which can lead to feelings of frustration. This may lead to mood swings and feelings of loss of control. The level of stimulation in a Snoezelen room can be adjusted up or down to manage levels of sensory arousal and to modify behaviour.

The Snoezelen environment

The 'Snoezelen' environment provides direct and indirect stimulation of sensory modalities and can be used individually or as a collection to provide a sensory approach. Equipment that might suit people with autism may include:

Visual stimulation (Sight) - Optic fibre spray, Projector with reminiscence images, Bubble tube.

Auditory stimulation (Sound) - Relaxation tapes, Vibration noise from equipment, Wind chimes, Music that reflects their personal taste in music.

Olfactory (Smell) - Aroma therapy, Perfumes and aftershave that are familiar. For example, perfume or aftershave that a parent wears may reduce levels of anxiety.

Gustatory (Taste) - Any food substance that provides distinct flavours or texture. People with autism may orientate to particular flavours and textures. The challenge might be to gently increase that range.

Tactile stimulation (Touch) - Vibrating cushions and mattress, weighted blanket with different textured fabrics.

Proprioceptive and vestibular stimulation (Movement) - Rocking chairs, rocking horses. Stretching and reaching.

The Snoezelen should be considered as a 'toolbox' with different types of sensory equipment to meet the different sensory needs of the person using it. The Snoezelen should not have all the equipment switched on at once.

Assessment

Before using the Snoezelen with a person with autism an assessment should be undertaken. Assessment tools may include:

☒ The Sensory Assessment and Profiling Tool (Collier, 2003) – This assessment identifies the sensory preference of a person. It is recommended that the Snoezelen session should start include equipment based on the person's identified sensory preference. This will assist with the transition into the Snoezelen room and can be used as a starting point for stimulating other senses as the therapy progresses.

☒ The Sensory Profile (Dunn, 1999) – This assessment identifies the level of stimulation a person needs. The assessment identifies those who have different sensory thresholds and orientation to different sensory modalities. With this information the level of stimulation required in the Snoezelen can be adjusted.

☒ The Pool Activity Level (PAL) Instrument for Occupational Profiling (Pool, 2011) – This assessment is best for adults with autism and gives guidance on how to run a Snoezelen session given the severity of their cognitive impairment. This includes how to structure the activity, guidance in how to facilitate the Snoezelen session, activity characteristics and guidance on how to start and end the session.

☒ Multisensory environments information sheets (Pagliano, 2001) – These information sheets help monitor progress in the Snoezelen environment, recording behavioural responses in a standardised manner. The emphasis is on the person's abilities and the aspects of the Snoezelen environment that aid and support development and learning.

Guidance in using the Snoezelen room

This guidance should be used in conjunction with robust assessment tools. Guidance for using the Snoezelen can be found in the Pool Activity Level (PAL) Instrument for Occupational Profiling (Pool, 2011).

References

Baird, G et al (2006) Prevalence of disorders of the autism spectrum in a population cohort of children in South West Thames: the Special Needs and Autism Project (SNAP). *The Lancet*, 368(9531), pp210-215.

Collier, L (200?) The Sensory Preference and Profiling Tool. Rompa. UK

Dunn, W (1999) The Sensory Profile. Pearsons, UK

Pagliano, P (2001) Using a Multisensory Environment. David Fulton Publishers. UK

Pool, J (2011) The Pool Activity Level (PAL) Instrument for Occupational Profiling. Jessica Kingsley.

An up-to-date reference list of research articles related to Snoezelen is available from Rompa. A reference list can be requested by emailing.