Put clinically, SNOEZELEN is controlled multi-sensory stimulation for people with a wide range of disabilities and sensory processing disorders. But, as FlagHouse Vice President and two-decade SNOEZELEN advocate Barbara McCormack can tell you, it’s much more than just the sum of its individual parts: bubble tubes, fiber optic cables and projectors, to name a few.

“SNOEZELEN is something that works for a broad range of populations in a wide range of facilities,” McCormack explains, citing schools, rehabilitation centers, and nursing homes as just a handful of its beneficiaries. “It increases the quality of life for clients and assists therapists and other healthcare professionals in making substantial breakthroughs with therapies.

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“It can do many things for different people,” McCormack continues. “A person who is withdrawn can be brought out of his or her shell; encouraged to communicate and lift his head, for instance. It can also soothe anxiety and create an oasis of calm. That’s why it’s applicable to organizations that need to accommodate a wide spectrum of needs.”

Imagine a young child with autism standing in a darkened room. He loudly repeats a single sound to himself again...and again. This type of behavior could go on for hours, says Susan McKinley, director of Tangible Alternatives in Huntington, West Virginia—a small, privately owned facility that provides services to children and adults with special needs. However, when a therapist adjusts the lights in this SNOEZELEN room that the center has operated since 2008, the boy becomes silent and sinks merrily into a beanbag chair with a soothing “whoosh” of air his only sound. He is now calm and happy.

“SNOEZELEN is the one time that these guys are the center of attention,” McKinley explains. “During SNOEZELEN time, that person is the one making decisions.” In other words, a SNOEZELEN space can offer children and adults the chance to control what they hear, see and touch: their entire therapeutic multisensory experience. It can bend to work as it needs to.

The word “snoezelen” comes from two Dutch words: “snuffelen”—which means to seek out or explore—and “doezelen”—which means to relax. Developed in Europe during the 1970’s, SNOEZELEN rooms, containing multiple pieces of multi-sensory equipment, were first created to observe the reaction to sensory stimulation of patients with multiple disabilities. What therapists soon found was that patients who were prone to behavioral outbursts and even self-abuse would often stop their negative behaviors when offered appropriate sensory stimulation. They discovered that SNOEZELEN multi-sensory technology had the power to soothe and to stimulate. SNOEZELEN developers have been on the cutting edge of sensory therapy ever since; and the technology came to North America in 1992, where it
This month's FlagHouse Forum focuses on the multi-sensory benefits of SNOEZELEN®. What is it? Where does it come from? How can it help your child? FlagHouse – a premier global supplier of resources for special needs, education, physical activity and recreation – is pleased to partner with Exceptional Parent to bring its readers this informational forum.

has rapidly spread throughout the United States and Canada.

While the basics of visual, tactile and auditory therapy are supported in multi-sensory environments (MSE) by fiber optics and tactile panels, SNOEZELEN is always evolving with the exciting technologies of our modern era. One of the most innovative new multi-sensory directions is virtual play, which can minimize anxiety and stress through fun for all ages. It’s a great way to bring athletics and recreation to sedentary populations or dazzle the senses with visual and audio effects. Another innovative sensory direction is the marriage of light and music through audiovisual technology, which lets users control images and sounds while interacting with colorful beams of light.

With the SNOEZELEN line of products continuing to evolve, there’s literally no end to the possibilities of sensory stimulation, which can be brought to people with special needs, young and old. That means that there’s also no end to its benefits for mental, emotional and cognitive challenges as well as degenerative conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer’s disease in old age and neurological diseases in younger populations. One of the most recent and rapidly growing applications for SNOEZELEN MSEs is with individuals with autism, just as Tangible Alternatives has found: “Many types of autism are now being relabeled ‘sensory processing disorders’ and the two arenas are strongly connected,” McCormack explains. “The concept of ‘sensory processing,’ or one’s ability to experience and react to surroundings appropriately, is now mainstream. Experts have learned that if you don’t get your sensory life in balance, you can’t function in other areas of your life.

“Behavior is communication,” she adds. “Behavior is always trying to tell you something.” McCormack explains that certain types of behaviors, which can be perceived as negative or irreverent actions—such as sleeping all the time, continually grabbing for things, or talking incessantly—might just be ways that individuals with sensory processing disorders try to communicate their discomfort or disenchantment. SNOEZELEN responds to these communicative behaviors in the short and long term. In the MSE, therapists can find out what clients do and don’t like and what it takes to stop a behavior or soothe a client. You can use the techniques you learn with SNOEZELEN technology to improve general quality of life and often—due to SNOEZELEN’s inherent versatility, with the simple flip of a switch, you can accommodate patients in need of sensory stimulation or those in need of relaxation.

SNOEZELEN can be applied on large and small scales: “One of our affiliated nursing homes is filling up its empty spaces with SNOEZELEN equipment little by little,” McCormack says. “MSE is the gold standard of its use and many people may think that the only way to go is a full-blown MSE; but SNOEZELEN equipment can be used in the nooks and crannies of a facility to increase the sensory possibilities for its population. We’re finding that people are being increasingly versatile and flexible with the uses of SNOEZELEN equipment.”

FlagHouse is the leading provider and developer of SNOEZELEN products—in affiliation with Rompa® Ltd., the originator of SNOEZELEN technology—and more importantly, the company serves as a hub for a network of SNOEZELEN facilities: “We’re in touch with thousands of people across North America, many of whom have years of experience with SNOEZELEN and who can speak to the approaches they’ve used and the challenges they’ve faced,” McCormack explains. “We have a relationship with our clients and we keep them informed of new developments, including exclusive leading edge technologies, such as virtual reality. We continually search and bring to the market some of the most exciting technologies available worldwide.”

For more information about SNOEZELEN, visit www.SNOEZELENInfo.com

Barbara McCormack is Vice President of FlagHouse and a SNOEZELEN advocate. In 1992, Barbara was searching for appropriate activities for her two-year-old daughter, who has profound disabilities, and came across the SNOEZELEN multi-sensory concept in the United Kingdom. She moved from a successful marketing career in the high tech industry to spearhead the introduction of SNOEZELEN to Canada with FlagHouse and has since designed and installed several hundred multi-sensory environments. Additionally, she has spoken at conferences about the SNOEZELEN multi-sensory concept in North America, Europe and Israel; and provided intensive training to thousands users.

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