

Multi-Sensory Environments and Inclusive Sensory Engagement at Durham County Library

“An important bit of advice for evaluating your library’s services...seek the guidance of the community you are aiming to serve.”

Durham County Library was one of the first public libraries in the country with dedicated Multi-Sensory Environments for patrons of all ages. Durham County Library’s Multi-Sensory Environments are modeled after those that were originally designed in the Netherlands in the 1970s for therapeutic use, particularly for people with autism, developmental disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, and/or dementia. Originally known as Snoezelen Rooms, or *snoezelroom*,¹ these spaces quickly gained popularity due to their beneficial nature for everyone, regardless of disability status.²

After several years of bringing limited library programming to the disability community, Durham County Library was awarded a two-year LSTA project grant for July 2018 through June 2020. The initiative “Practicing Inclusivity” was in part to develop these dedicated sensory spaces.

Durham County Library’s journey toward becoming more inclusive originally began in April of 2012, in the Project Manager Sarah Alverson’s first week as a children’s librarian. An adult with disabilities and his caregiver came to the library. Alverson said hello and actively engaged with the adult, much to the caregiver’s surprise. The pair were longtime patrons of the branch and typically had little interaction with staff during their visits. At the end of the conversation, the caregiver asked if Alverson would be willing to start a weekly program for adults with disabilities. And thus began a multi-year partnership for weekly Sensory Storytimes. The program was a wonderful experience with painting, stories, cooking, dancing and singing!

When Alverson transitioned out of her Children’s Librarian role into the role of Community Engagement Administrator, she brought her experiences and all she had learned. Too aware of how individuals with disabilities were underserved within Durham’s library system, there was now an opportunity to make a change on a system-wide scale. The first step in defining the need in Durham County Library’s system, and obtaining information on how to address it, was to pull together a team to evaluate the programs, services, spaces, and resources for serving this community.

An important bit of advice for evaluating your library’s services when you hope to create a culture shift: seek the guidance of the community you are aiming to serve. It is pointless to aim to serve a community if their voices are not represented in determining the services and resources meant for them.



A young child engages with Durham County Library’s Multi-Sensory Environment bubble tubes and colorful lights.

¹ “Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environments – Sensory Rooms and Therapy Explained,” Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environments, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://snoezelen.info/history/>

² “Incorporating Sensory Spaces in Interior Design of Public Buildings,” Sensory One Sensory Room Specialists, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://sensoryone.com/incorporating-sensory-spaces-in-interior-design-of-public-buildings/>



An inside look at Durham County Library's Multi-Sensory Environment shows bubble tubes, mirrors, textured wall panels, and projections.

Do not assume you know how best to serve them, especially if you have no experience with that community!

To ensure that Durham County Library was responding directly to the community, and not just what was perceived as a need, the team had a series of conversations with individuals with disabilities, their family members, caregivers, and friends. They asked questions about library usage, and what improvements could be made to the library with specific emphasis on serving individuals with disabilities. From those focus groups came the overwhelming response to create more inclusive and welcoming environments, primarily through physical spaces and programs. The recurring needs were then developed into a proposal for a two-year LSTA project grant, “Practicing Inclusivity: Establishing a Multi-Sensory Environment, Inclusive Playroom, and Mobile Adaptive Technology and Sensory Units for Transformation at Main.” The “Practicing Inclusivity” initiative was a three-tiered approach to making Durham County Library more inclusive, focusing on library

spaces, programs, and staff training. This proposal was awarded funding, and much of the work towards improving the library system’s spaces, programs, and services was accomplished through the generosity of funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act as administered by the State Library of North Carolina, a division of the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.

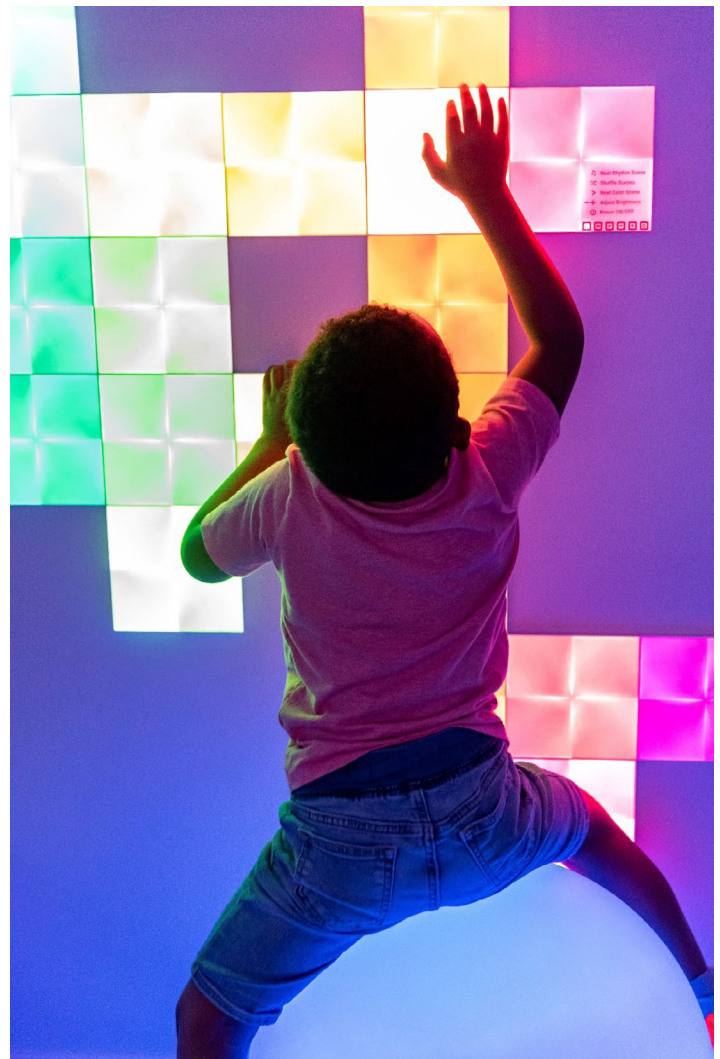
In the conversations the team had with individuals with disabilities, their parents, caregivers, families, and friends about the library, a common theme quickly arose. Many parents, specifically those with children with autism, expressed concern about the possibilities of their child experiencing a meltdown due to overstimulation in a new or overwhelming environment. From those conversations, the team learned that the “what if” of a meltdown in the library, traditionally viewed as a quiet space, was a huge barrier to families and their use of the library’s resources. This information was taken into account when designing Main Library’s sensory spaces, with

the end result being the creation of a separate Sensory Calming Room for patron use on an as-needed basis.

In 2021, Durham County Main Library opened two sensory spaces to the public: the Multi-Sensory Environment and Sensory Calming Room. The Multi-Sensory Environment is available by reservation for up to two hours per day. It includes music, projections, bubble tubes, fiber optic lights, and even a vibroacoustic waterbed that vibrates to the beat of music. Visitors can adjust light and sound to meet their specific needs and preferences. Since the Multi-Sensory Environment has been open, the library averages over 50 reservations per month. While Durham County Library does not track demographic use, conversations with users have shown that a diverse range of Durham's community has utilized the space, including but not limited to families with individuals with disabilities, college students needing a relaxing space after study, and occupational therapists and teachers working with their clients and students.

The Main Library's Sensory Calming Room is the library's smaller sensory space. It includes items such as a cozy cave, bubble wall, and soothing music, as well as a variety of fidget tools and toys. The Sensory Calming Room is available without reservation any time the library is open to the public, as library staff determined it would be beneficial to have a space readily available for anyone needing to self-regulate when overstimulated. The primary purpose of this space is to address that "what if" concern that the community shared repeatedly during the early research for the project initiative. For example, a child having a meltdown during story time can use the space with their guardian to calm their emotions and refocus, allowing them to rejoin the story time when they choose. Since the Sensory Calming Room has been open, patrons of all ages have been observed engaging in the space.

In February of 2022, Jennifer Jamsky was brought on board as the Accessibility Services Coordinator to continue to grow and expand the original efforts of the initiative. In addition to her other job duties, Jamsky also serves as the point person for the sensory spaces and as such, often receives feedback from patrons on their positive sensory room experiences. One patron who is a developmental counselor re-



A young child presses colorful light panels in Durham County Library's Multi-Sensory Environment.

cently shared that a client of hers was more engaged and vocal than ever while using the Multi-Sensory Environment. Another patron noticed that her infant daughter would happily enjoy tummy time while watching the bubble tubes and wall projections, instead of the normal tummy time behavior of screaming and agitation.

Durham County Library's sensory inclusion reaches beyond the physical walls of the library building, as staff strive to make the benefits of sensory engagement available to the wider community, including those who cannot visit library locations. The "Practicing Inclusivity" initiative included funding for a mobile sensory unit, which is utilized at library locations and with community and outreach partners to provide sensory engagement for all ages, in Durham County and beyond. Durham County Library also developed Sensory Bins and Sensory Kits. Sensory

Bins are available at each library location and are filled with fidget items as well as calming and focus tools (such as headphones and sunglasses) and are used by library staff during programming and events. Sensory Kits are available for checkout to the general public and include a wide range of tactile and fidget tools so that patrons can sample a variety of items to help them discover what types of sensory engagement work best for them.

The Accessibility Services Coordinator also leads outreach sensory and disability programming system-wide. Since joining the library, Jamsky has created outreach partnerships with multiple disability-centered organizations, enabling the library to provide accessible, interesting, and inclusive programming for the historically underserved disability community. Accessibility Services also provides sensory based programming at all library locations. In collaboration with STEAM and other library departments, Jamsky has developed programs such as Make Your Own Sensory Kit and Immersive Art Experiences. Sensory offerings are always very popular with patrons, especially when they are able to create sensory objects,

such as texture panels and fidget bracelets, for their own use.

While the current practices have been popular, Durham County Library is still constantly growing and changing. Public libraries must constantly evolve to meet the needs of the greater community, as the needs of the community are constantly changing. Durham County Library found that for Durham's disability community, sensory engagement has been vital to bridge the gap in services and strengthen the connections with organizations, families, and individuals.

As interest in sensory inclusion and engagement continues to grow, Durham County Library has had the opportunity to provide training and guidance to other library systems and organizations as they develop their own spaces' best practices and unique sensory programming, and they are always open to collaborating with other library systems and organizations to provide encouragement and guidance in the development of programs, services, and resources for the community.



Durham County Library patrons engage with projection lights as they work on a community photography project.