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ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES UNVEILS ITS PLAN FOR NEW SENSORY ROOM TO SUPPORT YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE WITH AUTISM

Sensory Rooms Create a Calming Environment for Youth With Developmental Disabilities; New ACS Sensory Room Features Therapeutic Elements, Including Soothing Lights, Bouncy Chairs & More

NEW YORK, NY - Today, NYC Administration for Children's Services Commissioner David A. Hansell announced plans for a multi-sensory room at the Nicholas Scoppetta Children's Center, which will better serve youth in foster care who have autism and other developmental or cognitive delays.

Across the country, approximately 1 in 59 children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder by the age of 8. Research suggests that sensory issues often accompany autism, which means that some children with autism may be hyper-sensitive to certain types of sights, touch, smells and more. Children with autism may also have proprioception and balance issues. Sensory rooms provide for a more therapeutic environment by offering soothing sounds, captivating aromas, tactile experiences, massage and vibrations. Additionally, sensory rooms provide children with better opportunities for social interaction

"The new ACS sensory room at the Children's Center will provide a more calming and supportive environment for children who may experience the world differently than others," **said ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell.** "In addition to our ongoing therapeutic programming, this new space will offer critical support to children with special needs. I want to thank all those at Bellevue, the NYU School of Medicine, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene who are helping to make our new sensory room a reality."

The sensory room at the Children's Center is being made possible by the "Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environment" (SME). The cutting-edge space was developed in partnership with NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue, NYU School of Medicine's Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) with the needs of the youth at the Children's Center in mind. Michelle Edmonds, a Special Consultant with the Bureau of Children, Youth and Families was instrumental in advocating and supporting this project. Her advocacy led to DOHMH funding the purchase of items that will be used in the sensory room. Staff at the Children's Center are being trained on how to use the room's therapeutic elements to modify a child's sensory demand which can reduce and prevent behavioral problems as result. The room will be available for use in fall 2019.

The new ACS sensory room will include a variety of sensory features, including:

- Solar Projector and laser stars: Projectors and lighting can promote calm and comfort through visual engagement. The changing of shapes and colors may help youth relax.
- Aroma diffuser: This can stimulate the sense of smell and provide a calming element for children.
- Bouncy loungers and crash mats: These can help with proprioception and sense of balance. Bouncing and jumping can help students with vestibular challenges.
- Bean bag chairs: Bean bag chairs help children with proprioceptive issues and provide deep pressure stimulation which can be calming and comforting to children.
- Gel floor pads: When children touch or step on the pads, the different colored gel shifts around; this encourages visual processing and sensory stimulation.
- Tactile Blocks: The feeling of these blocks in a child's hands can be calming and therapeutic.

“Sensory rooms will provide needed relief for children who may be experiencing distress while living in a potentially challenging environment,” **said Health Commissioner Dr. Oxiris Barbot.** “These facilities will offer a soothing atmosphere and an opportunity to engage with other children. I applaud the Administration for Children’s Services and Commissioner Hansell for making them available.”

“The dedicated clinicians from our Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Department are always looking for better ways to help support the vulnerable children who must spend time at the Children’s Center. The sensory room is a direct result of their visionary work in collaboration with ACS. We are grateful also to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene for all the support they have offered in making this a reality,” **said J. Rebecca Weis, MD, Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue.**

“Foster youth with cognitive and/or developmental delays experience even greater disruptions when entering the child welfare system. In an already confusing and scary time in their lives, the sensory room will provide a safe and stable space to help youth cope with the uncertainties facing them. A place to learn, grow, explore and be supported during a time of transition,” **said Dr. Patrick Heppell, PsyD, Clinical Director ACS/Bellevue Hospital Mental Health Team.**

“For children with autism, interaction with others can be challenging and their sensory environment around them can feel overwhelming, which can result in behavioral problems. The sensory room modifies the sensory demand and focuses on the child’s abilities which reduces these behavioral problems,” **said Dr. Laura Donnelly, PhD., NYU Langone Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.**

The Nicholas Scoppetta Children’s Center is a child-friendly facility that operates 24 hours a day, temporarily housing children and youth who are awaiting foster care placement. Dental care is just one of the comprehensive health services provided to youth at the Children’s Center. In addition to the new sensory room, youth at the Children’s Center have access to therapy dogs, which can help reduce stress and anxiety for youth who have experienced trauma. ACS also partners closely with the Bellevue Hospital in order to meet children’s clinical and mental health needs. Children and youth at the Children’s Center are evaluated and provided with vision care via a new partnership with optometrists from “Eye on Education.” And, the NYU College of Dentistry provides full dental examinations for youth at the Children’s Center.

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