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# Interior Design May Affect Behavior of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

📅 April 6, 2013   👤 Bronx, GCEP, Global Climate and Energy Project, United Parents of Highbridge, Western U.S.

CHICO, Calif. – A survey conducted by the Center of Disease Control (CDC) reported in March that one in 50 school children has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), surpassing an earlier estimate of one in 88.

ASDs are generally revealed in childhood with varying degrees of neurological disorders typically characterized by difficulty in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication.

As the fastest-growing developmental disorder in the United States, Kijeong Jeon, professor at California State University, Chico, has focused his attention on interior design methods to support students and individuals with an ASD.

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“This is not about medication, this is not about chemicals, this is purely a non-chemical environment,” Jeon said.

Jeon is an interior designer that utilizes multi-sensory environments (MSE), which use lighting, color, sound, music, scents and textures to create an atmosphere specifically for students and individuals with an ASD and other developmental disorders. MSE’s technical term is the Snoezelen effect, which creates environments both soothing and stimulating to individuals with an ASD, Jeon explained.

“When the five senses are stimulated over a period of time it gives somewhat of a calming effect,” Jeon said.

Jeon used these methods in his interior design of the Community Opportunity for Vocational Experience (COVE), a program of California Vocations in Paradise, Calif. The three-room building includes a main sensory room, quiet room or “pink room” and a computer lab. With a wide variety of students, the program has both stimulating and soothing features.

“Some children need more stimulation and some need to be calmed, so it can be hard to balance and find middle ground,” Jeon said.

According to Jeon, administrators of COVE have reported positive affects on student behavior. Schools such as Friendship School in San Diego County and Stockton Elementary School in Chicago have utilized MSE rooms to advance the education and therapy of students with an ASD, though Jeon said the MSE method is not used in the United States as often as it is in other countries.

MSE has been used as a therapeutic tool with other developmental disorder as well, Jeon said, most notably as a tool for those with Alzheimer’s disease.

However, Jeon said he understands may schools can simply not afford a designated space for MSE. But there are techniques that can be used in the classroom.



Teachers that have students with an ASD may want to stay from the traditional use of primary colors that are seen more intensely by ASD students and opt for more muted hues of pinks and purples, which studies have shown are more favorable, Jeong said.

Toy boxes should be equipped with a lid and remain closed, as the clutter of toys can be over-stimulating or distracting to students with an ASD.

Insulated walls and ceilings are also preferable, Jeong said, as echoing can be troubling. Every ceiling, entry way and wall was insulated at COVE.

Fluorescent lighting can create an unsightly strobe-light effect for children with an ASD, which Jeon believes can look something like a thunderstorm at times.

"The kids can see the arch in the fluorescent light," Jeon said. "Usually [neurotypicals] don't see the flickering but autistic children are more sensitive."

The details in interior design should generally be minimal, Jeon explained.

Ian Ellis, an architecture student at the University of Texas at Austin, has designed a proposal for an inclusionary learning school for children with an ASD on North Brother Island in New York's East River.

Ellis said for students with an ASD predictability and simplicity in classroom design is crucial.

"In general, traditional classrooms lack organization and do not provide transitional spaces thus resulting in a space that is extremely unpredictable and easily overwhelming to someone who is sensitive to sensory input," Ellis said. "Predictability is paramount to the success of the children's education and every design decision took this into consideration."

Jeon and his colleagues have received grants, one from CSU Chico, to continue with their research on MSE and its affects on children and adolescents with an ASD.

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