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Specialized suite brings joy to disabled kids

When mother **Barbara McCormack** watched her severely disabled daughter, Sarah, smile and focus on the brilliant points of light in front of her face, she became an instant Snoezelen fan.

"Sarah had never responded to anything visual before," said Ms. McCormack. "Yet when we held a clump of the fibre optic strands in front of her face, she showed delight and could actually see something."

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Originally created in the Netherlands, Snoezelen (pronounced Snooz-e-lin) is a specialized environment which uses sight, sound and touch to stimulate or relax. The word Snoezelen comes from two Dutch words meaning sniffing and dozing, two of the things you can do while visiting the room.

In thousands of locations across Europe, Snoezelen is used in a wide variety of settings for both children and adults. Group homes, seniors' centres and hospices have incorporated the concept. One hospital

even offers an alternative birthing room filled with Snoezelen equipment.

It can help anyone who is under stress or who has a special needs when it comes to recreation, said Ms. McCormack who first tried Snoezelen with Sarah in Great Britain. "The combination of gentle music and light gives people a chance to relax and that opens the door to learning."

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Ms. McCormack connected with Bloorview Childrens Hospital in North York through registered practical nurse Susan Hooey who used to help care for Sarah and now works at Bloorview. The hospital, which serves children with disabilities and chronic illnesses and their families, seemed to be the perfect setting for Snoezelen. Ronald McDonald Children's Charities agreed to fund the room.

Bloorview's Snoezelen Room officially opened in October 1992, making it the first in Canada. Hundreds of health care professionals, teachers and community workers have visited the room to learn about it and see if the concept would be useful to their client's needs. There are now about 17 loca-



Sarah enjoys the Snoezelen room with her mother, Barbara McCormack.

tions across the country.

At Bloorview, the room is used by those in many disciplines, including therapeutic recreationists, teachers and nurses. Family members can also use the room with their children, giving them a quiet place away from the unit.

The underlying philosophy is that children, especially those with special needs who spend a lot of time in the hospital, need a place to just plain be kids.

"Able-bodied children can run to the local playground," said psychologist Molly Weaver. "Snoezelen provides an opportunity for children with severe disabilities to play in their own way."

"It's a place where the children can get out of their wheelchairs and explore," said therapeutic recreationist, Heather

Sommerville.

"So much of their days are taken up with meeting their medical needs. This room gives them a place to relax and unwind, at their own pace. They love to come in and they ask to come back."

For intervenor Lois Hammel who works with deaf and blind children with multiple disabilities, one of the most important benefits of Snoezelen is that it can be used to strengthen the relationship between a child and his or her care-giver.

"This is the one place where these children can come with a staff member, volunteer or parent, have that person's undivided attention and have absolutely no demands placed on them," she said. "That goes a long way to enhancing their quality of life."