Co-founder Kristen Malfara and her son, Morgan, are on the bubble tube station at Morgan's Place in Melbourne Beach.
MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

STIMULATING THE SENSES
Multisensory room helps special-needs kids cope

By Maria Sonnenberg
For FLORIDA TODAY

Eighteen-year-old Craig Warr faces severe disabilities, including mitochondrial encephalomyopathy, a genetic condition that affects the brain, nervous system and muscles. Craig, who also is diagnosed as severely autistic, doesn’t usually smile or show emotion and is fearful of any new situation.

“You move the furniture around in his room, and he won’t go in it for months,” said his mother, Karen Warr.

When Craig visits Morgan’s Place, the Melbourne teen becomes a different person.

“He is mesmerized by the place,” Warr said.

“You see that relaxed smile, and his eyes light up.”

Morgan’s Place in Melbourne Beach is the recently opened “sensory” created by the M.O.R.G.A.N. Project, an all-volunteer organization that enhances quality of life for special needs children and their families.

The facility is named after Morgan, the 14-year-old son of Kristen and Robert Malfara of Melbourne Beach. At eight months old, Morgan was diagnosed with leukodystrophy, a rare neuromuscular disorder that often is fatal. The Malfaras wanted to give meaning to Morgan’s life, so they created the M.O.R.G.A.N. Project, now recognized nationally for its work helping families of children with disabilities such as cerebral palsy.

Dutch design

Morgan’s Place was designed to help children with limited access to multisensory stimulation. Although common in Europe as part of the therapy for disabled individuals, these multisensory rooms remain relatively rare in North America. Morgan’s Place is only the second freestanding facility in the United States.

The Christopher Douglas Hidden Angel Foundation, a Birmingham, Ala.-based nonprofit dedicated to enriching disabled people’s lives through the use of multisensory environments, donated the design and installation of the Melbourne Beach multisensory room, which is modeled after Holland’s Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environment, from the Dutch words “snuffelen,” to explore, and “doezelen,” which means to relax.

The concept gained favor in the 1970s, when Dutch researchers discovered the positive response a sensory environment elicited from extremely challenged individuals.
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"Most research is anecdotal, but the positive benefits of these facilities is that the individuals who use them are more alert, happier, and exhibit less stress and less behavioral issues," said Sandra Fornes, executive director at Hidden Angel.

"People without disabilities don't think about the sensory stimulation we experience throughout the day, but a child in a wheelchair is not able to interact with the environment like the rest of us can do. He does not have the stimulation we take for granted."

Lack of stimulation, Fornes says, could lead to failure to thrive. The sensoriums engage the senses of the impaired in a concrete level and in a safe environment. Most importantly, they provide the sense of control for individuals who have very little control over their own lives. The results can seem miraculous.

"We have heard kids say their first words in these rooms, or smile or giggle for the first time," Fornes said.

In addition to helping children with physical disabilities, these multisensory rooms have been proven beneficial for Alzheimer's patients, for the autistic and for people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Energizing equipment
The components of the room aim to energize several senses at once. The brightly colored bubble tubes, for example, provide sight, sound and tactile stimulation as the children see and hear the bubbles and feel them rushing up the tube.

Morgan's Place is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment to stimulate all five senses. In addition to the bubble tubes, the room includes a pool with multicolored balls, an effects projector that changes color at the user's wish, fiber optics, among other features. There are no agendas for the users, who are free to push all the buttons and switches or just choose one.

"There are no rules to make the room work," Kristen Malfara said.

The room is currently without fees and on a donation basis that includes volunteering time to the organization. Parents are required to attend the one-hour session with their special-needs child.

"We built this as a 'gentle-use' room," Malfara said.

The M.O.R.G.A.N. Project has established a facility for children with special health needs and disabilities for hands-on therapeutic play.

Kristen and Robert Malfara, founders of The M.O.R.G.A.N. Project, and their son visit the sensorium with bubble tubes that vibrate and change color.