

Sensory Hallway helps ease kids' anxiety at SARC



A new sensory hallway is helping to give local kids a break from the sensory overload at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex with a quiet place to learn and grow.

Built in partnership with Paths 4 U, the hallway was introduced as an alternative to stimulating environments while helping kids to build connections through sight, sounds and touch while encouraging kids to redirect overwhelming emotions or behaviours.

Designed for kids of all ages and developmental stages, the hallway is awash in activities for physical movements and challenges that promote the development of motor skills and has already proved a success with local youngsters.

'We got this so kids could kind of have a space to do some physical literacy as well as have some intellectual stimulation to deal with behaviours and develop some confidence in physical literacy,' explains Jodi Alexander, Community Programs Coordinator for the Town of Aurora. 'You can use it for multiple purposes. Sometimes it can be overwhelming out there in the arena. It can be noisy with a lot of things going on - the whistles, the pucks, the swimming - and this is a space away from everything for everyone to just kind of get away.'

As soon as you walk through the door, you're greeted by a floor of lily pads for kids to jump from one to the other. Next to that is another jumping obstacle, designed to let kids get the hang of jumping from side to side while maintaining forward momentum. Next is a hopscotch course with a twist incorporating various shapes and letters from the alphabet, while wall-mounted challenges encourage jumping and reaching to different challenging heights.

'Even in our programs [like pre-school] kids are getting

a bit distracted and not focused, so we'll bring them out here, let them do a lap or two, and bring them back to their room so they are a little bit more focused when they go back in. We're already getting some great feedback. I had a parent at the (SARC) desk the other day who said when their son is playing hockey their daughter comes in here and plays almost the entire time and brings her little friends from the team. In terms of our programs we have good feedback that when the kids are kind of struggling to focus and struggling to pay attention, or it is just one of those days that is a tough day, they will bring them out here, let them run around, jump around, crawl around and burn some of that energy so it is helping them refocus. For camps, it is nice because we use it as a transition hallway. If they are going outside or they are going to be going back in, it is easy to get the kids focused because we can say, 'Okay, we're all going to jump!' and it gives them something to occupy them other than behaviours.'

The SARC's sensory hallway has proved such a success that Ms. Alexander says the Town is looking for ways to bring similar concepts into other public spaces as needs grow along with the community.

In addition to the features already installed, the new year will bring a splash of colour to the sensory hallway as art students at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School brainstorm designs for a mural spanning the length of the space with work to begin in mid-winter.

'When you're at the SARC, as a parent or patron, as an adult or child, if you're feeling like you kind of want to burn some energy or take your kids somewhere so they have something to do while you're waiting, it is just a space that is free to use and is here whenever we're here,' she says.

By Brock Weir