

TEMPERATURES

Average temperatures for August 3-5:

H 88 L 68

Current forecast:
Sunny**TIDES**

Tides at the Saugatuck River entrance for August 3-5:

Today H 11:03am L 5:09pm

Thursday H 11:41am L 5:48pm

Friday H 12:17pm L 6:26pm

2nd front

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Wednesday, August 3, 2005

A3

'Sense-It' Room Stimulates CLASP's Clients

BY BEN SAMUEL

"It looks like a big happy playroom, doesn't it?" said Stan Kontogiannis at the open house for the "Sense-It" Room, which was held on July 21.

The "Sense-It" Room will allow CLASP to further "assist people with developmental disabilities, autism and other related disabilities in Fairfield County," according to CLASP officials.

The two rooms comprising the new Sensory Integration (SI) program at CLASP Homes' new facility, were made possible by two significant grants from the Bridgeport Area Foundation and First County Bank Foundation, totaling approximately \$14,000.

SI refers to the brain's ability to receive and interpret sensory information. In the average brain, all the senses work together to derive meaning from incoming stimuli, however some people do not have the ability to efficiently process sensory information. This processing difficulty is known as Sensory Integration Dysfunction.

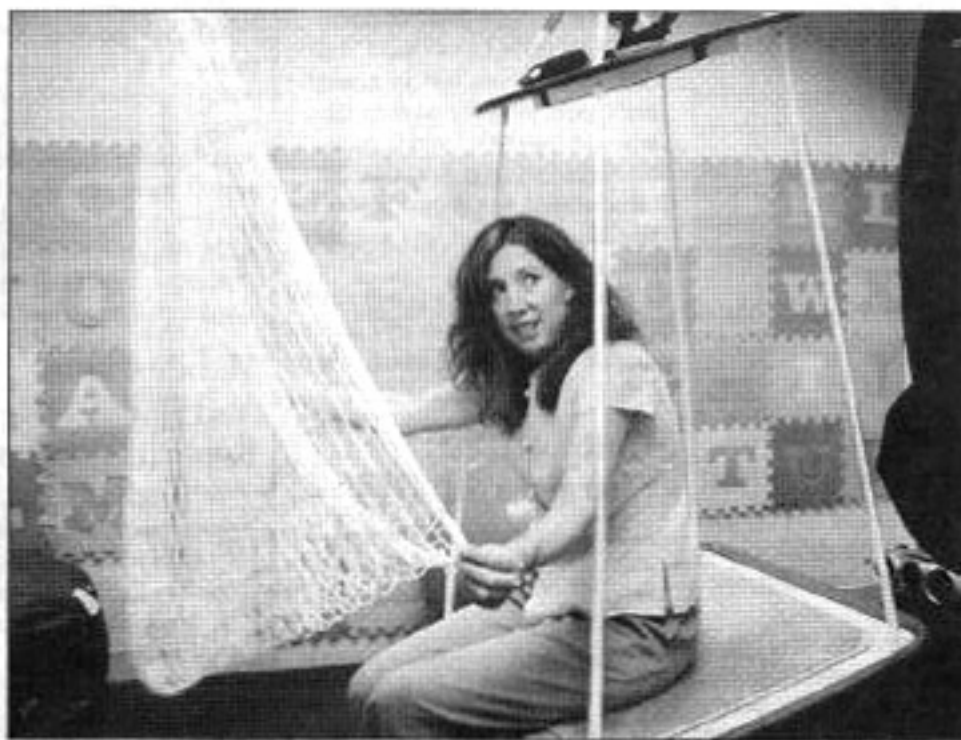
According to CLASP, "SI serves two main functions. It protects us from overstimulation by sifting through sensations, disregarding some and reacting to others. It also helps us to interact with and learn from our environment."

Sensory Integration Dysfunction manifests in mainly two different forms: a person can be hypersensitive and overwhelmed by sensory information, or the person is unable to receive the sufficient information to make sense of their surroundings.

Possible indicators that someone may have an SI disorder are: "avoiding touch, over-reacting to touch, inability to identify objects by touch, spinning, hand flapping and head banging, biting, poor eye contact, short attention span, distractibility and hyperactivity, clumsiness and lack of balance, fear of movement, outbursts, difficulty using both sides of the body, repetitive speech, slow speech, behavior problems, raised shoulders and poor gross and fine motor skills."

The new facility at CLASP is one of the few facilities of its kind in the area. The "Sense-It" Room is used to assess whether a client has any SI disorders and to determine and implement proper therapies to improve their condition.

Entering the "Sense-It" Room, one will immediately notice the bright colors on the walls and the array of stimulating objects. With many decorations and amusing, psychedelic lamps projecting colored lights on



For the WESTPORT NEWS / Ben Samuel

Patty Richards, vice president of quality assurance for CLASP, highlights some of the new equipment available at the new "Sense-It" Room in Westport.

the walls, one might easily confuse the facility for a college dorm room. But the deceptively entertaining decor serves a purpose, said Kontogiannis, the development officer for CLASP, referring to many of the tools the therapists use as "toys with a therapeutic purpose."

Mobiles, pinwheels and large tactilely stimulating, colorful quilts and surfaces adorn the walls. An illuminated glass column of water gurgles as bubbles rise to the top while a projector filled with different colored oils emits colorful moving images on the wall.

Many of the objects resemble toys, and some actually are, like a traditional metal slinky that offers auditory and physical stimulation, said Behavioral Specialist Tina Martire. One section of the "Sense-It" Room houses a swing-

set, costing approximately \$3,000. For this price, CLASP obtained equipment that is not the typical playground swing set, but instead features three separate swings each providing different forms of therapy that benefit senses which control a person's balance and spatial awareness.



For the WESTPORT NEWS / Ben Samuel

Patty Richards demonstrates the "squeeze machine," a piece of highly specialized equipment for people with Sensory Integration Dysfunction.

a client may be able to process sensory information and continue to work on other developmental skills.

One of Martire's favorite tools is the fiber acoustic bed. The thick mattress allows patients to relax while speakers within help them "feel the sound rather than just hear it." The bed stimulates a range of sensory systems, allowing the client to feel the vibrations and hear the sounds while observing a colorful light display projected on the ceiling overhead. Specialized equipment, like the fiber acoustic bed, help the senses "get in touch with each other" to promote more effective sensory processing and integration, said Martire.

Kontogiannis and Martire along with Patty Richards, Michelle Chevrette and Amanda Lifer all spent two years extensively researching and applying for grants to make the "Sense-It" Room possible. The committee designed the room to provide a program of activities that were "carefully selected and disguised as play because it is the most effective way of learning developing skills and growth in deficient areas," according to CLASP.

The "Sense-It" Room will allow the staff at CLASP to better serve their clients and offer the Fairfield County area a new specialized facility. Therapists, schools and parents can use the room independently or with the expert guidance and assistance of the CLASP's trained staff.

CLASP Homes began in 1976 through a small group of families who began to plan activities together for their mentally disabled children. The group grew in number and so did their concern for their children's futures once they graduated from the school system.

In 1982, the nonprofit organization's first group home was established at King's Highway, and from there has progressed to many more homes and a more independent apartment living program, allowing the group to further serve the needs of adults with mental and other related disabilities.

Along with the new patients who will be able to make use of the new "Sense-It" Room, CLASP Homes, Inc. serves 76 residents in 10 group homes and nine apartments located throughout Fairfield County.

Those living in the homes "share responsibility in home maintenance, including shopping, cleaning, meal planning and cooking.

They are encouraged to establish meaningful relationships and generally to enjoy life to the fullest."

Through the therapists' work with the clients, "sensory stimulation activities with textured fabrics from carpeting to feathers, loofah bath gloves and sponges, various massage methods (hand, arm and neck) may allow an individual to stand up straighter and make and maintain eye contact for longer periods."

The sensory-related activities conducted in the controlled environment by trained professionals allow the clients to "ground themselves," said Martire. Through work with SI therapy,