

Calming, ocean-themed room offers tranquility for those with sensory processing issues

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The ELC's ocean-themed sensory room is an integral component of its Preschool Autism Language and Social Skills program. Credit: Michael Mercier | UAH

The relaxing sound of the ocean greets you as you take in the soft glow of twinkling lights around you and the smooth billows of white satin overhead. Sinking into the cozy hug of an oversized bean-bag chair, your

mind begins to calm, absorbing the soothing ambiance and letting go of the day's distractions. You've found peace at last—that is, until the school bell rings and reminds you that you're not at the spa. You're in the calming sensory room at the Early Learning Center (ELC) on the campus of The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH).

Unveiled last fall, the room was made possible by the generous financial support of two community partners—the Daniel Foundation of Alabama and the Boeing Employees Community Fund—each of whom provided a \$25,000 grant to the ELC.

"I had always dreamed of having a space that allows our kids to regulate their senses and be a little more ready to learn, so we're beyond thankful for the funding from the Daniel Foundation of Alabama and Boeing that enabled us to turn that dream into a reality," says Deana Aumalis, director of the ELC. "Together they've helped us create an amazing, one-of-a-kind sensory oasis that encourages our children to relax and refocus their minds, and allows them to better concentrate on what they're learning outside of the sensory room and inside the classroom."

The sensory room is an integral component of the ELC's Preschool Autism Language and Social Skills (PALS) program, which seeks to meet the needs of children with [autism spectrum disorder](#). It also allows education majors with a focus on autism spectrum disorders to gain hands-on experience in differentiated instruction, given the ELC's role as a service and outreach unit for UAH's College of Education.



The room's SMART Table was purchased with funds from a literacy and technology grant from the Daniel Foundation of Alabama. Credit: Michael Mercier | UAH

"We started PALS two years ago to meet the demand in this community for quality early-childhood programs that serve children on the autism spectrum," says Aumalis. "So the PALS class uses the sensory room at a scheduled time, and then it's open to anyone else who needs it at any point during the day."

Pursuant to its under-the-sea theme, the room features a giant ocean mural painted by UAH alumna Theresa Cordier, a projector that displays underwater imagery, a lighted bubble tube with fish, stackable cube lights, and a SMART Table that assists children with acquisition of pre-academic [social skills](#) like turn-taking and sharing. "We were able to

purchase the SMART Table with funds from a \$50,000 literacy and technology grant we had received previously from the Daniel Foundation of Alabama," says Aumalis.

The room's pièce de résistance, however, is its sensory swing. A staple of sensory rooms, these swings help improve users' core strength, balance, and motor skills by engaging their vestibular receptors with a rotating motion. What makes this one special is that it was designed and built by UAH students in Dr. Christina Carmen's two-semester product-realization course.



The room's sensory swing was designed and built by engineering students in Dr. Carmen's two-semester product-realization course. Credit: Michael Mercier | UAH

"While there have been various industry customers for my student teams over the years, no customer has been more exciting to work with than Deana Aumalis, the ELC teachers, and their precious students," says Dr. Carmen. "And the student team that worked on this project was simply exceptional. Each gave an all-out effort to ensure the product was, first and foremost, safe, as well as ergonomically appropriate, durable, reliable, aesthetically enticing to use, and functionally sound. The best part is knowing that ELC students will be able to use and benefit from the product."

And she is not alone. Both the Daniel Foundation of Alabama and the Boeing Employees Community Fund share Dr. Carmen's pride and pleasure in supporting the ELC and its mission to give all children a firm foundation for their future. "We are pleased to support the ELC through the addition of a sensory room that meets many of the special needs that students have and that allows staff to provide helpful therapies and lessons," says Jennifer Gray, who serves a program associate at the Foundation.

Fortunately, there are plenty more opportunities for the ELC's [community partners](#) to provide support going forward. Among other plans in the works, Aumalis is hoping to create an active sensory room for those children who seek sensory stimulation rather than relaxation. "Our calming sensory room has been such a great success—more than we could have imagined," she says. "Now I would like to be able to replicate that, and in doing so, help even more children experience the social, cognitive, physical, and emotional growth essential to a high-quality education."



The room's furnishings were made possible by donations from the Daniel Foundation of Alabama and the Boeing Employees Community Fund. Credit: Michael Mercier | UAH

Provided by University of Alabama in Huntsville

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