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Tailored Environment of CHOC Thompson Autism Center Comes

From Designer's Firsthand Experience

The Thompson Autism Center at Children's Hospital of Orange County will exist to help evaluate children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) earlier in life, and promote better outcomes. It will be one of a few clinics fully dedicated to patients with autism.

Don Lawrence knows the frustration and helplessness of not being able to find adequate resources to help an autistic child navigate and thrive in the world around him. Much of what he and his wife were able to find for their son over the past two decades came through their own research and perseverance.

The opportunity to channel his experience, findings and challenges into the design of the Children's Hospital of Orange County's new Thompson Autism Center, which celebrates its completion today, has proved to be a remarkably profound and important journey for Don.

“As the parent of an autistic son, I can tell you it’s a nightmare to try and find resources,” said Don, a healthcare planner with Blue Cottage of CannonDesign who helped design the Thompson Autism Center. “There was no center like this when my son was born, so it was a real challenge for me and my wife to find the resources to get interventions. Now that there’s more awareness of autism, we’ve seen more and more providers noticing and diagnosing autism early. Intervention at a facility like this can make a huge difference in their lives.”



The Thompson Autism Center will focus on early diagnosis and intervention, which is critical in the development stages of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Extensive research

resulted in evidence-based design solutions for lighting, artwork, color, sound and signage that make the sensory overload of a doctor's office more calming for ASD children.

Don remembers taking his son to get blood drawn at a regular pediatric clinic. "It took five people to hold him down while he was screaming," he said. "Everyone in the building heard his anxiety about the process." This experience led Don to help CHOC create sound-isolated spaces in the Thompson Autism Center's clinic all filled with soothing imagery and light. This helps reduce stress for patients and ensure one upset patient doesn't affect others.

Research into how ASD children perceive art found that images of children by themselves are scary—they see it as being isolated or abandoned by their parents or caregivers. All art in the Thompson Autism Center shows kids with their peers or families to maintain a comforting atmosphere throughout the whole building.

Another key distinguishing feature of the center is that it allows for children to be seen by multiple specialists during one visit, all in the same room. "We can bring in specialists... things that are very

difficult for kids to go to in regular clinic,” said Don. Having to only bring the child to one place cuts down on the stress for both the child and their family accompanying them to the appointment.



The Thompson Autism Center not only provides resources and classes for caregivers of ASD children, but also has spaces to assist them in teaching certain developmental behaviors, such as toilet training. This was a difficult process for Don and his son, and that difficulty is something misunderstood by the greater public.

“If you don’t have a special needs child in your life, you don’t understand what it’s like for parents to deal with [toilet training] on a regular basis,”

said Don. “Many times they are intolerant, they think the kid is acting out and the parents aren’t training them properly. When in reality the parents are doing everything they possibly can. As autism awareness becomes more prevalent, with the help of centers like this, I’d like to think people will become more tolerate to those children who don’t fit into the standard child lifestyle.”

As diagnosis continues to improve and the incidence of autism continues to rise, the demand for tailored spaces like the Thompson Autism Center will also increase. Designed with diligent research, interviews and planning, this center will be a benchmark for others across the country and allow for early diagnosis and early invention, resulting in improved learning, communication and social skills for children with ASD. The center is also distinct as a resource and community for the families and loved ones of autistic children, who are used to being their own support system. The Thompson Autism Center is a space for care, compassion and hope, and a beacon for the ASD community.



Autism Spectrum Disorder On The Rise

- One in 59 children has ASD – a 112 percent increase from similar data in 2008.
- ASD is about four times more common among boys than girls.
- The co-occurrence of one or more non-ASD diagnoses (such as developmental, neurological, gastrointestinal, etc.) is 83 percent.
- The total cost per year for children with ASD in the U.S. are estimated to be between \$11.5 billion and \$60.9 billion—from medical care, special education and lost parental productivity.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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