

## Does Space Matter in Mental Health Treatment?

**An exploratory study for a child/adolescent mental health inpatient unit in the University of Minnesota Masonic Children's Hospital examined design elements and spaces as contributing influences to behavior and wellbeing for patients, staff, and families.**

Treating children and adolescents with mental and behavioral health issues is challenging. For those seeking treatment, care must be of the highest quality. Research suggests therapeutic environments can positively influence the patient experience. Treatment culture and care models that place emphasis on enhancing the relationship between patients and staff rather than on controlling patients are a growing standard of care and have greater effectiveness when supported by a therapeutic environment.

The groundbreaking **Child/Adolescent Mental Health Unit renovation** used evidence-based design strategies to enhance the organization's care model, uncovering a better understanding of the link between the physical environment and the healing process for children and adolescents facing mental health challenges. After completing the inpatient renovation, the University of Minnesota Masonic Children's Hospital and BWBR partnered to conduct a post-occupancy study focused on how the design elements and spaces influenced calm feelings for patients. Therapeutic milieu was incorporated into the renovation, a concept that advances the general management of patient care by incorporating components of the psychiatric environment to achieve best treatment outcomes with patients and their families.

### METHODOLOGY

This mixed-methods study combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches in assessing the behavior and wellbeing of the patients, family, and staff through staff surveys, staff interviews, and patient image surveys. The approach focused on gathering both patient and staff perceptions of design elements and their impact on patients and family outcomes.

### FINDINGS

#### **Choice and control with the physical environment contribute to feelings of calm for child and adolescent patients.**

Patients are able to control their environment through lighting (dimming and color-changing accents) and music control panels in many of the activity, therapy, and group rooms. The most commonly selected design elements and spaces with calming effects were those offering choice and control: music panels, colored lights, the patient's room, use of the therapeutic pool, and light dimmers.



Name is: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Doctor is: \_\_\_\_\_  
 TC is: \_\_\_\_\_  
 GOAL today is: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Questions I have for my  
 treatment team: \_\_\_\_\_



**Increased physical activity is associated with decreased behavioral issues.** Fifty-one percent of respondents alluded to the clinical benefits of increased physical activities that have been incorporated into the treatment model on the units as a result of the renovation.

**Needs-adaptable rooms enhance positive behavioral outcomes.** Another prominent theme that emerged is the adaptability of patient rooms to patient needs. Fifty-three percent of the staff attributed patients' positive experience to the way patient rooms were enhanced to accommodate specific needs.

**Units' design features are of clinical utility.** This was the most prominent theme in the evaluation, as a majority of staff (73.2%) reported positive impacts of the units' design and environmental features on patients' coping as well as family satisfaction. Staff discussed how the colors, artwork, and the open areas on the unit aid patients in maintaining emotional regulation while working on their behavioral and mental health goals.

### IMPACT

Overall, the results suggest that space does matter in child-adolescent mental health facilities. Results of this study suggest that design features in which patients have choice and control create an atmosphere that is perceived to be calm during their stay. Staff were also influenced by the new unit design, generating feelings of calm, safety, and pride in the work environment that influences the delivery of patient care.



BWBR actively supports research across all areas of our practice to inform design decisions and build knowledge about occupant and building performance.