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**Award-winning sensory garden improves wellbeing for kids with Autism**

Delegates to Occupational Therapy Australia's (OTA) 2020 Virtual OT Exchange have been told that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) responded positively to a new sensory arts garden in Florida, USA.

Dr Amy Wagenfeld – occupational therapist and Principal of Design and Faculty in the Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctoral Program at Boston University – played an integral role in the collaborative design and installation of the award-winning garden.

“Interacting with nature is understood to improve physical, sensory, social, and emotional wellbeing for all people, regardless of age or ability,” Dr Wagenfeld said.

“With a significant rise in diagnosis of ASD, now more than ever it is important to provide these children with carefully designed outdoor environments that meet their unique needs and increase the meaningfulness of their daily lives.”

The Sensory Arts Garden at The Els Center of Excellence is purposely designed for individuals with ASD and the community of parents, educators, therapists, and caretakers that support and enrich their lives.

The garden was intentionally designed to provide unobstructed views throughout the space.

According to Dr Wagenfeld, children look forward to their daily visits to the garden in which they were able to spend twenty minutes in an unstructured, autonomous activity of their choice.

Future research is expected to review the impact of daily visits to the garden on children's attentional capacity and self-stimulatory behaviours.

These findings could contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the positive link between interaction with nature and healthy development for children.

“Gardens provide children with important opportunities to be outside, exercise, socialise, learn, nurture their sensory systems and, above all, improve their health and wellbeing,” Dr Wagenfeld said.

“All children, regardless of skill, ability, or circumstance deserve and need to participate in these outdoor activities.”

Approximately 500 occupational therapists have converged – virtually – on the 2020 OT Exchange, the first of OTA's national conferences to be delivered entirely online.

The conference features 93 scientific presentations and three workshops focussed on four key areas of occupational therapy practice: Driving, Rehabilitation, Paediatrics and Environmental Modifications. It runs from 14 to 15 September.

**Media Contact**

Michael Barrett | Government, Media and Public Relations

0403 795 505

[policy@otaus.com.au](mailto:policy@otaus.com.au)

**About Occupational Therapy Australia**

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