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Issue 21

Social Skills Training for Individuals with High Functioning ASDs

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On February 2, 2010 the Parent and Professional Lecture Series of LBPSB's ASD Team welcomed Vicky Tagalakakis and Jack Strulavitch of the Montreal Children's Hospital. Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch are in the relatively unique position of having led groups for preadolescents (age 10-12) and teens (age 13+) with Asperger's Disorder or other types of high functioning ASDs for the last ten years. Attendees of the Lecture Series were treated to a sampling of their collected wisdom. Among the themes that emerged over the course of the evening, three of the most salient were: (a) the orientation of the groups, (b) the framework of the sessions, and (c) the things that might enhance the group's effect.

Ms. Tagalakakis' and Mr. Strulavitch's groups have always been guided by the fundamental goal of helping participants become as independent as possible. Although not officially part of the triad of impairments in ASDs, poor functional autonomy (i.e., low independence) is ubiquitous among individuals within the spectrum. The frequency with which this form of impairment is observed is due, in large part, to its interrelationship with the deficits in communication, social skills, and cognitive flexibility that are central to ASDs. It is difficult to be independent if you have trouble understanding and being understood, interacting comfortably and effectively with others, and generating solutions to life's challenges or shifting from the one strategy you have come up with. Getting group members to overcome their apprehension about trying new things or new approaches is a gradual process that Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch believe is facilitated by guided social interaction and the development of one basic social/coping skill at a time. Although usually selected from guidebooks such as "Skill Streaming the Adolescent" or "Navigating the Social World", Ms. Tagalakakis' and Mr. Strulavitch's choice of a skill to focus on is largely organic (i.e., determined not in advance but what emerges as the groups coalesces).

Ms. Tagalakakis' and Mr. Strulavitch's groups begin with a check-in (e.g., how was last week? Is there anything the group can help you with?), a reminder of the group's rules of conduct (e.g., no teasing, no violence, no dating; participation is mandatory and confidential), followed by a review of the preceding week's skill, the introduction of a new skill, snack time, and finally fun time. Skills that are routinely covered in sessions include: (a) carrying on a conversation (e.g., tone of voice, simple questions to ask, topics to consider, questions/topics to avoid), (b) calling someone on the telephone, (c) what to do if you don't understand something in class, (d) dealing with gym class and bullies, and (e) handling parties, attraction to peers, ordering in a restaurant. *Teachable moments* arise when the 8-10 group members discuss these issues and put their new skills to the test during snack or fun time and on the group's trip to a restaurant together. Debriefing how the preceding week went provides another opportunity for the group leaders and members to provide didactic feedback and skills coaching.

Ms. Tagalakakis' and Mr. Strulavitch closed their session with a discussion of how they thought the effect of their groups could be bolstered. Being able to provide more direct support to the parents of participants emerged as one of the main things on their wish list. By coming together at the same time as their children were meeting, parents could benefit from: (a) discussions of their experiences in raising a child with Asperger's, (b) the support derived from realizing that they are not alone in their frustrations, successes, and disappointments, and (c) the didactic feedback and coaching available from the clinician leading the group. For Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch, a central component of this coaching would be helping parents to answer the question "where do you want your child to be in five or 10 years?" and in devising a plan for guiding their child in getting there. The opportunity to provide *booster sessions* to group members in the months after their graduation from the group was another thing that Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch would like to build in their treatment. Central to these sessions would be reviewing the skills the group offered, troubleshooting current problems, communicating ongoing concern/care, and reminding them that *you can't always do what you wish you could do, sometimes you have to do what you are good at.*

After Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch's presentation, feedback from the audience focused on how helpful it would be if more LBPSB students could access the group and if more such groups could be created. It was clear that many of the individuals who attended the presentation could envision the intervention model devised by Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch assisting a child they knew or knew of. We thank Ms. Tagalakakis and Mr. Strulavitch for sharing their time and expertise and applaud them for their great support of students with ASDs.

Dr. Andrew Bennett

Communication Corner

As the weather warms up, we realize that the end of another school year is fast approaching. Teachers and parents are reflecting on the progress that their children have made over the school year and parents often ask what they can do over the summer months so their children can continue to develop. The summer months are a great time to help children participate in community activities. Outings such as visiting a zoo, going camping, enjoying a bike ride or a stroll downtown can be overwhelming for some children with an ASD. Using visual strategies can help children understand where they are going, what they will be doing there and when they will be returning home to their more familiar surroundings and activities. When children are provided with this information in a concrete visual form, they will be able to take part in these activities with less disruptive behaviour and fewer meltdowns.

Here are some suggestions:

- * **Plan ahead.** Where will you be going? How long will you be there? What do you plan on doing there? Use the internet to

search for pictures and information. Many places have websites that allow you to preview the activities available so you can plan what you would like to do. You can download pictures and paste them on index cards.

- * **Preview.** Show your child the day before the activity where you will be going. Discuss what you will be doing there as you show him/her the pictures. You can put the pictures on a ring or you can insert them into a mini-photo album. Be sure to add in when you will be having a snack.
- * **Use your pictures as your itinerary.** Once you are at your destination, refer to the pictures often. Use the pictures to remind your child what you are doing. When you focus your child's attention on the picture of the activity, you are engaging your child in a meaningful communication exchange.

Visit the website www.usevisualstrategies.com for additional information about using visual strategies at home.

Helene Packman, Speech-Language Pathologist

Teacher Tip

As we start planning for the following school year, it is important that we make sure the teacher(s) who will be working with students with an ASD have all the information needed. Here are a few tips to facilitate this process.

First, review and update the student profile form in order to indicate the current information about the student. What would the next teacher need to know? Although this information could be shared verbally, it is preferable to have it in writing in case there are changes in staffing. Next, select samples of work which indicate the level of competency of the student in various subjects. These could be sent home if we know they will be sent back at the start of the year. In addition, samples could be kept at school for next year's teachers. This way, both parents and teachers will be on the same page. Finally, the teacher may recommend taking pictures during the summer and creating an album, scrapbook, or presentation with their family. These could be shared with the new teacher, resource team & peers in the fall.

OT Corner: Impact of Seasonal Change on Students with Sensitivities

With every seasonal change, new challenges may arise for students with sensitivities, as a number of considerations come with the change of weather. The most obvious one is about dressing. Although its complexity decreases in the spring, it may nevertheless create a challenge for certain students with oversensitivity. By March, students have generally gotten used to wearing heavier winter gear that covers their whole body. This provides them with extra grounding input and "padding" that acts as a protective layer against the outside world. Therefore, getting used to less clothing and shorter sleeves may take a bit of time, as body/temperature awareness needs to be readjusted, and increased direct tactile contact may distract and be disruptive for certain students. As well, new fabrics, fasteners and shoes may add sensory and motor planning challenges. Adjusting the visuals of the dressing task accordingly may assist students in anticipating and adapting to the sensory change. Providing the opportunity to wear less aversive clothing fabrics (e.g.: used/pre-washed clothes versus new ones), approaching students from the front, using firm (versus light) touch, and warning them before physical contact generally helps when dealing with tactile sensitivity.

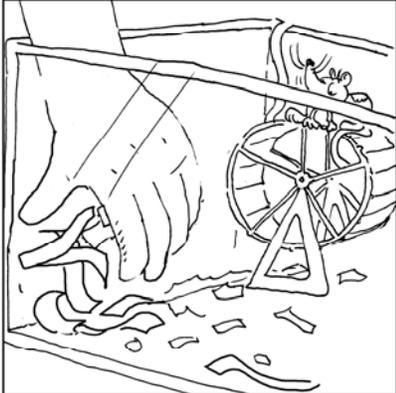
As well, with warmer temperatures comes increased opportunity to be in contact with environmental noises and smells, due to open windows and doors. This can lead to difficulty in focusing and completing work in the classroom. Reorganizing classroom seating to be away from the source of noise/smell, and using ear plugs or headphones during independent work, may assist students in maintaining their attention and productivity. In addition,

students who are light sensitive may find it harder to work near windows and/or play outside at recess on bright sunny days. They may avoid direct gaze, cover eyes or squint in reaction to the increase in lighting. Allowing them to wear a cap or sunglasses outdoors (and indoors if necessary), using blinds, a slant board to avoid reflective lighting, or an enclosed study carrel, may support their participation.

Finally, warmer weather leads to increased outdoor time. All students benefit from physical activity and movement, because it supports functional attention, alertness, activity level, and organization. However, as vestibular input is very powerful, movement activities may need to be structured and adapted for students with sensory modulation challenges and vestibular over-sensitivity, in order to facilitate vestibular integration and support overall regulation. This may include: avoiding high intensity and sustained movement, in particular when it involves changes in head position and rotation; breaking down running/fast movement activities with resistive muscular work (e.g.: wall push-ups, being door monitor at recess), or by adding a visual element (e.g.: target throwing); favouring goal oriented activities and rhythmic slow movement exercises, instead of unstructured/fast movement activities (e.g.: running in circle). In any case, don't hesitate to consult with your occupational therapist if you have questions or concerns regarding the adaptation of students with sensory challenges to the seasonal change.

Joëlle Hadaya, erg

THE #1 SIGN A TEACHER DOES NOT FIND A CONSULTANT'S INPUT SUPPORTIVE:



CONSULTANT'S REPORT IS FOUND SHREPPED AS BEDDING FOR THE CLASSROOM HAMSTER.

Read All About It!



Navigating the Social World by Jeannette McAfee (2006)

was one of the main sources used by the Montreal Children's Hospital Social Skills group for curriculum and activity ideas. This book provides step-by-step programs to teach social skills to students with high-functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome. Emotions, abstract thinking and behaviour are also covered in sections of this manual.

This book and other books related to social skills are available through the ASD Library. To consult available materials, please visit www.lbpsb.qc.ca/eng/asdn/index.asp and click on *Library*. To access resources from the library, please contact the ASD consultant for your school.

Wrapping Up

The end of the year can be a very busy time for all staff but whether you're wrapping up or packing up, it is always important to pass on all relevant information and materials to ensure continuity for the student with an ASD.

As a first step, make sure that all materials and activities the student was using during the year are gathered and transferred to the next location. This will serve as a great baseline of familiarity and consistency for the student when they start their new year. It also prevents school staff and professionals from having to "re-invent the wheel". These important materials include any activities, visual supports, and technological software/hardware which were made for, ordered for or belong to the specific student. Any type of material borrowed from school board professionals should be returned to them at the end of the school year.

It is important to remember that transitions are both an exciting and anxiety-provoking time in a student's life. As we all know, students with an ASD thrive on predictability and preparedness. Therefore, preparing a student for the impending change in setting, classroom, teachers, and peers is an important step in ensuring a successful transition.

For students who are simply moving up a grade in the same school, it is helpful to have them meet their future teachers before the end of the year, and visit their classroom. If need be, take pictures of the student with these teachers and in the classroom so that parents can review the pictures during the summer with their child. A social story about moving to another classroom and grade, as well as meeting new people would also be a helpful tool. For students who are shifting to another building, whether a different elementary school or high school, following the *Transitioning Plan and Timeline* can help facilitate the transition for both the student and the receiving school. In preparing for a student who is transitioning to high school, the *Student Profile* form provides extremely useful information for the new school to ensure as much continuity as possible. The form entitled *What You Need to Know About* can also be a very valuable tool. It can help pass on information about a student's day to day fluctuations and characteristics in a quick and efficient manner, when a staff member is absent or if your student will be working with a new integration aide or teacher next year. The above mentioned forms as well as templates for needed materials, visuals and social stories are all available on our website at <http://www.lbpsb.qc.ca/eng/asdn/index.asp>.

Finally, whatever the transition may be, the student with an ASD will need to be prepared to say goodbye to peers and friends. In this case, a social story about saying goodbye would be very helpful as well as allowing the student ample time to process their departure from the classroom or school. Therefore, gradually preparing the student two or three weeks before the end of the year is a good way to ensure that they will move on comfortably to the next setting.

