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Issue 37

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ASD Newsletter Feature Article: [On Being Good-Enough](#)

Years ago, a famous British psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, came up with the concept of the '*good-enough parent*'. Winnicott worked for a children's hospital in London in the 1940's through to the 1960s and came to the field of psychotherapy from the perspective of a pediatrician. He introduced the concept of *good-enough* to communicate the idea that parenting is difficult and complex and that no one can be a perfect parent. Given our fallible nature and the stresses we face, we will inevitably do some 'wrong' things in raising our children. These mistakes will usually not be traumatic, by which we mean doing significant damage to the child's emerging personality, and, in fact, can serve the purpose of healthy development. The concept of good-enough is relevant in at least two ways to the work and experience of individuals supporting children with ASD in schools (i.e., teachers, integration aides, clinicians).

The first way that good-enough is relevant to those working with children with ASD is that it informs our efforts to encourage autonomy and agency. Winnicott believed that an infant develops a sense of self in direct relationship to her attachment figures, and the first such figure is usually the mother. The infant experiences a need, like hunger, and the mother (or father) meets that need. In the early days of the infant's life, she does not recognize a difference between self and the mother (or father or nanny); all she knows is that when she has a need, she cries and then the need is met. There is no sense of a differentiated self; she is her own world. However, this does not (and should not) continue forever. According to Winnicott, *the good-enough mother... adapts less and less completely, gradually [pulling back], according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure...*"[1]. So the good-enough parent begins to increase the amount of time between the infant's expression of need (e.g., crying) and meeting that need (e.g., feeding, changing, or whatever). Although this is not enjoyable for the infant, she learns that she is dependent upon the parent for her needs to be met, which means that she is different from the parent. She also learns that she can survive these scary moments of need. The infant cries because she is afraid or distressed. However, little by little, the child experiences more of this anxiety and discovers two things: (a) that the parent eventually comes and provides for her need; and (b) that the anxiety did not overwhelm her. In contrast, the parent who tries to be too *perfect* does not allow the child to experience these threats and anxiety, and thus the child never learns to deal with anxiety and develop a sense of herself as independent and capable of surviving in the world.

As with the *good-enough* parent, the good-enough professional gradually moves from providing extensive support to a child or teen with ASD when they are confronted with new challenges to allowing them to be exposed to a manageable level of anxiety. Be it raising their hand and asking a teacher a question in class for the first time, approaching a group of peers and asking to join their activity, or taking public transit alone, the child with ASD will often initially seek to avoid the challenge and it is easy for a well-intended professional to try to protect them from anxiety by providing extensive support (i.e., essentially initiating the task for them). Despite our discomfort in the face of the student's initial expression of need/distress, *pulling back* represents not indifference but the good-enough professional's recognition that the child must sit with anxiety in order to discover both that it can be manageable and that they have agency over many of the circumstances in their lives

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A second way that good-enough is relevant to our work is that it promotes compassion for ourselves as professionals and underscores the essential role of *attunement* in relationships. To be a *good-enough* teacher or child care worker conveys the idea that, although we do need to perform skillfully enough to accomplish the challenges of our role (i.e., we must understand and apply the techniques and attitudes that lead children with ASD to learn and develop), we do not need to accomplish these challenges perfectly. We do not have to be the best or win a gold medal; we just need to be *good-enough*. From there, we can enjoy our work, not put too much pressure on ourselves, and accept making a few mistakes along the way but learning and growing from these errors. From Winnicott's point of view, of the many traits component of good-enough parenting, *attunement* is one of the most important. Attunement implies hearing, seeing, caring, and responding. It involves listening and reacting appropriately when a child or adolescent we are working with sounds frustrated or distressed – and then figuring out solutions to the triggering situations with them. It does not mean having everything already figured out and having the perfect action script already in hand. If we are attuned and responsive, we are already in possession of a key ingredient to all successful (and good enough) relationships.

[1] Winnicott, D. W. (1953). *Transitional Objects & Transitional Phenomena*, International Journal of Psychoanalysis. Vol. 34

Occupational Therapy Corner: Facilitating Self-Regulation

Individuals with ASD often present challenges with self-regulation as a result of their cognitive characteristics and sensory profile. As our students with ASD enter the school world, they are faced with the need to adapt to more complex environments than previously encountered. School environments typically include a number of authority figures and many variables that challenge the ability of all students to deal with anxiety and develop autonomy to function successfully within these settings. Although effort is made by school teams to tailor the environment and demands to the needs and individual characteristics of their students with ASD, inclusive community environments are far from perfect. As a result of their conditions, students with ASD are bound to struggle in multi-sensory (at times over-stimulating) physical environments, interact with adults and peers with all kinds of temperaments and personalities, and potentially face greater frustration than their peers (regarding changes in plans/routines, communication breakdowns, social interactions, academic learning, etc.). Therefore, it is essential to support the development of students with ASD by using therapeutic and educational approaches addressing their specific needs, which includes teaching them from a very young age a set of skills to facilitate self-regulation; that is, the ability to manage their own energy states (alertness and activity level), attention, emotions and behaviors.

Self-regulation involves dealing effectively with sensory and emotional stressors. As components of self-regulation include sensory processing and modulation, executive functioning, emotional regulation and social cognition, supporting the development and consolidation of each of these areas may need to be more or less emphasized for any given student with ASD. A variety of tools addressing domains of self-regulation have been developed over the years, and successfully used by the ASD community to support individuals with ASD. These include programs such as *Social Stories*® by Carol Gray which explains social information in context and guides students' responses; *Social Thinking*® by Michelle Garcia Winner teaches social perspective taking and how the social world works; *How Does Your Engine Run? The Alert Program*® for Self-Regulation by M.S. Williams & S. Shellenberger develops the student's awareness about their alertness, activity level and ability to regulate self; The Incredible 5-Point Scale by Kari Dunn Buron & Mitzi Curtis helps students better understand their emotions and reactions in different situations; and The Zones of Regulation® by Leah Kuypers, is a framework to simplify how we think about and manage our feeling states, based on personal goals, the social context, and current environmental demands.

Despite the care and effort in providing *good-enough* relationships and environments for successful learning; school teams will make mistakes along the way. In the same way, we can expect that our students with ASD are also on a learning curve, and will experience feelings of frustration and failure at times. However, with use of appropriate teaching tools and strategies, in conjunction with support from their caregivers and school teams, we will achieve our common goal of seeing students grow and learn from these experiences in order to develop socially acceptable behavior, maintain good relationships and wellbeing, as well as learn at their own pace.

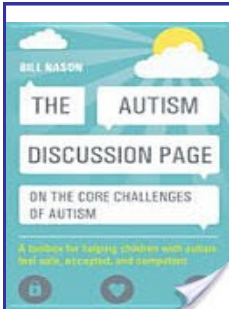
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Our team is composed of professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist LBPSB schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

We're on the web! <http://coeasd.lbpsb.qc.ca>



Read all about it!

The *Autism Discussion Page Blue Book* focuses on the core challenges associated with autism and provides concise accessible information and simple tools for supporting children with these vulnerabilities. Based on posts on the popular online community page and organized by subject for ease of reference, this book offers excellent understanding of how children with autism process and experience the world, and effective strategies for coping with these challenges.

This book will assist parents and school staff to feel more comfortable with their understanding and ability to effectively intervene in supporting students who have difficulty managing the social environment or academic expectations.

www

<http://aie.apsea.ca> is a new website created as a result of an Atlantic inter-provincial collaboration supported by APSEA (Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority). The website features webinars and information papers on important topics to support learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder. You will also find useful links to other excellent websites and resources.

Behavior Tip:

One of the practices we can adopt by being a good enough parent or support person for a child with autism is to give the child space and time to adjust to their environment or to a new request. When children are given a wait period before being expected to respond to a directive or a prompt, we are often surprised by what they can accomplish on their own. The added benefit of this approach is that we often encounter less negative behavior because we are not in their personal space and they are given an opportunity to process an expectation and generate a response.

When aggressive behavior is observed, we often notice that the helper is in very close proximity to the individual with autism in a way that one would rarely expect with a colleague or even another child. As consultants, when we see or are told about a behavioral difficulty, our first objective is to observe how physically close the helper is to the child and how much they are prompting or directing them. We often suggest giving the child more physical space and testing them to see how much they can do on their own or when given wait time. This takes a lot of patience and respect for the child's abilities since all of us want him/her to succeed and to be seen as more than "good enough". Keep in mind that you may not always be there in every moment of the child's life and if you are working harder than they are, you could be stifling their ability to become independent and achieve their full potential, regardless of their level of functioning.

Try this:

Many individuals have difficulty accepting mistakes (their own or others'). In the spirit of the good enough parent, educator or student, we can use the *MISTAKES* acronym with *My Favourite Mistake* sheet to help students develop a *growth mindset*.¹

The example below as well as other tools can be found at www.growthmindsetmaths.com

My Favourite MISTAKE

<p>M Means</p> <p>I I</p> <p>S Start</p> <p>T To</p> <p>A Acquire</p> <p>K Knowledge</p> <p>E Experience</p> <p>S Skills</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A mistake that moved my learning on.....</p>
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From: <http://www.growthmindsetmaths.com/>
Acronym created by @Math4UKpic

¹ Dweck, C., 2006 *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*