Welcome Back!

Welcome back everyone! Here’s hoping that everyone has had a wonderful and refreshing summer and that you are feeling energized for the new school year.

We are starting year five of the Consortium’s existence. Many of you have taken advantage of one or more of the wonderful staff development opportunities. This year is sure not to disappoint. We have plans to bring in several leaders in the field of autism to teach us on topics such as assessment (Donald Oswald, Ph.D., Marilyn Monteiro, Ph.D.), Social Skills and Social Stories (Carol Gray), Sensory Processing (Carol Kranowitz) and more assessment training on the VB-MAPP (Adam Dreyfus).

This will be a very busy year! I am so excited by how staff from Region 1 has embraced the training opportunities and have become more well versed in research based strategies that will help enhance your students’ educational experience. In addition to the training that the Consortium has provided, many of you have enrolled in college courses specific to autism or taken on-line seminars to help increase you knowledge of autism.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that each one of your students is an individual. Programming needs to be specific to each child’s individual needs. Have fun and be creative as you get to know each one of your students. It is going to be a fantastic year!

Have a wonderful start to the 2012-2013 school year!

Thanks!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Region 1 Autism Education Consortium

“Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement, nothing can be done without hope and confidence.”
~ Helen Keller

Parent/Teacher Relations

Many of your districts have active Parent Resource Centers (PRC’s). Be sure to give your students’ parents information for this valuable resource. The PRC’s have staff that are knowledgeable on special education procedures. Many of the centers offer a library of resources on disabilities that the parents can check out. In addition to this, there may be workshops on various topics that are available free of charge. The Region 1 Autism Consortium has had the pleasure to partner with the PRC’s to bring highly desired speakers to the area. Look for information about an upcoming event that is scheduled for November 5, 2012. Carol Gray will be speaking to parents. Check out www.soe.vcu.edu/aec for more information.

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Special points of interest:

This issue focuses on ideas for social skills instruction. Also, a brief summary of the new proposed DSM-5 criteria is included in this issue.

Articles are always welcomed! Also welcomed are “shout outs” to your peers. If you would like to submit any information for future issues, please contact me at: radiganct@vcu.edu.
This past year, Richmond Public School staff and VCU/Autism Center for Excel-
ence staff embarked on a project to de-
velop a model social skills group to be
replicated across the division. The social
skills group was known as the Peer to
Peer Club and it met after school on
Mondays and Wednesdays. This pro-
gram was open to students at Albert Hill
and was made available through a collab-
orative project between Albert Hill Mid-
dle School, the Office of Exceptional
Education and Student Services, and Vir-
ginia Commonwealth University Autism
Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE Pro-
ject). The goal of this project was to
create a model social skills program at
the middle school level that provides
opportunities for students with disabili-
ties to learn critical social and communi-
cation skills and to practice those skills
with peers.

The Peer to Peer Club was held every
Monday and Wednesday, after school,
from 2:30-4:30 with transportation pro-
vided by the school division. Every
Monday, students with disabilities who
had participated in the program received
direct instruction by Ms. Lauren Dawson,
a special education teacher, and Mrs.
Emily Helmboldt, LPC and Technical
Assistance Coordinator at the Autism
Center for Excellence. Every Wednes-
day, a small group of peers (5-10) with-
out disabilities attended the club to act as
mentors and participated in fun group
activities planned by the staff. These
activities consisted of role-playing, skits,
social skills games, and outside activities
that encouraged the use of conversational
skills and peer interactions.

Students were instructed in critical social
skills which were identified by the staff
via formal and informal assessments and
observations. The skills and topics cov-
ered have included:

- How to introduce yourself to friends
  and new people
- How to make new friends
- How to make conversation
- Entering and leaving conversations
- Conversation topics
- How to have a telephone conversa-
tion
- The diverse groups of the students in
  the school
- Bullying
- Emotions
- Stress management and relaxation
  strategies

These skills and topics were introduced to
students via a buzzword, which is gener-
ally a term that relates to the main focus
of the day, a handout which was followed
by discussions among the educators and
students, role-playing and some type of
activity that relates to the topic. Parents,
staff and students relayed positive feed-
back in regards to the significant impact
the group made on the students. Students
blossomed throughout the year, learned
vital social skills, and implemented these
in their daily living. Parents and educa-
tors gave encouraging feedback and stu-
dents grew tremendously through the use
of this club. Final assessment measures
resulted in a 22% average increase in
social skill acquisition. The model will
be replicated in two or more schools dur-
ing the 2012-2013 school year.

Thank you to Ms. Dawson and Mrs.
Helmboldt for sharing this information!

A Shout Out Goes To!

Over the summer months, two staff de-
velopment opportunities were offered
through the Consortium. First, in July a
four-day Summer Institute was conduct-
ed. We welcomed Andy Bondy and Lori
Frost from PECS, Georgia Brown from
SECEP and Mona Pruett from VCU/T/
TAC along with approximately 100 par-
ticipants. This training was very well
received and showed the dedication of
our staff to come in during their summer
vacation.

Our other training was Model Classroom
Training. Thank you to our presenters,
Heather Weston, Susan Mapes, Allison
Adams, and Gretchen Williams. Thanks
also goes out to Cynthia McCreary and
Maria Fiden who ran our classroom por-
tion of the training. And let’s not forget
our wonderful students who came in to be
a part of the class-
room!

We continue to learn
and grow in Region 1!
Upcoming events

The fall months will bring several professional staff development opportunities that are being sponsored by the Region 1 Autism Education Consortium.

On October 4-5, 2012, we will offer training on the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule-2 (ADOS-2). Donald Oswald, Ph.D. will be the instructor on this assessment tool which is considered the “gold standard”. The training will take place at Oak Knoll Middle School in Mechanicsville.

Marilyn Monteiro, Ph.D., is coming to us on October 25, 2012. Dr. Monteiro is from Texas. She trains staff in Texas and neighboring states on how to conduct assessments to help school divisions with eligibility decisions. Dr. Monteiro will discuss several different assessment tools.

Next, on November 5, 2012, we are extremely excited to welcome Carol Gray. Ms. Gray is the creator of social stories and comic strip conversations. She is a well respected international speaker. On November 5, 2012, she will talk to parents at the Henrico Theater. The topic title is “The Next Generation of Social Stories”. This two hour talk (6-8:00 pm) is sure to give parents some practical advice as to how to help their children better understand the complexities of social contexts by using social stories.

Ms. Gray will then be conducting a full day workshop for staff of Region 1 Schools on November 6, 2012. The title of this workshop is “Social Context in ASD: Breaking New Instructional Ground with Practical Strategies”. Don’t miss this as this is one of Ms. Gray’s last speaking engagements as she is retiring.

All of the above mentioned staff development opportunities are offered free of charge to staff members of Region 1 Schools. More information will be available on the Region 1 Autism Education Consortium website www.soe.vcu.edu/aec. Please contact Carrie Radigan at (804) 365-8127 or radiganct@vcu.edu if you would like to register for any of these events or if you have with any questions.

Picture is of Georgia Brown & Mona Pruett, July, 2012

Resources

Here are some other websites that you may find helpful:
www.doe.virginia.gov
www.autismspeaks.org
www.asacv.org
www.autismva.org
www.dotolearn.com
www.mayer-johnson.com
www.researchautism.org
www.tonyattwood.com.au
www.findahodgdon.com

Check our Carol Gray’s books:
The New Social Stories Book
Comic Strip Conversations
My Social Stories Book

As many of you may have already heard, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual V is currently in the works. There is much debate over the new proposed criteria for autism. To qualify for autism under the new proposed definition:

- Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays, and manifest by all 3 of the following:
  1. Deficits in social emotional reciprocity ranging from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back and forth conversation through reduced sharing of interests, emotions, and affect and response to total lack of initiation of social interaction,
  2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction; ranging from poorly integrated-verbal and nonverbal communication, through abnormalities in eye contact and body-language, or deficits in understanding and use of non-verbal communication, to total lack of facial expression or gestures.
  3. Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships, appropriate to developmental level (beyond those with caregivers); ranging from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit different social contexts through difficulties in sharing imaginative play and in making friends to an apparent absence of interest in people (Cont. on page 4)
The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium established the Board of Directors in June of 2008. The Consortium’s guiding principles are as follows:

1. The Consortium will assist participating school divisions in designing and implementing a comprehensive program of instruction which utilizes evidence-based practices that will result in documented outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder.

2. The Consortium will support the implementation of high-quality services for students with autism spectrum disorder in member school divisions.

3. The Consortium will recognize that comprehensive educational programs for students with autism spectrum disorder will require that all professionals working with these students to participate in ongoing professional staff development activities.

4. Hyper-or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment (such as apparent indifference to pain/heat/cold, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, fascination with lights or spinning objects);

   - Symptoms must be present in early childhood (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities)
   - Symptoms together limit and impair everyday functioning.

There has been much debate in the autism community over the proposed changes to the criteria. Currently, an individual can be on the autism spectrum with a diagnosis of autism, pervasive developmental disorders-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Asperger’s, Rhett’s or Childhood Disintegrative Disorders. If this change takes place these individual identifications will be eliminated. This is still a proposed definition. Experts in the field state that they are concerned that this new definition will exclude some people who are currently diagnosed as having an autism spectrum disorder under the DSM-IV. Obvious concerns are that individuals who do not fit the new criteria may lose needed services.

At this point, it is unclear as to when the new definition will come out in print. Autism Speaks is taking an active role in the development of the new definition. They are conducting research on this topic. They have a lot of information on their website www.autismspeaks.org.