Greetings! April is Autism Awareness month. It is a great time for those of us that work in the field to remind everyone about autism and how important it is for all of us to work together to make the lives of individuals with autism richer.

Here are some ideas that you might want to do for autism awareness month:

- Make a bulletin board displaying famous people with whom have been speculated as having autism such as Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin. Others that are alive today and have been very successful are Dr. Temple Grandin, Daryl Hannah and Courtney Love.
- Place information on autism and upcoming workshops on the bulletin board in the teachers’ lounge.
- Show a movie or video to the staff at your school. Recently on HBO, a movie aired about the life of Temple Grandin, a well known autistic savant.
- Give out small gifts that signify autism. The autism puzzle ribbon pins have become quite popular and are very easy to make.
- Suggest to teachers that they read a book to the class on differences. There are many easy to understand children’s books about autism.

The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium continues to make strides educating school personnel in best practices that will enrich the learning environment. We have had an exciting year with many training opportunities. Stay tuned for upcoming staff development trainings for next year.

Thanks and have a great rest of the school year!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Region 1 Autism Education Consortium

Parent/Teacher Relations

Spring is here and so are I.E.P. meetings. Often, teachers schedule I.E.P. meetings back to back to back. This does not allow for much time for discussion if any issues arise. I.E.P. meetings are not meant to be marathon meetings. However, they are meant to be a team effort. Everyone at the table should have a say as to what goes into the student’s I.E.P. Spring does tend to be a busy time for such meetings as students are transitioning to a new teacher, grade level or school. Many things are being considered at this time of year including services for the next year as well as extended school year services. It is good practice to make sure that everyone feels they are being heard.

Inside this issue:

- SOLs, VGLA, VSEP, VAAP, Ugh! Another Test, Help
- Shout Outs!
- Upcoming events
- Resources
- What’s Happening Around the State in Autism
- Getting Ready for Next Year, the Transition

Special points of interest:

This issue focuses on how to help students with autism spectrum disorder build skills that will enhance social skills and relationships. Evidence based practices are also explored.

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.
Spring brings many things such as spring break, beautiful weather, allergies, and above all in school—standardized tests!!! Students, not just those with autism, feel the pressure of these tests. Whether your students are taking the Standards of Learning Test (SOLs) or a portfolio assessment such as the Virginia Alternate Assessment (VAAP) or the Virginia Grade Level Assessment (VGLA), they may still experience some test anxiety and stress.

This is a busy time for teachers and students. Teachers are cramming in the final pieces of information that students need to know before the tests are given. Students often feel the crunch as extra homework and class work are assigned to make sure that the pace of instruction matches the testing due dates. For students that are taking the tests via portfolios, they may be doing extra work to try to get in every last objective that is required for the test.

Although teachers do their best to help their students not stress over the tests, it is inevitable that some students will become anxious. Consider the following when everyone becomes frazzled:

- Break the work down into pieces so that it is not too overwhelming. Sometimes individuals with autism will react negatively if too much is given at one time. Understandably, there is a lot of information to get through. However, if the work is broken into more than one assignment then the student may be able to get through the work without frustration.
- As you are attempting to get in all the last minute information, make assignments fun with choices built in. Consider using a tic tac toe board. In each of the squares put different assignments that allow the students to learn the concepts. For instance, for English, one of the squares could ask the students to do a powerpoint on a favorite character in a book that they read. Another square could ask them to write a newspaper article on a conflict in a book. Both of these are fun to do and provide great learning and practice. Also, the students only have to pick three assignments to make a tic tac toe, so they have plenty of choices built in to their work.
- Remember to use accommodations that help reduce testing stress. For instance, allowing breaks during the test for certain individuals allows them to regroup so that they can get back to work. It is much easier to have a built in break that takes 5 minutes than deal with a complete meltdown that takes 30 minutes.
- Teach test taking strategies such as “slash the trash”. This allows students to narrow down the choices for their answers and thus have a better chance of being successful.
- Teach your students calming techniques such as taking a deep breath. Taking a mental break for just a few seconds may help them relax and thus be more ready to conquer the questions at hand.
- Be aware of distractions that may cause undo discomfort for your students. For example, some students need to be in a room by themselves or with very few other students.

It is very important to keep in mind your students’ individual needs when making decisions about when and how they will be tested. Be sure to follow their Individual Education Plan (I.E.P) when applying testing accommodations. Also, make sure that testing decisions are made according to the standards that have been set forth by the Department of Education. For example, in order to take the VGLA, VSEP or the VAAP, the student must qualify according to the test criteria. Visit the Department of Education at www.doe.virginia.gov for more information on testing.

A big thank you goes out to Henrico County Public Schools for hosting the March 11, 2010 staff development by Janine Stichter, Ph.D. The workshop was in the beautiful Henrico Theater.

Congratulations to Powhatan County Public Schools. They won a grant through the University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability and the U.S. Department of Education. The grant focuses on inclusive programming for students with autism.

Congratulations also goes out to Richmond City Public Schools who has received a grant through the National Professional Development Center. This grant focuses on the implementation of research based strategies for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Way to go!
Upcoming events

During the 2009-2010 school year, we had many wonderful trainings. We plan on continuing offering such high quality staff development opportunities during the 2010-2011 school year. The trainings will continue to be free of charge to staff members of Region 1 Schools.

We are in the process of scheduling workshops for the summer and next school year. Save the date for July 20, 2010. Jed Baker, Ph.D., of New Jersey will be coming to present on social skills. He is a dynamic presenter and is sure to bring along many ideas on how to teach social skills to students with autism. More information will be out soon on this workshop.

We are pleased to announce that Andrew Bondy, Ph.D. and Lori Frost, M.S., CCC, SLP will be coming to present a two-day training on the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) that they co-created. The workshop will be help on November 29-30, 2010. More details to come.

Stay tuned for more information. These events as well as others will be listed on the Consortium’s website: www.soe.vcu.edu/aec.

If you have any questions regarding staff development opportunities, please contact Carrie Radigan at radiganct@vcu.edu or (804) 828-4501.

Janine Stitcher, Ph.D. presenting on behavior, March, 2010

Resources

There are numerous resources available. Here is a brief list of some of them:

www.autismtrainingva.org is a wonderful website. It is the website for the Virginia Autism Council. Trainings are listed as well as other resources such as college courses on autism and tuition reimbursement.

T/TAC has a plethora of information on various disabilities. There are on-line courses and information about trainings and workshops. You can go to

www.ttaonline.org or www.vcu.edu/ttac.org.

Here are some other websites that you may find helpful:

www.doe.virginia.gov
www.autismspeaks.org
www.varc.org
www.autismva.org
www.dotolearn.com
www.mayer-johnson.com
www.researchautism.org
www.tonyattwood.com.au
www.lindahodgdon.com

Check out Ian’s Walk: A Story About Autism by Laurie Lears. This book is suitable for children ages 6-10. The narrator in this story is Julie who’s little brother has autism.

What’s Happening Around the State in Autism?

Some of you may have heard of the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (ILARC). ILARC is responsible for evaluating the performance of State agencies and programs. In 2009, ILARC conducted a study that focused on services for individuals with autism in Virginia. The full report can be reviewed at http://ilarc.state.va.us/reports/Rpt388.pdf.

The recommendations brought about some changes in Virginia. First, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) developed a new position which is dedicated to helping Virginia improve educational services for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). VDOE has already begun making plans to increase training for those serving students with ASD. VDOE along with assistance from Virginia Commonwealth University will be developing guidelines for educators.

They are also planning to train psychologists on the Autism Diagnostic Observation Scale (ADOS). This assessment tool will assist teams in making informed eligibility decisions.

One other change in the state may not directly impact schools, but it will effect autism services. The Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services has developed a position devoted to helping families receive services from birth-adulthood.
The Autism Educational 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 on-going professional staff development activities.

Getting Ready for Next Year—the Transition

Yes, it is time to start thinking about next school year for your students. Some students are just moving from one grade to another within the same school, while others are moving from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school. Regardless of where the transition is taking place, it is a good idea to write down some ideas so that the next year’s teacher can have a head start making sure that your student is successful. In an article by Paula Kluth, “Strengths & Strategies: Assessing and Sharing What Matters”, she explains a strategy that helps summarize the student’s strengths and strategies that have been successful.

On the strengths page, things listed may include: can count from one to one hundred, is cooperative, or has a fascination with watches. The list is written in positive terms.

The strategies page details what the teacher has found to be effective when working with the student. These strategies might include: using humor, singing Beetles’ songs during times of stress, using visual information or letting the student use red pens.

The forms can be filled out by the teacher or by the student’s team (teacher, speech therapist, parent, etc.). It is an informal assessment that can give valuable information to the next teaching team. As mentioned, the forms are written in a positive way throughout. Dr. Kluth suggests that each list contain no less than fifty items. This forces the team to sit down and focus on the student’s individual likes and abilities. Dr. Kluth also recommends that educators may be able to use these forms to: plan curriculum and instruction, create curricular adaptations, develop student goals and objectives, design supports for challenging situations, work more collaboratively with and elicit concrete items from families; and collaborate and communicate with others.

The Strengths & Strategies Profile outlines the student’s strengths, gifts, interests and talents as well as the strategies that help the student learn the most effectively.

Please visit www.paulakluth.com/articles/strengthsstrateg.html to view this entire article which includes a sample strengths & strategies form that has been filled out. There is also a blank strengths and strategy form available on this website.

Happy transitioning!

Paula Kluth