After such a mild winter that we have had in Virginia, it is hard to believe that Spring is upon us. We have had an extremely busy year! Thank you to all that have supported the Consortium and have come out to the high quality staff development opportunities that we have offered throughout the year. Your dedication shows in your constant willingness to learn.

As many of you know, April is Autism Awareness month. Start thinking about things that you can do to help your school community learn and understand more about autism. Here are some ideas for Autism Awareness Month:

- Put up a bulletin board in your school with information about autism. Maybe include some pictures of famous people with autism such as Satoshi Tajiri (creator of Pokemon), Albert Einstein, Jason McElwain (high school basketball player), and Temple Grandin.
- Show a video about autism to the staff in your school. The movie, Temple Grandin, would be a good one to watch.
- Hold a staff development to give your colleagues a quick presentation on autism. Think of fun ways for them to learn such as playing games such as tic tac toe to answer questions about autism.
- Ask your administration if you can order ribbon pins. Or make them yourself and give them out in your school.
- Read books on disabilities to your students. There are several books available that are appropriate for children.

Thanks and have a great rest of the school year!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Region 1 Autism Education Consortium

Welcome!

Parent/Teacher Relations

The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium is excited to announce that we will be hosting an evening presentation with Andrew Bondy, Ph.D. and Lori Frost. Dr. Bondy and Ms. Frost are the co-creators of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). They will be discussing how PECS can be used at home and in the community.

Mark your calendars for this wonderful opportunity. The training is scheduled for July 10, 2012. This will be offered free of charge for parents who have children that attend schools in Region 1, Virginia.

More information will be available as we get closer to the event.

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Special points of interest:

This issue focuses on tips to help your students transition, recent autism legislation and new autism prevalence rates.

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.
Transition

Do you have students that will be transitioning out of your classroom next year? Are they going from ECSE to kindergarten or elementary to middle or middle to high school? Or will they simply be transitioning from one teacher to another within the same school building? Whatever the upcoming transition, you can help make it easier by starting to plan now for that change. Here are some quick tips/ideas that may help make this transition a bit smoother:

1. Begin developing an informational sheet on each of your students that can be passed along to the next teacher. Here are some examples of what to include:

   - What does your student’s day/schedule look like? Outline what their current schedule is. Do not make recommendations about what you think he should be doing the next year as that is a decision that will be made in the I.E.P. meeting. However, it is helpful to share how their day flowed, what they did in general education, etc.

   - Is your student on a behavior plan? If so, make sure you include this with your summary. On this sheet you may want to write a brief synopsis of the plan. What does he like for reinforcers? How often do you need to give a reinforcer? How do you remind him of the rules? Is there a visual rule card that he responds to? Any other information about what has worked will help the new teacher so that she doesn’t need to start over if you already have something successful in place.

   - What kind of visual supports does your student need to be successful? Does he use a transition schedule? If so, what does it look like? Does he use pictures, line drawings, objects or a combination? Does he take the schedule pieces from point A to point B, or does he simply move them once he checks his schedule?

   - How is your student’s work set up for him? Does he follow a visual work schedule? Does he have his own independent work area set up? Does he work alongside his peers? What kind of work tasks does he typically do? Worksheets like in the general education class? Tasks that use manipulatives? Tasks that are presented in a very structured way such as using boxes and containers? Tasks that are presented in file folders to help with organization? If possible meet with the teacher that he will have in the summer or for the next school year and show her some examples of what his work looks like.

   - How independent is your student? Can he follow a teacher’s direction the first time given, sit down and complete his work without prompting and then let the teacher know when he is finished? Or does he require more attention and prompting to complete an activity?

   - Share with the next teacher what your student’s likes and dislikes are. What are his favorite activities, foods and school subjects? What are his least favorite? What tips do you have to build in some of those least favorite subjects into your schedule? For instance, do you follow a least favorite (math) by a highly desired (reading)?

   - Are there any sensory sensitivities that need to be shared? Is he able to go to the gym or to the cafeteria with his same aged peers or does the noise seem to affect what he is able to tolerate? Do you build in sensory activities throughout the day? If so, what does he respond to well?

2. If possible, bring your student to tour the new setting/school. Also, meeting the new teacher (if that information is available) may go a long way in helping ease the transition. Some schools offer a course for students over the summer to get to know their new school.

3. Meet with the teacher that your student is going to be with for the next school year. You can answer any questions that the receiving teacher may have. This will give you an opportunity to share your informational sheet with the teacher.

A Shout Out Goes To!

Lauren Dawson, a teacher at Alberta Hill Middle School in Henrico County, has done an amazing job setting up, developing and implementing the Peer to Peer Social Skills Group. This program offers students the opportunity to learn, refine and practice basic relationship and communication skills within a safe environment of peers and peer mentors. Ms. Dawson has gone above and beyond as this program is after school hours.

Congratulations to those of you that have finished the coursework to receive your autism certificate. Your hard work and dedication is truly appreciated!

Way to go Region 1! Keep up the good work!
Upcoming events

The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium is pleased to announce their first annual summer institute that will take place July 9-12, 2012. The theme of this year’s institute is communication. We are thrilled to welcome back Andy Bondy, Ph.D. and Lori Frost. They are the co-creators of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). During the first two days of the institute, participants will learn basic PECS. This involves step by step hands on learning. On day three, Andy and Lori will teach PECS throughout the day. This is a more advanced training and is designed for folks that have already received the basic training. On Day 4, we will have Georgia Brown of SECEP and Mona Pruett of VCU/T-TAC. Georgia will be discussing higher level language/pragmatic skills. Mona will share examples of augmentative communication and also share some ideas of how to use the IPAD.

In addition to the four day program, Andy and Lori have agreed to talk to parents on one of the evenings. This will most likely take place on July 10, 2012. More information to come.

On August 14-16, 2012, we will hold another Model Classroom Training. This staff development will be held in Hanover County. It is designed for new teachers or those new to autism. The training includes hands on activities and an opportunity to observe two master teachers at work. More information soon.

Please check the Consortium website for the flyers on these events. If you have any questions regarding staff development opportunities, please contact Carrie Radigan at radiganct@vcu.edu or (804) 828-4501.

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.asacv.org
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 this book out: “Middle School: The Stuff Nobody Tells You About: A Teenage Girl with High-Functioning Autism Shares Her Experiences” by Haley Moss

Autism Legislation

After many revisions and discussions, House Bill 325 has passed. It reads as follows: Students with autism spectrum disorders; training required of personnel. By September 1, 2014, each school board shall ensure that aides assigned to work with a teacher who has primary oversight of students with autism spectrum disorder receive training in student behavior management within 60 days of assignment to such responsibility. School boards may provide such training to other employees, including transportation employees. The Board of Education shall provide training standards that school divisions may use to fulfill the requirements of this section. It also goes on to say that the Board of Education will consult with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to develop an online training that school divisions may use to fulfill the requirements. The training shall be available to local school divisions free of charge.

In response to this bill, VCU-ACE has developed and on-line course for paraprofessionals. The first course is scheduled to begin on April 2, 2012. The course consists of five modules and will cover information on characteristics of autism, responsibilities of a paraprofessional, social and communication, strategies for working with students with autism and behavior supports. Participants will earn a certificate of completion. For more information, please visit the VCU/ACE website at www.vcuautismcenter.org
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.

Autism Prevalence Continues to Rise

For those of you that have been in the field a long time, you have seen the rates of autism steadily increase throughout the years. In Virginia, in the year 2000, the child count was 2,226. That is, 2,226 students were eligible for special education services under the primary identification of autism. This information is from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). Now compare it to the year 2010 child count data reported by the VDOE. In 2010, 11,705 students had a primary identification of autism. The increase shows a 356% increase between 2000-2010.

Next, let’s take a look at the Nationwide data that is available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Recently, you may have heard that 1:110 children are now being identified as having an autism spectrum disorder.

There are still more boys than girls being identified. Autism is almost 5 times more prevalent in boys than girls. In fact, the CDC has indicated that the rates are 1:54 for boys and 1:252 in girls. The statistics continue to show that autism is evenly shown across racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups.

Why are we seeing such staggering statistics? In the late 1980’s to early 1990’s autism was considered a disorder that effected a few out of 10,000 children. A couple years after that, the rates were 3:2,500. Then in the mid 1990’s the rates began to look like 3-4:1,000 (about 1:250). One reason for the increase in the mid 1990’s may be due to the fact that the autism spectrum grew to include Asperger’s Disorder, a milder form of ASD. The Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV edition was published in 1994. This edition included Asperger’s Disorder under the category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders, which is what autism falls under. Because of this addition, there was naturally an increase of the incidence of children being identified as having an ASD.

Regardless of the reason for the increase of the number of children with Autism (environmental factors, toxins, genetics, better testing and knowledge, etc.), it is important to stay current on research based strategies to help these children improve skills that will help them become productive members of society.

For more information from the CDC, you can visit their website: www.cdc.gov