The beginning of the school year has truly been a busy one for the Region 1 Autism Education Consortium. We have had multiple professional staff development opportunities that many of you have taken advantage of.

So far this year, we have had presenters in from the TEACCH program in North Carolina. They conducted a three day training on how to develop a structured environment for students with autism spectrum disorder. We also were pleased to host a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) workshop. This intensive two day workshop was presented by Andrew Bondy, Ph.D., the co-creator of the PECS system.

Also, there were staff development opportunities for school psychologists. The focus of these trainings was on eligibility determination. School psychologists and other related personnel were invited to participate in trainings that focused on this topic. Donald Oswald, Ph.D., lead two separate trainings that educated staff on how to perform the Autism Diagnostic Observation Scale (ADOS). This assessment is designed to aid in the identification of students with autism spectrum disorder.

On-going staff development continues to be a goal of the Region 1 Autism Education Consortium. New autism incidence rates have been released. According to a study that was published in the American Academy of Pediatrics’ journal Pediatrics in October, 2009, 1:91 American children are being reported as having an autism spectrum disorder. This study was based on a large parent reported survey. The Virginia Department of Education is quoting an incidence rate of 1:100. Regardless of the specific rate that you hear, the rate has increased, so it is important to continue to be educated in high quality research based strategies.

Thanks!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Region 1 Autism Education Consortium

Parent/Teacher Relations

Share, share and share some more. It is important to keep parents informed on strategies that are working in the classroom so there can be follow through at home. For instance, if one of your students is doing well with picture exchange communication then share how you are doing it with his parents. You can also make a copy of the pictures that you are using so that a set can be kept at home. You might be surprised with how much parents are willing to do when they are given the resources with which to succeed. Success at home = success at school.

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.
Social Skills and Relationships

What does it mean to have social interactions skills? Gresham and Elliot (1995) defined social skills as: Socially acceptable learned behaviors that enable a person to interact with others in ways that elicit positive responses and assist in avoiding negative responses. Individuals with autism often have difficulty making and maintaining social relationships.

Building Social Relationships: A Systematic Approach to Teaching Social Interaction Skills to Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Other Social Difficulties, by Scott Bellini, Ph.D. outlines a five-step model for teaching social skills. The following is a brief summary of his five-step approach:

Step 1: Identify and assess areas of need. Assess social functioning by using a social skills assessment tool. Information can be gathered by interviewing the child, his teacher, and his parents. This will help you determine areas of strengths and weaknesses. You can also gather a multitude of information by completing an observation of the student in the natural setting. From this information, select areas with which to focus. Bellini suggests focusing on no more than five skills per three month period.

Step 2: Discern between skill acquisition deficits and performance deficits. Is this a skill that he has never been taught? Or is it a skill that is has been taught but is unable to perform? Try to determine which category the skills fit into as it is going to change the way you teach the skill. For instance, if it is a brand new skill then you are going to start from scratch and teach the skill. However, if it is a skill that has been taught then you are going to use strategies to enhance what has already been taught. Bellini outlines strategies that promote skill acquisition (social stories, role playing, thoughts, feelings and interest activities, etc.) and that enhance social performance (video modeling, relaxation strategies, game playing and peer mediated interventions, etc.).

Step 3: Select appropriate intervention strategy. This perhaps is one of the most challenging phases. There are several things to keep in mind when determining which intervention to use. First, one needs to decide which skills to target. Remember not to target too many skills all at once. Second, match the strategy to the skill deficit that is going to be taught. Is it a skill acquisition deficit or a performance deficit? Third, make sure that the strategy chosen matches the child’s developmental level. Fourth, is the strategy supported by research? Fifth, if the strategy is not supported by research, what is the rationale for using the strategy? Sixth, what components of social interaction skills (i.e. social problem solving and rules) does the strategy address?

Step 4: Implement the intervention. During this step, it is important to plan the intervention carefully. Decide what children would benefit from a social skills program. Determine how you will teach it (i.e. individually, small group). You will need to select the peers that you are going to use as model. All members need to be trained on what is being implemented. Get your materials together and decide where you will teach the skill. Lastly, you will need to develop a schedule to help determine how much time you will need to work on the skill. Make sure that you work on generalization of skills. Using a variety of trainers and locations will help with generalization of skills. Also, be sure to fade prompts as quickly as you can.

Step 5: Evaluate and monitor progress. There are several ways to make sure that the program that you developed is working. The data that you collect will give you valuable information. It will tell you whether the program is working as is or whether it needs to be modified. Use of observation may also be invaluable in determining program effectiveness. You may want to set up a schedule so that you catch your student in multiple settings.

Social skills are used throughout our students’ lifetimes. They are extremely important to learn as social skills are often what keeps these students out of gainful employment. Bellini’s book offers many ideas for teaching effective social skills.

A Shout Out Goes To!

A huge shout out goes out to Barbara Driver, Selena Joy and Brooke Bottari of Henrico County Schools, for hosting the PECS workshop in October. They not only provided a wonderful facility but also coffee and snacks. Hanover County Schools deserves recognition for hosting two separate trainings on the ADOS, an assessment tool. It was a fantastic training. Oak Knoll Middle School was very hospitable. Also, Hanover had the support of four families. Each family picked up their child from school and brought him over to be tested so that the trainees could observe. It was a fabulous learning opportunity and we really appreciate the support!

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to Dinwiddie for hosting Carol Schall’s workshop in November. Everyone appreciated the wonderful atmosphere of the new high school and the goodies that were provided!
Upcoming events

The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium is pleased to announce a staff development opportunity that will focus on social skills. Maureen Conroy, Ph.D., a professor from Virginia Commonwealth University, will be presenting the workshop titled, “Developing Social Skills Competence in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder”. Dr. Conroy has presented at numerous conferences both nationally and internationally. This staff development opportunity is free of charge for staff members in region 1 schools. It is scheduled for January 25, 2010 from 9:00-3:30.

The training will take place at the Chester Baptist Church which is located at: 4317 School Street, Chester, Va. 23831.

Please register by contacting Carrie Radigan at radiganct@vcu.edu or (804) 828-4501.

Other events are in the process of being scheduled. Stay tuned for more information. These events will be listed on the Consortium’s website: www.soe.vcu.edu/aec.

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


Ideas for Community Based Instruction

As we have talked about previously in this newsletter, in order for social skills to be generalized it is important to work on these skills across settings.

For example, you have a student who has a goal to work on waiting in line, maintaining appropriate proximity to others, orienting his body toward another while speaking and using full sentences when making requests. What better place to work on these skills than in McDonald’s? The student could certainly work on these skills plus many others such as counting money and change and using manners. Also, there is a great big reward waiting for him when he uses appropriate social skills—the french fries!

Here is another example. You have a student who has a goal of working cooperatively with others. You want him to learn to take turns by waiting for his turn and then telling a peer when it is their turn. Now, let’s consider a bowling trip. There are so many skills that can be worked on at the bowling alley. Some of these skills are ordering shoe size for the bowling shoes, choosing a bowling ball according to weight, and waiting for a turn to throw the ball down the alley. This is a fun way to work on tons of skills. It’s definitely a strike!
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.

Evidence-Based Practices

The National Professional Development Center (NPDC) on Autism Spectrum Disorders has identified 24 practices that met the criteria for evidence-based practices for children with autism spectrum disorders. The results were based on extensive review of scientific journals. The following are the 24 practices:

- Computer-Aided Instruction
- Differential Reinforcement
- Discrete Trial Training
- Extinction
- Functional Behavior Assessment
- Functional Communication Training
- Naturalistic Interventions
- Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention
- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
- Pivotal Response Training
- Prompting
- Reinforcement
- Response Interruption/Redirection
- Self-Management
- Social Narrative
- Social Skills Training Groups
- Speech Generating Devices/VOCA
- Stimulus Control
- Structured Work Systems
- Task Analysis
- Time Delay
- Video Modeling
- Visual Supports

Each of these practices is defined on the NPDC website: www.fpg.unc.edu/~autismpdc.

The NPDC website has an abundance of valuable information. There are learning modules that you can take at your own pace. You just choose the topic and click on the module. It will walk you through the learning module. Each module is complete with a pre and post test. The website is free to use, but you do have to sign up and get a password.