

Off-campus Program for Secondary Students with Autism

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Background Information

Our official name is The Provincial Resource Program for Autism and Related Disorders - quite a mouthful. For the sake of brevity and sanity it is shortened to the PRP.

The PRP is divided into two components. The component with which many of you may be familiar is the Provincial Outreach Program. The POP consists of a group of autism specialists who provide training and consultation to teachers throughout the province.

The second component of the PRP is the educational component. At two sites, Delta Senior Secondary School and at the Off Campus School, we provide the educational component for students living in the Gateway Residential Treatment Facility as well as students with autism who live in the Delta area.

Students entering the program must be between 12 and 19 years of age with a diagnosis of autism or a related disorder. Referrals for residential placement come through the student's social worker to an Admissions and Review Committee. Students who enter the residential program are generally some of the most difficult students in the province: in many cases things have broken down both at home and school and the students and their families are in crisis.

Once a student has entered the treatment facility, he or she enters a three month assessment and evaluation period. The educational assessment is done at the Off Campus School. A team is formed, consisting of a child care worker from the residence, a teacher and a special education assistant from the school. The team conducts a comprehensive assessment of the skills the student has acquired using the Functional Curriculum and/or the Brigance Inventory of Basic Skills; identify inappropriate behaviours; and collect baseline data. The team look at all aspects of the student's life. They evaluate behaviour issues, academic skills, communication, both expressive and receptive, self help skills, community skills , recreation/leisure skills and work skills. Lower functioning students may be given a concrete to abstract assessment to determine the appropriate level of visual supports which will work best for the individual.

Placement

Once the assessment is complete, the team makes a recommendation for site placement.

Students who have limited verbal skills and who are working on the lower levels of the functional curriculum, remain at the Off Campus school. These are students who require a life skill oriented curriculum, a higher degree of structure and behaviour support.

Higher functioning students with some verbal skills may be provisionally placed in the classroom at Delta Secondary School.

Off Campus School

The Off Campus School is located directly across from the Gateway Residential Treatment Facility. We have been in our building since September. There are three classrooms capable of accommodating three students in each, two classrooms with one student in each, an assessment classroom, a staff room/kitchen area and a multipurpose room.

Each student has a visual schedule (tangible objects, pic/syms or written) for the daily activities and several have portable schedules also. Visual schedules are placed in easy visual distance from the student when he/she is seated, and each has an accompanying finished pouch. One student tears paper to such an extent that his visual schedule of pic/syms is drawn on sample pieces of formica (the kind you get at Home Depot) and hung on hooks. Since the majority of our students have difficulty crossing the midline, most of the schedules are hung to read top to bottom.

Each student has a clipboard with a daily communication sheet (the pic/syms are used so that students can point to the activity or circle the activity when they complete the class) which goes to parents/caregivers to give a brief overview of the day. It provides a jump off place for interaction to discuss the day, as well as giving a picture of how the day went. Escalating behaviours during the last class of the day are a good indicator that receiving staff need to be on their toes.

On the clipboard is also a daily record of behaviour. Staff identify one or two target behaviours, generally those that are the most dangerous to either the student or other around him. Each behaviour has been baselined to determine frequency, duration and intensity and a behaviour strategy plan is written. This includes what staff perceive as the purpose of the behaviour, as well as precursors, and environmental changes which might alleviate the behaviours.

Included finally are the steps staff are expected to take when the behaviour occurs.

The target behaviours are identified and a reinforcement schedule is determined to create a DRO. At the end of each interval, the student is asked "What is your rule?" Student replies can be verbal or gestural. If the student has followed the rule for the entire interval, there is a reinforcement given. In many cases, the students at the Off Campus school are given an edible reinforcement. They require a basic, and more immediate reinforcer. If a student has not followed the rule, they are simply told "Try again next time".

On the reverse side of every chart there is a calm down routine and a card which identifies the person carrying the clipboard as a staff person from the Provincial Resource Program for Autism. This is often handy when in the community and staff are required to use a NVCPI hold to prevent a student from injury to himself or others.

Other visual strategies that are in place in the Off Campus School classrooms are basket systems, theme boards, break cards, counting strips and noise meters. We use Boardmaker on a daily basis to help students understand the progression of the day. Another technique we have used for students who have high anxiety is to put staff photos beside an activity.

Academic Program

At the Off Campus School, the emphasis is placed on a functional curriculum with the greatest degree of independence possible. There are seven areas in the functional curriculum and all are interrelated.

Functional Academics: this portion of the curriculum includes reading Safety Signs, Food Recognition, reading Survival Words found in daily living, learning Personal Awareness information, Time, Money and Calculator Math. These skills are all taught through Discrete Trial Training in the classroom.

The next portion of the curriculum is devoted to the community in which the students live. The skills taught in the classroom setting are applied in the community. Community skills include mobility, product location, store identification, signage, shopping, ordering/eating in a restaurant, mailing a letter and using a public telephone. Ladner is a wonderful community for our students. It is small enough that it is difficult to get lost, yet large enough to support one of each type of store or public facility. Community members are also very cognizant of the type of student with whom staff are working and can usually be relied upon to call for

backup in an emergency or at the least, not to be surprised by some of the things that our students might say. Staff all walk around with a clipboard to record data (easily recognizable) and cards in their pockets to pass out if questioned about a student who is in a NVCPI hold. The community program is tailored to fit the ability levels and needs of the individual students.

The third component is Work Experience: students participate in learning skills at many different job sites. Some do general cleaning (washing windows, counters and floors) at the Boys and Girls club; cleaning stables at a local horse barn; walking dogs for the SPCA and for local residents; cleaning mouse cages at Owl Refuge; shopping for senior citizens at Save on Foods; delivering flyers for local merchants; recycling cans and bottles; feeding birds at the local bird sanctuary; working at the local Variety Club Job Shop doing several tasks dependent upon what contract work is in; and Building Maintenance around the school, emptyng trash cans, replenishing paper towels, soap and toilet paper in the restrooms, washing dishes, vacuuming and washing windows. The students earn \$1.00 for each hour they work and this money can be saved and spent on Friday afternoon during social time or a portion can be spent as a reinforcement at McDonalds where a small group can pool a part of their pay and purchase fries or a drink to share.

The fourth area covered in the functional curriculum is covered under the broad term Life skills. These include personal hygiene and domestics (vacuuming, washing tables, setting tables, doing dishes, sweeping, and menu planning/shopping/cooking. Prevocational skills include sorting, matching and assembly tasks such as sorting bolts according to size using a template, removing the lid from a film cannister and sorting the lids into one container the cannisters into another, putting one nut onto each bolt and matching to a template until there are a specific number of assembled pieces to put into a bag, or simply matching the knives forks and spoons to a sample in a cutlery drawer.

Social skills are taught through modeling by the staff, role playing directed by staff, and practice. Once a week the students enjoy a social outing. This could be a trip to a local beach to play on the equipment, it could be a trip to a restaurant to practice restaurant skills, or it could be an afternoon of shopping in a mall for a desired item.

Developing recreational or leisure skills is extremely important for our students. Our challenge is to provide a physical activity that can be a life long recreational activity: one in which enjoyment can be received even at a basic skills level: and one

available in most communities.

In the Ladner area we are fortunate to have an indoor and outdoor pool, a skating arena, a bowling alley and many parks and easy hiking trails for day trips. One of the students is learning to use the exercise equipment at the pool as part of his fitness program.

Behaviour

Of course, one of the most important components of the school program is behaviour. As we have touched on earlier, each student has identified target behaviours, a behaviour strategy plan and daily behaviour chart to collect data. Without the structure of the daily schedules, the visual supports, the consistency of staff and the reinforcement of appropriate behaviours, behaviour does not change. It is only through consistent use of all the supports that we can see improvement in behaviour.

Communication

The last component of the program is that of communication. Students who are frustrated through lack of ability to communicate their wants and needs often resort to aggressive behaviours. We have been extremely successful using the Picture Exchange Communication system with our lower functioning students, and have recently begun trying our lowest student who is still at a concrete object level, with small objects hot glued onto blocks of wood. Up to this time, he has been using a communication shelf with only four objects (a roll of toilet paper, a cup, a fork and a thermometer) so the introduction of PECs is a giant step.

Other Special Activities

A few of the students from the Off Campus School have had the opportunity to participate in the annual "Track shoes" meet in Victoria. They live on the University of Victoria campus for the weekend and participate in track and field events and organized social activities. For many students this is their first experience with hotels and crowds. Last year staff had some real concerns with one of the students who wanted to go. He was extremely self-abusive when touched, often requiring medical care as a result. Social stories were written to help prepare him for the crowds at the stadium.. He came through the experience without a single incident! It sure underlines the tenet of "motivate, motivate, motivate".

Conclusion

The Off Campus program is designed to provide support, to promote independence, and to give students skills which they will take with them into an adult world. For some it will be group home living with a day program, for others it may be working and living in a teaching home.