

Students with autism in Secondary Schools

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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.

Contract

Students who are able to read and have higher cognition are presented with a contract the first day of the assessment. The contract explains that placement in

the high school classroom will be dependent upon the ability of the student to manage behaviour. This contract is discussed with each student to ensure that there is clear understanding of the contents, and it is signed by the students, the assessment team and the Teacher in Charge.

Delta Secondary School has a policy which suspends students for aggression to staff or students. This policy has been extremely challenging for all concerned (students, parents, staff from the high school classroom and staff and administration from the high school) as most of the students referred to our program are referred primarily due to aggressive behaviour. Additionally, all the research pointed out that suspension was not an effective consequence for our students. It is important that the students understand that aggression to others is not acceptable, and also that it is a privilege to attend the high school program. To those ends, a slight change was made to the suspension policy. In the event that a student *is* suspended from the high school program, the student serves an in-school suspension in the Off Campus School. For most of the students in the high school program, that consequence is definitely not desirable, as most of the students in the Off Campus School are non verbal and there is little or no social reinforcement.

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.

The high school classroom is one large resource-type room. With the support of school administration, two unused portables were also opened up for students who were having difficulties with the large number of individuals in the classroom. There are currently 2 teachers and 8 teaching assistants assigned to the classroom, and there are 13 students. A few of the students are integrated into the regular high school classes for one or more subjects, depending upon their ability to handle both the regular academics and their behaviours in class.

Other students may be working in the classroom on a modified course of Science,

Social Studies, Math or English with the support of study guides, teaching assistants and adaptations to the curriculum.

Transition

The initial assessment is usually completed within two weeks. Once the team has made a recommendation for placement in the high school program, the educational staff involved with the assessment go with the student to the high school classroom for a transition period, usually 2 to 3 weeks. That staff member works exclusively with the student for the first day or two, and gradually steps back as other staff become familiar with the student.

Academic Program

At the high school, some students are capable of attending one or more regular classes with support from the PRP classroom. Other students may be working on a modified academic program in the PRP classroom with support from the staff. Still other students may be working on an academic program combining modified academics with the Functional Curriculum. For example, one student may do fairly well in most of the subject areas but is unable to do the modified academics in math. This student might then be given instruction using the math section of the functional curriculum. Study guides, computers and visual supports may all be used to support the student with the academic portion of the day, while some students may require a combination of modified courses and the functional curriculum.

Community Skills

All of the students participate in a community skills program. The skills included in the program include street safety, mobility (finding your way to and from a specific site within the community) product location, store signs, store identification, and appropriate use of the telephone, the bank, the post office and restaurants. Students may go into the community one on one with a staff member, or with one or two other students and a staff member.

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.

Work Experience

The high school students all participate in work experience. Some of the various jobs include making salads at Kentucky Fried Chicken, washing muffin pans at the Muffin Inn, cleaning stalls at one of the many horse stables in the area, filling grocery orders for seniors who are unable to get to the store, washing equipment at McDonald's, packaging bird seed at the bird sanctuary, walking dogs at the SPCA, cleaning and feeding mice at the Owl Refuge and delivering flyers for local businesses.

Social Skills

Misinterpretation of social cues, poor social judgment, difficulty developing and maintaining social relationships, lack of understanding the "rules", lack of flexibility, inability to engage in reciprocal conversations. These are among the many social problems we see in students with autism. When our students don't "fit in" they become frustrated and upset and may lose it completely. Teaching social skills is one of the most important functions of the program. Twice a week the students in the high school classroom participate in Skillstreaming. Many teaching techniques are used during this class: direct instruction for social skills, social stories, comic strip conversations, scripting, watching videos, role playing, game playing, and the teaching of rules. Students may be given strategies to help with specific problems. An example would be perseverative questions. The student might be taught other things to say, might be given a visual cue that the communicative partner will only answer the question twice and then the question is finished, or the student could be given question cards. When the student wants to ask a perseverative question, he hands a card to the person. When the cards are all gone, that is a signal that the question is finished.

Recreation

Our students do not do well in traditional Physical Education classes, particularly at the high school level. They feel self-conscious and are easily frustrated because they often have poor coordination and are unsuccessful at the specific skills required for regular physical education classes. Leisure activities are extremely important to all teenagers, but to teenagers with autism they are a necessity. As

you know our students do not amuse themselves well. The times during the school day that are the most prone to behaviours are morning break and lunch and the transition times between activities. Most of our high school students play Nintendo and computer games....and only those if allowed. Why? There is no competition other than the computer itself, there is no need to be socially appropriate with another human, there is a beginning and an end to each game, and they are highly reinforcing.

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. Every afternoon the students participate in a recreational activity. During the winter months, ice skating is offered once a week and when the ice is removed students can rollerblade on the concrete surface. The high school students enjoy hockey both on the ice and concrete. Twice a week they swim, beginning each class swimming laps (and diving for those who feel comfortable with that activity) followed by some time in the hot tub and then relaxing and socializing in a shallow pool. The students also learn to shower following their swim and wash their hair independently.

Friday afternoons are devoted to a social activity. This could be eating in a restaurant, baking cookies for a party, or a special out trip.

Peer Tutors

As in most high schools, there is an organized peer tutor program. The peer tutors may participate in the social skills class, may assist students with homework assignments, or they may be a buddy in a special activity outside of the classroom. The students who are peer tutors in the classroom are given information about autism and about the students. They are supervised closely by the teaching assistants and teachers in the classroom and receive a grade at report time, based on their knowledge, dependability and commitment.

Other Special Activities

Students in the high school classroom have had some unique and wonderful experiences over the past few years. They have 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.

Every two years the staff sell smoked salmon, have fashion shows and produce a cookbook to raise funds to send students to Disneyland during spring break. For many students this is their first experience with air flight, hotels and huge 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 airport, for the close proximity of the seats in the plane and for the crowds at Disneyland. He came through the experience without a single incident! It sure underlines the tenet of "motivate, motivate, motivate".

Students also participate in school activities such as dances, graduation ceremonies and stage shows.

Behaviour

Of course, the path to participation is not smooth. Every student in the high school program has a behaviour strategy plan. Following the assessment, the team identifies those behaviours which impede social acceptance. Rules are kept simple and positive. Rather than "No hitting" the rule is stated "Hands and feet to self". Rather than "No swearing at staff/students" the rule is "Respect others".

Each student has a daily behaviour chart and the student is able to earn tokens for appropriate behaviour. These tokens are exchanged on Friday for money which may be spent on lunch at McDonalds, or a favorite activity (dependent upon student choices).

Conclusion

The high school 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 a few, the adult world may be college classes. For some it will be semi-independent living, for others it may be working and living in a teaching home.