ASD: Making the Connections

Course Title: Orientation to Autism and Asperger’s Disorders

Instructors: Cheryl Cotter, Director of Training & Consultation Services
             The Autism Project; Contact Information: cheryl@theautismproject.org
             Megan Black, Lead Consultant, The Autism Project

A. Categories under the Pervasive Developmental Disorder Umbrella
   - Autism
   - Pervasive Development Disorder-Not otherwise specified, PDDNOS
   - Asperger Syndrome
   - Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
   - Rhett’s Disorder

B. What is a Pervasive Developmental Disorder? (Rowland Barrett PhD April 2009)
   A condition that permanently and adversely affects all aspects of a person’s development, including:
   - Social Development
   - Cognitive Development (intelligence, language)
   - Affective development (mood, emotions)
   - Physical development (motor skills)

C. What is Autism?
   Autism is a life long developmental disability that prevents individuals from properly understanding their experiences
   (Division TEACCH)

D. Autism...
   • Affects how the student views the world.
     - Does not appear to have the intuitive ability to socialize
     - Challenges with verbal and non verbal communication
   • Affects how the student learns.
     - Engages in unusual interests and play skills
     - Challenges with sensory integration
     - Differences in cognitive profile
   ***Because of these unique interpretations, children will have behaviors but autism is NOT a behavior disorder
E. Consider Can’t vs. Won’t
Thinking differences is NOT a choice in autism, but a consequence of very real differences in the brain
(Learners on Autism Spectrum 2008)

F. “Understanding how people with autism think is the foundation for effective and appropriate intervention”.
(Minshew & Williams 2008)
Theory of Mind
• Theory vs. Instinct
• Sally and Anne Experiment

G. Challenges in understanding:
• What am I thinking & feeling?
• What are you thinking & feeling?
• What is your expectation?
• What are your motives and intentions?
• How do you see it?
• What are your beliefs?
• How do I think about myself? Personal Identity

H. Self-Concept
• Lack sense of self:
  – Challenges with processing words related to self
  – Deficit in self-consciousness
• Lack of self awareness and an awareness of how their actions impact others or bring about consequences. They have difficulty being aware of their own mental states, and thus unaware that their thinking impacts their choices in acting. (Paxton & Estay 2007)
  • What does Drake think?
  • What are Drake’s feelings?
  • What are Drake’s motives and intentions?
  • Drake believes...

I. Scenario- What is a Hero?
• What does the student:
  – Think
  – Feel
Believe
• What is motivating the student

J. Impaired Executive Function
Refers to all mental processes required to create a plan and carry it out
 Working memory
 Keep information in head as you consider
 Hindsight and forethought
 Planning & organizing abilities
 Impulse control to stay on target
 Emotional regulation
 How did I handle this in the past?

K. Cognitive Rigidity/ Shifting Attention
Shifting from rules and expectations in one situation to another
• Impacts ability to “change their thinking”
• Impacts ability to
— make plans, problem solve & transfer learning and knowledge across situations
• Need for predictability and routines
• Preservative thoughts— Thought or idea gets stuck

L. Cat in the Corner
What skills are necessary to play this game?
SCAVANGER HUNT
• Break into groups
• Wait for directions
• In 2 minutes, directions will be given to return to seats

M. Let’s share
Each group share:
• What was hard?
• What was easy?
• How did the group work?

N. Weak Central Coherence
• Detailed thinkers— misses BIG PICTURE
• Views experiences as a series of unconnected events
• Difficulty knowing what information is relevant/important
— Visual learners, they notice details most people may miss that are not important
— MAY LEARN UNREALTED BITS OF INFO
—Not understand how to link together/ keep parts separate and unrelated
What is this picture about?

O. Visual Thinking
Think in pictures vs. Think in verbal words
• Verbal words may not stay in “head” in any meaningful way
• Visual thinking tends to be concrete
— Social concepts are abstract

P. Make it: CONCRETE & VISUAL!!!!
Temple Grandin-
Thinking in Pictures
Concrete vs. Abstract Thinking
• Difficulty with abstract concept
— Social expectations are by nature abstract
— Rules are written...expectations are not
• Interpret rules and expectations in a “black & white” manner
— Exceptions to the rules are “grey”
*** Concrete thinkers have difficulty thinking ahead into the future to plan for possibilities

What is the problem?
What is the black and white thinking?
What is the GRAY area?
Scenario
What is the problem?
What is the black and white thinking?
What is the GRAY area?
One Channel Processing

Q. Students have at least two cognitive demands on them at all times: academic task demands (understanding and working with content) & social task demands (interacting with others concerning that content).
□ Stop, wait to gain attention
□ Give one direction at a time
□ Consider the challenge in note taking