Title of Project: Educating for Excellence: Training Paraprofessionals in ASD Best Practices

Grant Recipient: The Autism Project
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Overview of Project

The Autism Program has been a lead agency for the support of individuals with an autism spectrum disorder, their families and caregivers, and the many professionals who work to support and educate them. For more than a decade we have been a leader in curriculum development for parents and professionals. Our model of collaboration between parents and professionals has created a strong continuum of training at all levels. We have designed and implemented a training series for parents of children newly diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. In addition, the Autism Project has developed two training series that we have been offering for over 10 years. “A Starting Point” is a nine session series that covers the general topics of understanding the diagnosis and the visualization, sensory, communication, and behavioral strategies that are essential components of effective programming. “ASpire” is a five session series that focuses on Asperger’s Syndrome and its component characteristics. We have sponsored an annual National Speaker’s Conference for eleven years which have been attended by hundreds of individuals throughout New England. Our team of professionals and parents have held four, week-long summer institutes on the topics Structured Teaching, Social Thinking, Transition, and Middle & High School Inclusion. We offer multiple single-session workshops on topics ranging from toilet training to early identification and intervention, to preparing for adulthood. Finally, the Autism Project developed a graduate level program of six courses focused on key evidence-based practices that were offered through Johnson & Wales University and resulted in a Certificate of Completion of Autism Studies.

In Rhode Island, there is a large group of paraprofessionals that families depend on to provide supportive services to children with autism spectrum disorders in their homes and the community. (There are as many as 1200 in-home workers who provide services to children with special health care needs.) Rhode Island has developed a strong home-based support system for families that relies on a paraprofessional workforce of individuals with high school degrees who may be working towards attaining an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. The same is true for our Teacher Assistant workforce in schools. However, there are few opportunities for these paraprofessionals to get an organized training program in autism spectrum disorders that is specific to their range of responsibilities.

Our proposal to Autism Speaks was to develop our trainings and incorporate best practices into their content with the focus on providing a comprehensive and practical training curriculum specific to paraprofessionals. The training program was to be organized into 30 sessions that could be offered in two, 15 week segments and cover principles of structured teaching, communication, positive behavior supports, sensory integration, cognitive processing, and relationship-based interventions. It would be taught by Master’s level staff who are either certified or licensed in their area of expertise (e.g., special educator, speech/language
patologist, occupational therapist, behavior specialist, etc.). This additional course work for paraprofessionals will extend the learning opportunity to one of the most important pools of caregivers for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder.

Our end goal was to get the training program approved as a course of study in our community college system in Rhode Island. Currently, the Community College of Rhode Island offers several Certificate Programs for individuals in Human Services. For example, their Developmental Disabilities Certificate (CDVD) prepares students to provide support to individuals with disabilities in a variety of home, work, school and recreation environments. Emphasis is placed on students applying their skills in increasingly complex systems of support that facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities in the fabric of society. There are four core courses that include Introduction to Helping and Human Services, Practicum for Developmental Disabilities, Characteristics and Needs of Special Populations, and Significant Developmental Disabilities. Two additional courses are the content courses for Direct Support Professional Training. Our plan was to work with CCRI to offer as an alternative, two content courses in ASD, resulting in a Certificate Program in ASD. These certificate courses would then directly apply towards an A.A. degree.

Project Goals

Goal 1: The Autism Project will develop a comprehensive training program that will result in trainee’s developing competencies in specific ASD evidence-based practices to increase the number of children who receive quality programming.

Goal 2: The Autism Project will work with the State Departments to facilitate opportunities for Rhode Island’s paraprofessional workforce to engage in meaningful professional development.

Goal 3: The training curriculum will be integrated into the Community College of Rhode Island’s certification program which can also lead to an associate’s degree.

Project Curriculum

The Autism Project developed six undergraduate level trainings for educational and treatment paraprofessionals who are interested in developing specialized knowledge and skills in evidence-based practices for children and youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Each training incorporated 12 hours of instruction that focused on one of the evidence-based practices identified below:

- **Structured Teaching and Visual Supports** – a promising practice based on Treatment & Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) that targets attention, comprehension, communication, and social interactions through use of “structured teaching” principles that include a highly structured and predictable environment of routines achieved through the management of schedules, physical space, individualized learning targets, visual supports, and parent-professional collaboration.

- **Applied Behavior Analysis & Positive Behavior Supports** – a scientifically-based practice that focuses on understanding behaviors through the functional behavior assessment process and using the analysis to develop effective interventions. Based on the knowledge of the specific conditions surrounding target behaviors, the tools necessary to plan efficient and effective interventions can be designed that are appropriate to the environments in which they will be implemented.
• Communication Systems – promising practices that have been developed to address the unique communication needs of individuals with ASD, including the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Functional Communication Training (FCT), Computer-Aided Instruction, Naturalistic Interventions; Social Narratives; Speech Generating Devices/VOCA; Video Modeling, and Visual Supports

• Sensory integration – a promising practice in which the neurological foundations involved in processing sensory information and the influence of sensory processing on arousal regulation and readiness to learn are examined. Current research indicates that many of the behaviors typical in autism such as restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities are rooted in an atypical interpretation of typically occurring sensory information from the environment.

• Cognitive Learning Strategies – promising practices that teach skills needed for successful social interactions. They include strategies such as social stories, cognitive behavior therapy, and social thinking that focus on learning how to consider points of view, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, prior knowledge and intentions of others.

• Relationship-Based Approaches to ASD – promising practices in which the focus of treatment is on social relationships rather than on specific behaviors or skills. The approach emphasizes building social connections to establish the foundation for growth and learning. Several theoretical programs will be explored that either are based on or incorporate a relationship-based approach, including DIR (Developmental, Individual-difference, Relationship-based approach)/Floortime, Son-Rise, and SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, & Transactional Supports).

Project Activities

Planning Phase: The team of multidisciplinary professionals responsible for developing the course of study met multiple time to plan the scope and content of the curriculum and the instructional strategies that would be used to ensure attainment of practical skills that could be applied in various educational and support environments. The instructors included Cheryl Cotter, M.Ed.; Megan Black, M.Ed.; Kathleen Schlenz, OTR/L; Tabitha Ruiz, OTR/L; Patricia Rakovic, SLP, and Susan Stevenson, M.Ed. All instructors have many years of experience in their fields, have specialized in the field of Autism Spectrum Disorders, and have taught college courses.

The curriculum was organized into its “units” according to the above six areas of practice. In addition the following three instructional units were created to provide foundational learning to the evidence-based practices, and to pull it all together at the end: 1) Orientation to Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2) the Neurology of Autism, and 3) the Roles of Support Staff. In total, the curriculum was organized into 27, 3 hour training sessions: 1 session for each of the 3 foundation units and 4 sessions for each of the six best practices, resulting in 80 hours of instruction.

Outreach/Recruitment Phase: Once the training program was established, an outreach plan was developed and implemented to identify a cohort of approximately 30 participants. The Autism Project developed a program description and met with public school special education directors and principals, private special education programs, and home-based providers. We
also marketed the program through the RI Department of Education, the RI Department of Health, and the RI Department of Human Services to endorse the program as a recommended training. Within one week of advertising on our website and sending out an “e-blast” to key school and program personnel, we had reached the capacity of 35 participants and had to start a waiting list. Each participant paid $100 to offset the facility costs. Some schools paid the cost for their employees but many participants paid their own fees.

The original plan was to train 2 cohorts of 30 participants. However, it because evident during the planning phase that the training would need to span at least 9 months given its comprehensive nature. Consequently, the training was conducted with one cohort with the plan to implement it with a second cohort during the summer of 2013 through a two-week intensive summer institute.

The 33 participants who have engaged in the course represented the range of paraprofessionals that we had hoped to include in the project, as follows:
- 12 Special Education Teacher Assistants
- 6 Regular Education Teacher Assistants
- 1 School-based Behavior Specialist
- 1 Early Childhood Educator
- 4 Home-Based Behavior Specialists
- 3 Center-based Milieu Therapists
- 1 Parent Liaison
- 4 Educational Paraprofessionals
- 1 Speech/Language Specialist

**Implementation Phase:** Given that the participants came from all over the state, we wanted to hold the training in a central location and in a facility that would support the instructional technology used by the group. We were able to rent a classroom at the Community College of Rhode Island in Warwick, RI. The classroom was fully equipped with a computer, projector, video and audio equipment and white boards. The training started on October 4, 2012 and will be completed on May 23, 2013. Classes are held weekly with the usual breaks during vacation and holiday periods. During the first class, a “pre-test” was administered to measure the basic knowledge of the participants. Each instructor submitted three questions related to their area to be included in the pre/post test. The test will be re-administered at the end of the last class to measure the effectiveness of the training. In addition, each instructor provided a satisfaction survey to the participant at the end of their unit.

**Sustainability Phase:** The Autism Project has begun discussions with key personnel at the Community College of Rhode Island to incorporate the courses into their curriculum. We are exploring several options at this time to determine the best way to initiate the relationship and how it might develop in the future. The first likely option is to incorporate it into the College’s Workforce Development and Community Education Program. A second option is to integrate it into the training for Occupational and Physical Therapy Assistants, and third into their Early Childhood associate’s degree. We are confident that this training will become some part of the College’s curriculum sometime during the 2013-14 academic year.

In addition, we will again work with the three RI State Department of Education (targeting teacher assistants), Department of Health (targeting special health care needs personnel), and Department of Human Services (targeting early childhood and home-based behavioral specialists) to promote the training to their targeted groups as a course of study towards a specialized certificate.
Project Outcomes

Goal 1: Development of a comprehensive training program that results in trainee’s competencies in ASD evidence-based practices.

- An 80 hour course was developed that incorporates best practices in a) structured teaching, b) communication, c) sensory processing, d) positive behavioral supports, e) cognitive learning strategies, and f) relationship-based approaches. (See attached course syllabi.)

- 30 of the original 33 registered participants sustained their participation over the span of 9 months, attending weekly classes.

- The average attendance for each class has been 25.2 of the 30 participants.

- A pre-test was administered; the post-test will be administered on May 23, 2013.

- Satisfaction Surveys administered for each unit resulted in the following average ratings:
  
  1. overall quality of training 4.77
  2. new info, helpful examples 4.86
  3. content useful to job 4.74
  4. presenters effective and knowledgeable 4.75
  5. discussions helped understanding 4.84
  6. good pace 4.62
  7. information made clearer 4.12
  8. sensitivity to culture 4.61
  9. convenient location and time 4.71
  10. recommend training to others 4.77

  **4.68**

Goal 2: The Autism Project will work with the State Departments to facilitate opportunities for RI’s paraprofessional workforce to engage in meaningful professional development.

- The three State Departments of Health, Education, and Human Services all assisted in the outreach to their provider communities to encourage participation in the training. As a result, the training was over-subscribed within a week of the announcement. The departments have committed to continue their promotion of the training as we integrate it into a formalized curriculum at the local community college.

Goal 3: The training curriculum will be integrated into the Community College of Rhode Island’s certification program which can also lead to an associate’s degree.

- We are in current discussions with college administration to consider various options for implementing the training through their various courses of study and programs.

Budget
The project was granted $22,101. $11,612 was expended on instructor’s planning and teaching time. $5,345 on administrative coordination of grant activities, $3,155 on training materials, office supplies, and marketing activities, and $1,989.00 on overhead. Facility costs = $2700, covered by the participant’s $100 registration fee.