

An Inclusive Summer Treatment/Camp Program for Children with High Functioning Autism

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Imagine a child that hides under the table when family comes to visit. Instead of saying “hello,” he responds by barking like a dog. He has difficulty fitting in with peers and does not seem to understand how his unexpected behaviors impact friendship development. Parents are worried if he will be successful in an academic environment and if he will learn the skills to live independently as an adult. Many families have similar stories and worries, and difficulty finding support. To help families such as the one mentioned above, the Knapp Center for Childhood Development initiated a partnership with the Jewish Community Center (JCC) to offer a new horizon for children with High Functioning Autism and Asperger’s Disorder. This innovative treatment design titled the SBI Program (Social Bureau of Investigation) teaches children with high functioning autism spectrum disorders (ASD) the vital skills they need to be successful in social interaction with peers. One parent testimonial states: “I attempted to find interventions since [our son] was 4 years old and not one intervention that was applied even remotely helped and were completely ineffective and useless....we are finally moving forward.”

Research on the intervention needs of children with ASD suggests that programming should be intensive and year-round to prevent regression in skills and avoid negative long-term outcomes. For children with high functioning ASD, it is important to provide opportunities for interaction with typical developing peers. Since typical developing children generally do not spend their summers in schools, settings where there are appropriate peer models during the summer are in demand in order to teach the social skills that are pivotal for the success for children with ASD. One way to address social skill deficits and maintain continuity of services is to provide intensive support services within neighborhood summer camp

programs. A summer day camp provides an ideal setting for addressing peer interactions, social communication, development of interactive play skills, and engagement in group activities (Brookman et al., 2003). Summer camp allows the freedom to forgo a narrow academic focus that is typically associated with extended school year (ESY) services and intensively concentrate on social skills—something that is often difficult to address adequately during the course of the school year. A summer camp program offers a more natural setting for addressing a broader range of social skills than possible in other typical environments, even an inclusive classroom. Chances are greater for generalization of skills from camp to home because the interventions occur in a naturalistic setting.

Why Teach Social Skills?

Children with ASD show a preference for solitary activities rather than spending time with others. There may be a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, activities, or achievements with other people (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Difficulty cooperating in groups is common and children may have difficulty establishing peer relationships and demonstrate little interest in making friends. Children with high functioning ASD demonstrate a reduced awareness of other's feelings and to social norms. They are less responsive to social cues such as smiles or eye contact. They may show impairment in the use of nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, facial expressions, body postures, and gestures that regulate social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). These children often have difficulty in processing social messages and social cues that promote socially appropriate behaviors (Morrison et al., 2001). They have great difficulty determining what social cues are significant and which are incidental. They can become frustrated and alienated by their lack of success with social contacts.

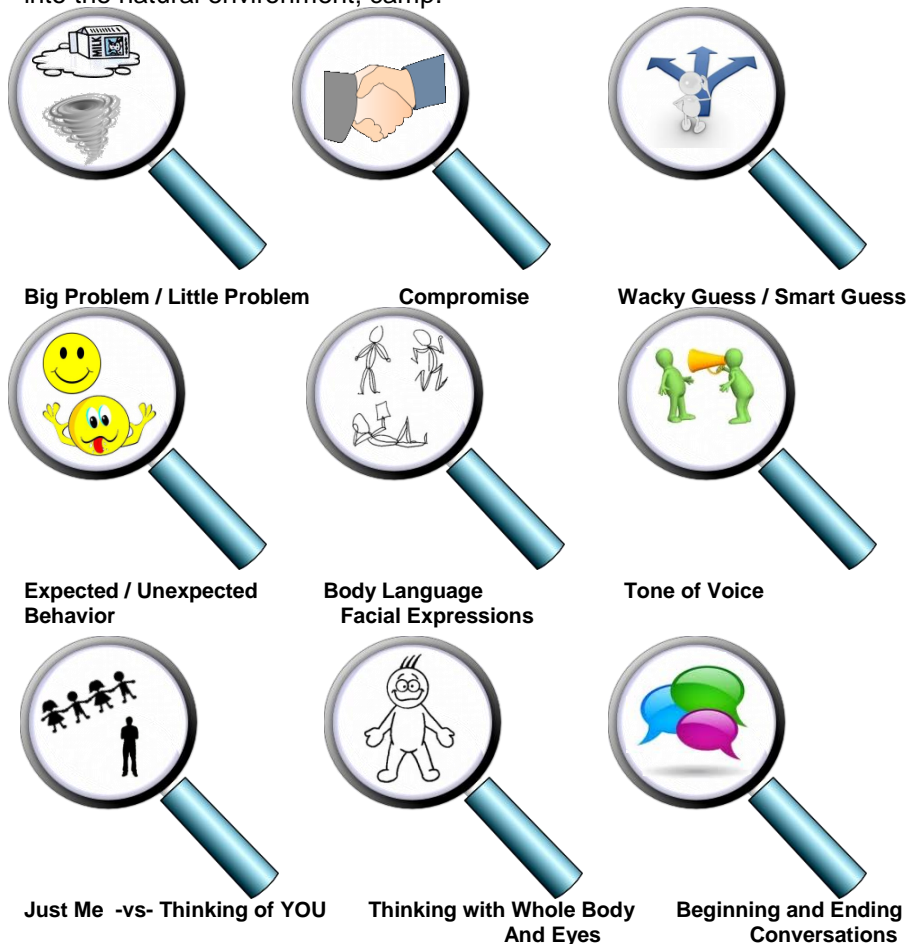
Most children learn social skills automatically and intuitively by observing other children and imitating their behaviors. Children with high functioning ASD are less adept at recognizing and imitating social behaviors. When the natural approach to acquiring social competence fails, a didactic approach to teaching social skills can be effective in ensuring that children develop the skills they need to have positive and fulfilling social interactions.

Preparation for Camp: Social Skills Training

To prepare children with ASD for their summer camp experience, the children in this program participated in social skills training at the Knapp Center for Childhood Development. Training occurred throughout the school year (November-May) and each session was 75 minutes. Recognizing the need to follow treatment that is empirically supported in research, the program followed Winner's (2005) Social Thinking curriculum. Objectives targeted throughout the sessions included the following skills:

Expected/Unexpected Behaviors, Big Problem/Little Problem, Social Commenting, Conversational Skills (initiating, sustaining and ending a conversation), Reading and Interpreting Body Language, Understanding Tone of Voice, Problem Solving, Compromising, Using Our Bodies to Listen, Making an Educated Guess (versus wacky guess), and Thinking of Others.

SIDE BAR: The skills taught were paired with a visual icon (please see picture) to be placed in the child's SBI kit. The SBI kit was utilized at the summer camp to help generalize skills from the training sessions into the natural environment; camp.



Behavior Modification

Behavioral technologies, from the science of Applied Behavior Analysis, such as shaping, prompting, reinforcement schedules and contingency reinforcement were utilized to facilitate skill acquisition and generalization of targeted social skills. A token economy system was used to teach self-regulation of maladaptive behaviors and recognition of positive social behavior. This system allowed secondary reinforcers to be earned for demonstrating specific behaviors such as listening, contributing to conversations, regulating emotions, and most importantly, demonstrating use of skills taught in the group. The token economy system followed the child to camp, where by they continued to earn tokens to cash-in for desired reinforcers. To help facilitate fading of the token economy system, self-monitoring of behaviors was taught and paired with the token system at camp. This is very important as it allows for fading of the token system which helps prevent extinction of the desired behaviors after program termination. Self-monitoring helps sustain desired behaviors after the program ends and is a skill that a child can take with them anywhere.

Generalizing Skills

Generalizing skills is a key component of this program, as generalization means that the children are displaying learned skills in new environments without external support. To help generalize skills taught in the social skills training, a three-part plan was implemented:

1. Parents met with the psychologist every other week there was a social skills group. Parent sessions targeted ways to increase generalization of their child's social skills from group into the home and community setting. Parents learned the necessary skills to maintain behavioral change in their children. These meetings also offered parents the opportunity to raise questions with an experienced professional in a structured format. To help facilitate generalization, parents were given weekly tasks to complete with their child; tasks targeted the skill the child learned that week. In addition, parents learned a variety of interventions specifically designed for children with ASD that could be used in the home setting for modifying behaviors and increasing socialization. These included tools such as Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviors, social stories, token economies and visual techniques.

2. The majority of research supports that social skills training can be effective for children with ASD; however, research indicates that social skills training falls short of helping children generalize their skills to a more natural environment (Ozonoff & Miller, 1995; Rogers, 2000; Barry et al., 2003). As part of the SBI program, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) offered the opportunity for children with ASD to generalize their social skills, communication skills, coping skills, and behavioral competencies in a more natural setting. The goal of the inclusive summer camp experience was to provide children with ASD an opportunity for interaction and social engagement with typical developing children; in addition, provide opportunities for generalization of skills learned from social skill groups. Children were offered a structured environment during the summer, providing opportunity for continuity of skills over the summer months. The camp program extended three days per week for six weeks, for seven hours per day. Children were paired 1:1 or 2:1 with a behavioral coach. Children were “coached” within natural opportunities to put their knowledge gained from social skills training into practice. The behavioral coaches provided social facilitation, direct instruction, and aided in generalization of skills. As is the case with the social skills training classes, social cognitive and behavioral interventions continued to be used throughout camp. To maintain the settings’ inclusive nature, only 6% of the children at the camp were associated with the Knapp Center for Childhood Development SBI Program.

Jewish Community Center

The JCC offers summer fun to children in their facility located in Youngstown, Ohio. They are committed to promoting family values, building character and opening new horizons for youth. There are many challenges to implementing an inclusive, high quality program for children with ASD, especially in a summer camp setting.

Typical camp programs, although structured, may seem noisy and chaotic, which can be a challenging setting for children with a need for sameness, routine, structure, and order. Many children with ASD are accustomed to avoiding social interactions. Systematic desensitization programs and successive approximations of the target behaviors may be necessary approaches for addressing anxiety and/or



fears. This gradual approach enables the child with ASD to experience social success, perhaps for the first time. As they begin to experience success, they may be more willing to try new things and participate more in the social world which is critical for ensuring the success of children with ASD at the JCC camp.

Games and activities that constitute the curriculum of the JCC camp program provided a basis for focusing on the tasks of childhood: playing, initiating and responding to social overtures, building friendships, and learning the rules and roles for functioning in peer groups. Opportunities were abundant for practicing social behavior with typical developing children in a variety of activities. The children enrolled in the JCC camp were given opportunity to participate in the following activities:



Craft time: During craft time, they required campers to work on skills necessary for "typical" art class experiences. The campers followed craft time rules of listening to instructions, raising their hand for assistance, and appropriate turn taking for materials. Some of the activities the students completed included making tie dye shirts,

nature lava lamps, and Fourth of

July decorations.

Nature: During the nature activities, children explored the camp grounds and helped take care of the garden. They were taught about how to manage and maintain a garden and identify



different types of types of plants and insects.

Outdoor Games: There were various outdoor games planned for the campers including baseball, kickball, soccer, four



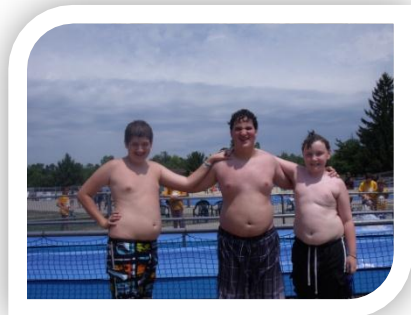
square, and water balloon fights. The campers were required to work as a team and follow the rules of the games.

Cooking: Campers were exposed to the rudimentary skills of baking such as measuring out ingredients, following recipes and mixing ingredients while making ice cream, cookies and banana bread.



Field trips:

There was a special activity planned every Wednesday. These included The Cleveland Zoo, Wagon Trails, Pioneer Water Park, and Mill Creek Park, and Birthda Party Day. Field trips gave our campers



the opportunity to generalize the skills across multiple environments and settings.

Tennis: The campers also had tennis lessons every week where they were taught the fundamentals and rules of sport.



Swim: The children had swim time twice a week. On Tuesdays, they had lessons where they were broken up into groups based on age and skill level. On Thursdays, they had free swim where the campers had access to pool toys and a chance to use their imagination and work together to come up with fun pools games to occupy their time.



The Partnership

The two agencies involved in making this program a success are the Knapp Center for Childhood Development and the Jewish Community Center. The Knapp Center provided the experts in autism to ensure that programming was tailored to meet each child's needs. The JCC offered a camp setting for the children to have fun and generalize their skills. In addition, Autism Speaks, a national leading organization

in autism research and treatment, provided Dr. Julie Knapp (when Dr. Knapp was on staff at the Cleveland Clinic Center for Autism), a grant that offered seed money for this innovative treatment approach. Because of this generous grant, this program was able to be created and made affordable for participating families. Dr. Knapp and her team then replicated the program through the Knapp Center for Childhood Development with the JCC to ensure program sustainability in various locations around the state.

Recommendations for Replication

For camps interested in developing a similar program for children with ASD, it is critical to establish a relationship or partnership with a local center for autism, hospital, community agency or a University that offers expertise in ASD. Vital components of the program include (1) social skills training for children with ASD prior to entering camp to increase their chance for success in the camp environment, (2) parent training/meetings in order to foster generalization and maintenance of treatment progress, (3) structured summer camp activities that are adapted for children with ASD, (4) interns or a similar aide (placed at camp) to support the child with ASD, and (5) effective communication among all parties involved in the program. The Knapp Center for Childhood Development offers consultation to those interested in replicating their program.

Success Breeds Success

The camp experience offered by the JCC was a huge success this past year. This camp not only offered children with ASD an opportunity to learn social skills, but enable them to learn skills to help them succeed in life. One parent who participated in the program commented "The program, people, facilities, was a true blessing! Thank You! Words cannot express our appreciation for your dedication to improve [our son's] life and give him the life skills he needs to be successful!" The children were faced with new and exciting obstacles that increased their confidence, self esteem, emotional regulation and friendship developing skills. In the long run, camp is about making friends. This year at the JCC, children with ASD proved that even kids with autism can make friends at camp!