

# The Inclusion Notebook

Problem solving in the classroom and community

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## Inclusive Education and Autism

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This issue of the Inclusion Notebook highlights the topic of teaching children with autism in the general education setting. In this edition we present educational models and practices that are designed to meet the unique needs of children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in a manner that enables them to be educated in an inclusive setting. Rather than focusing on treatment interventions designed to address isolated skill areas, we present information on educational approaches that serve as a framework for meeting the individual needs of students with ASD while in the regular education classroom. We have included articles on the rationale for implementing inclusive models designed for students with ASD as well as articles on student experiences and parent perspectives regarding the inclusive education for their children with ASD. The pull-out section includes an overview of several different models that can be utilized to educate students ages three through adulthood using inclusive practices, as well as a summary of key components necessary in any inclusive program. Our Q and A section highlights one Connecticut school districts' commitment to educating students with autism not only in the general education setting but in their neighborhood schools as well.



## Educating Children with Autism

Autism has become the fastest growing category of special education since it was added to the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. In the decade following its addition to IDEA, the number of students identified as having autism increased from 5,000 to over 118,000 (OSEP, 2004). Since that statistic was reported, the numbers have continued to grow almost exponentially. This has occurred as the result of several factors. First, the definition and diagnostic criteria for identifying autism has been expanded to include a range of abilities and presentations, and is now considered to be a spectrum of disorders. Essentially, three primary characteristics are recognized as defining autistic spectrum disorder (ASD):

1. deficits in social interaction
2. deficits in communication
3. restricted repertoire of interests and behaviors

Second, the Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism, National Research Council (2001) recommended that all children with a diagnosis of ASD should be eligible for special education services under the category of autism, regardless of their level of impairment. Third, it has been proposed that investigation should take place to determine if the dramatic increase in the numbers of children served with autism has been offset by commensurate decreases in other categories into which children with ASD might have once been placed such as other health impairment, social and emotional disability, and developmentally delayed (OBrien & Daggert, 2006).

The increase in the number of children with ASD and the range of abilities among those children has brought with it a host of questions and concerns on how to provide a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to children on the spectrum. Over the years, a number of teaching methodologies have been proposed, including interventions that target specific areas such as relationship development, individual skill building, cognitive development and physiological processes. Often these approaches are therapeutic in nature and focus on the acquisition of core social, communication and play or academic skills and take place in segregated settings. As children with ASD progress through the school years, those with more significant learning needs may experience a decline in the amount of time that they spend with same-aged peers participating in the general education curriculum.

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 and 2004, the emphasis on educating students with ASD in the general education setting has increased dramatically (Yell, 2003). As a result, some school districts have begun to look at structured models for inclusive education for students with ASD as an alternative to more therapeutically driven methodologies. The benefits of applying a structured framework for teaching students with ASD in inclusive settings include consistency across people providing support; organized instructional settings; smoother transitions between school-age programs (elementary to middle to secondary); a shared knowledge base among team members; improved family-school partnerships; and enriched social experiences for all students.

The Pull-Out Section of this edition features a description of several models used for teaching children with autism in inclusive educational settings including the SCERTS model, structured teaching, LEAP, and the Autism Spectrum Disorder Inclusion Collaboration Model. These models offer a framework for facilitating the successful education of learners with ASD in the regular education classroom as well as other inclusive settings.

## A Tale of Two Students

*Two students were observed in their classrooms; both students have a diagnosis of ASD although they are very different. The students, a 2nd grade girl and a 4th grade boy are members of the regular education classroom and receive support from a special education teacher and related service providers. Here's a glimpse of how they spend their day:*

### **Maritza**

When you walk into Mrs. K's second grade classroom you are met with a typical scenario. Mrs. K is seated in a comfortable rocking chair reading a storybook to her students who are quietly gathered around her, seated on a carpet that defines the boundaries of the meeting space. Most of the students are attending; a few fidget from time to time, shifting their weight or occasionally looking away from Mrs. K, noting that someone has just entered the classroom. One of the students, however, is looking away more than the others and moving a little bit more than the others; her body is turned slightly away from the teacher, and she is holding a book in her hands. She is also not sitting directly on top of the rug, but rather she is sitting on a round rubber disk, about 10" in diameter that has a number on it.

The student's name is Maritza and she has autism. When Maritza was a toddler, her parents were given the diagnosis; at that time the family was living in New York and as Maritza moved into the realm of public school at the age of 3, all that the school district was willing to offer was to bus Maritza an hour each way to a "special" program for children with autism. Maritza's parents refused to have her segregated; rather than fighting the school district, they moved to Waterford, CT to be near family and to provide Maritza with the opportunity to attend school with typically developing children.

While Maritza's parents did not realize it at the time, their new school district was busy preparing to improve its ability to educate students with autism. The goal was to adopt a framework called the SCERTS model that would enable the district to not only educate students with autism within the district, but to do it in such a way that students could attend their neighborhood school, and be taught in the regular classroom.

Maritza has been able to benefit from the implementation of the SCERTS model to such an extent that she is able to be in the classroom all day, learning alongside her peers, despite her diagnosis of autism. Like many individuals with autism, Maritza does not speak conversationally, she does not engage in age-appropriate social interaction with peers, and she does not have a typical or expanded repertoire of interests for her age. Contrary to what was once considered "typical" for children with autism, Maritza does have a desire to communicate, she does have an interest in her classmates and she does want to participate in a number of activities. Barriers to her achieving these ends, however, lie in the difficulties that Maritza experiences in social communication (SC); emotional regulation (ER) and transactional support (TS). Put them all together and they spell SCERTS, the model that was adopted by the school district.

What you see when you look at Maritza during story time is the SCERTS model in action. To support her participation, Maritza has specific objectives for the lesson that are based on the SCERTS model. The social communication objective for Maritza is to comment or respond using her own words or a picture symbol by raising her hand to gain her teachers attention, responding when she is acknowledged. The emotional regulation objective is for

*Maritza, continued on page 4*

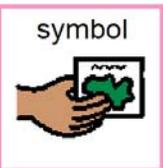
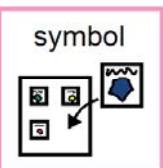
*Maritza, continued from page 3*

Maritza to sit through the story without invading the space of the other students, fleeing the group, or trying to grab the book away from her teacher (reported to be one of her past “behaviors”). The transactional supports are the “things” or strategies that will be provided to Maritza to achieve her objectives. For participation in this activity her transactional supports consist of relevant communication symbols to use to respond to the story, a rubber disk placed on the carpet to help her understand where to sit, and a book for her to hold to keep her from trying to take Mrs. K’s.

The SCERTS model makes it possible for Maritza to be supported in the classroom while learning at her own pace. Weekly team meetings take place between key personnel, including a special education teacher trained in the SCERTS model; topics/themes for the week are presented, key concepts and vocabulary are identified and pre-taught in Maritza’s individualized teaching time and supporting materials are identified and created or obtained by the special education teacher. “Why read a long book when a short one will do” stated Mrs. K, indicating how some of the transactional supports are naturally embedded into the lesson and are of benefit to a number of students who may have difficulty attending or learning new material.

When the story is over, Maritza approaches her teacher and asks for the book; her teacher hands it to her, complimenting her for requesting the book appropriately. Maritza smiles and does an over excited “wiggle” taking the book to her seat; she is joined by a peer who begins looking at it with her asking Maritza to point to things in the picture. The rest of the students have become busy, several of them joining Mrs. K for small group work; others writing in journals; two girls are looking at a book together; fortunately for Maritza there is nothing “special” going on in this classroom.

### Transactional Support-Within Task Schedule

 <p style="text-align: center;">language arts</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">choose</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">book</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">read</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">book</p>	
 <p style="text-align: center;">get</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">symbol</p>	
 <p style="text-align: center;">match</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">symbol</p>	

*Students who rely on picture schedules can use a "Within Task" schedule to understand the expectations and sequence of the task, increasing independence.*

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## A Tale of Two Students

### Seth

Seth is a 4th grade student who has also has a diagnosis of ASD. Seth is one of thousands of children in this country who have been diagnosed as having Asperger's syndrome (AS) (see box on page 6). Seth's teachers also use the SCERTS model to include him in the general education curriculum. On this particular day, the class is about to engage in group activities about the concept of elapsed time. For Seth, who speaks conversationally, the social communication (SC) objective is broader than that of a child who does not speak and typically does not change with each activity. The SC objective for Seth is to participate in a group in a cooperative manner, allowing his peers to take turns and contribute to the activity in a fair and equitable way. Seth has difficulty working cooperatively and can become upset when things don't go according to his expectations; flexibility is not something that comes easily to Seth, a common factor associated with AS.

Seth's emotional regulation (ER) objective is to maintain an appropriate state of arousal throughout the activity from the time the teacher is giving the directions to the time the activity comes to a close. Seth uses predominantly self-regulatory strategies, which are those strategies that are self-initiated and self-directed, as opposed to relying on others to provide support for emotional regulation.

Seth's transactional supports (TS) consist of a check list that he'll use at the end of the lesson to self-assess his social communication experiences and emotional regulation. There are supports in place for him to discuss any problems that occurred (i.e. social skills group and counseling) and role play/problem solve how things could be done differently in the future. Other transactional supports include a small counting clock for Seth to use to compute the elapsed time, a "bumpy" cushion on his chair to help him remain attentive, and a visual schedule to let him know what to expect across the day. Since Seth can read well, his schedule is presented in words rather than pictures. There are also a host of other visual supports available to all students to help with the assignment including manipulatives and step-by-step written instructions for the kids to refer to.

Seth's ability to emotionally regulate himself is a key objective of his program, in an effort to help him achieve that, a number of accommodations serve as on-going transactional supports. For example, Seth has difficulty getting through a fire drill. His anxiety over whether or not a fire drill would occur was interfering with his ability to learn in the classroom. An accommodation was written into his IEP requiring him to be told ahead of time when a fire drill would occur. This has worked well and Seth is no longer anxious that the alarm will sound. Other accommodations that serve as transactional supports include telling him ahead of time of when changes will occur in his schedule or when activities that are out of the ordinary will take place. Seth's principal shared an experience where he went in to teach a lesson to the class. He quickly realized that Principal-turned-Teacher was not a change that Seth was comfortable with; he also realized that the approach he was going to use to address the class did not match Seth's needs. Subsequently, he met with the team for a problem solving session whereby he was able to adjust his approach to the topic and be more effective in the future.

Seth also receives on-going instruction in social skills and peer relationship development. Topics include conflict resolution, carrying on a conversation with turn-taking and topic expansion, knowing how to initiate and end a conversation, and reading and interpreting non-verbal cues and information.

*Seth, continued on page 6*

*Seth, continued from page 5*

Seth is preparing to move to another state with his family. He has benefited from the SCERTS approach across the domains of social communication, emotional regulation and transactional supports. As a result, he is better prepared to face the challenges of transitioning into a new school; hopefully, he can continue to be supported in a manner that enables him to take risks and grow socially and emotionally as well as academically.

## ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

**A**sperger syndrome (AS) is an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), one of a distinct group of neurological conditions characterized by impairment in language and communication skills, social interactions and a limited or restricted repertoire of interests. Unlike children with a diagnosis of autism, children with AS develop language skills and are usually conversant.

One distinguishing symptom of AS is a child's excessive interest in a single object or topic often to the exclusion of any other, such as lawn equipment, transport vehicles or historic events. Children with AS may focus intently on their topic of interest, often learning minute details that are of little or no interest to others. Similarly, their conversations with others may be repetitive and focus on their topic of interest exclusively. Their "expertise," high level of vocabulary, and formal speech patterns have sometimes earned them the title of "little professors." Other characteristics of AS may include repetitive routines or rituals; peculiarities in speech and language; socially and emotionally inappropriate behavior and the inability to interact successfully with peers; problems with non-verbal communication; others may have clumsy and uncoordinated motor movements.

Many students with AS do not experience academic difficulty in the early years, when the curriculum is predominantly concrete and fact-based. Difficulty often arises later on as the curriculum becomes more inferential and students are required to engage in higher level thinking involving application of abstract reasoning. This is also the time when children start to form independent relationships with peers, based on mutual interests and compatible personalities; children with AS are often isolated because of their poor social skills and narrow interests.

## Parents Perspective

### *Parents Perspective on Teaching Children with Autism Using the SCERTS Model*

Recently a group of mothers got together to share their perspectives on having a child with ASD fully included in a regular education classroom with the support of the SCERTS model. The SCERTS model is family-centered and believes that family members must be included as collaborators and partners in all efforts, and plans are developed to support families. Here's what they had to say:

#### **Annmarie, mother of Seth a 4th grade student:**

"I'm not really sure what the SCERTS model encompasses exactly. What I know is that Seth is having a good year; the first few weeks were a difficult adjustment for him, but things have smoothed out. We moved here from Massachusetts where trying to accommodate Seth and keep him in the regular classroom was a constant struggle; I was always at odds with my son's school, trying to make them understand his needs. They were not knowledgeable in how to make school an enjoyable experience. What is different about this school and this program is that I have been able to relax; his teachers and everyone at his school 'gets it.' Things that might be upsetting to him are almost always recognized and planned for ahead of time so that unsettling 'meltdowns' can be avoided. There have been times when someone from Seth's school will call to alert me about an event or activity that will be taking place and propose a solution to me ahead of time. Last year, Seth's teacher called me to let me know that he was bringing home a birthday invitation to a movie theatre party. Knowing that Seth would have a difficult time attending the movie, she offered to take him and bring him in after the movie had started to avoid pre-movie anxiety and the extremely loud previews. The trip was a success and Seth enjoyed a day out with his peers."

#### **Raquel, mother of Maritza a 2nd grade student:**

"Everyone from Maritza's school has been so helpful to us as a family. Mrs. P [SCERTS trained special education teacher] has come out to our home to help us with problem behaviors that were occurring in home but not at school. Mrs. P. helped us to put things into place to help Maritza be more organized and to do things on her own. She provided us with pictures for communication and setting up a schedule; this helps Maritza to do things at home the same way that she does them in school. Maritza is not always happy to see Mrs. P. come to the house since she has figured out that she will not be able to get away with things. One time when Mrs. P. was visiting Maritza came into the house and dropped all of her belongings on the floor, just as she always did. Mrs. P. redirected Maritza to pick them up and put them away, something that she was expected to do at school, but never did at home. Now Maritza puts her things away when she comes in, just like she does at school, although she will throw them on the floor if she thinks that she can get someone else to do it for her!"

#### **Darlene, mother of Nathan a 3rd grade student:**

"Nathan has done well this year in 3rd grade, but we are starting to see him struggle more academically. Nathan is in the process of being assessed by his educational team using the SCERTS Assessment Protocol (SAP). It is encouraging to know that Nathan will have a team of people to support him through elementary school who have had this training. It saves us all from having to reinvent the wheel each time a child with ASD comes through the doors."