



Perkins Magazine

2010

Perkins Magazine
2010

A journal spotlighting promising practices and emerging issues in special education, day treatment, and residential care for children with unique needs.

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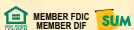
Charles P. Conroy, Ed.D., Executive Director
Perkins School, Lancaster

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fax: 978-365-3718

mholland@clintonsavings.com
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Dear Reader:

If you've already glanced at the index of this edition of Perkins Magazine, you might now be scratching your head as you contemplate such a seemingly diverse, unrelated, maybe even disjointed, choice of articles. Would you ever be wrong!

You can tell neither a book by its cover nor a magazine by its index. Our topics – literature, physical exercise, problem-solving skills, music, hurdles help, and a sewing project – what could they possibly have in common?

Well, as it turns out, a lot.

Each of the articles either describes an innovative approach to teaching, treatment, skill-building or the author advocates for newer ways of looking at things that can improve and enhance the lives of our students today and for years to come. It's no secret that, these days, placements at Perkins are shorter and shorter. The techniques, methodologies, and approaches described in this edition demonstrate our never-ending search to offer the best, the latest, and the most innovative in the all-too-short time we have with our day and residential students.

Beyond their technical content, the articles eloquently serve as statements about the level of passion of the Perkins staff. An English teacher, a music teacher, a licensed clinical social worker, a physical educator/trainer, a residential program director, and a team of speech-language and occupational therapists round out our authors for this edition of the magazine. Review the content of each piece carefully, but notice also the commitment, devotion, and intensity – notice the *passion* – with which they describe what they do and how they do it. You quickly sense that they really, really are committed to what they do. You feel how much they want our kids to succeed. You see how crucial they believe they are to kids achieving that success. That's passion.

The authors don't view themselves as cogs in a large Perkins wheel – a spoke maybe, critical to the overall entity – but hardly a cog. Each is so significant to what we do. Each piece in this edition articulately lays out how important each of the spokes is to the smoothly rotating wheel that is Perkins. Yes – there's intense diversity and pride in the work of each, but they all move together and support each other for the good of the kids we serve. Each makes the wheel turn and each is so important.

Enjoy the magazine – and – don't be bashful about giving us feedback. Send it to Kerry Flathers, the editor, at kflathers@perkinschool.org.

Thanks. Now start reading!

Sincerely yours,

Charles P. Conroy, Ed.D.
Executive Director





Using Literature

Exploring Life's Great Mysteries and Potential Victories



Author, Francisco Stork listens to questions about *Marcelo in the Real World*

Most children grow up enjoying the enchantment of a story as a regular part of life. Some need to be presented with opportunities to experience a story coming to life firsthand. We try to offer that experience to our students here at the Perkins School. Novels are viewed as a puzzle, each piece having a hidden meaning to the outcome of the story. Our goals are to explore, analyze, and ultimately understand the vast meanings found within the words set

forth by each author and to relate them to themes within our own lives. We preset each story's stage by exploring the setting, culture, and world events surrounding each novel so that we can clearly understand the underpinnings of that era. As we explore the actual novel, we try to identify devices used by the author to manipulate each aspect of the story and bring it alive for each reader. We analyze themes, symbolism, metaphors, and other devices



Francisco Stork speaks to a group of students at Perkins

the author has used to capture the reader. We amplify each story for students to ensure that the story has increased vitality in their eyes and that they become a part of each adventure.

We have read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou along with her poetry to understand the complexities of racial differences in the 1930s. Her story, along with her poetry, inspired the students as they began to analyze and understand the symbolism and themes found within her words.

They learned of her intense devotion and tireless commitment to equality for all. We wrote to Maya and explained the depth of feeling we collectively had as a class after studying her meaningful words. She was gracious and responded with a heartfelt note of gratitude and appreciation. Students knew they had just participated in an immensely eye-opening experience.

This spring we focused on the overall theme of



courage, facing adversity, and the ability to stand strong in the face of challenge. With those themes in mind, we read *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. We set the stage by learning all about the Civil War and related complexities of that time period. As we read the book, students wrote personal journals, as if sending letters home from the war, just as Henry Fleming did. We explored feel-

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Cindy Wing shares a cup of tea with a student during the author's tea.



ings as we thought Henry might have had throughout each of his challenges in the war. We analyzed what fear and courage can do to a person and what type of training is required to overcome and conquer internal conflict in time of war. Students were able to understand the effect war has on life and to express their personal feelings about how they thought Henry felt when he deserted his comrades. To add a personal experience and bring the story home, we invited Sergeant Michael Wing for a “war conference.” He explained how Marines are trained for combat today, how they learn to engage the “mechanism” of war-time behaviors, and how they protect their brothers, as well as their country. Michael went through his pictures and experiences of two tours in

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A REVIEW

Scholastic Books
New York, 2008
320 pp.



Charles P. Conroy, Ed.D. Executive Director

There have been a number of “first person” books written by people with autism spectrum disorders as well as by others skilled in describing the characteristics, insights, feelings, and hurts of people on the spectrum. The books vary in quality and are alternately readable, insightful, and perspective-widening. Rarely are they all three. Even more rarely, does autism

take center stage in young adult literature. Until now.

Francisco Stork’s *Marcelo in the Real World* describes the summer work experience of Marcelo Sandoval, a 17-year-old, who attends Paterson, a special needs school. Marcelo exhibits behavior common to people with Asperger Syndrome. He has specific, circumscribed interests—the Bible and religious themes being the most obvious.

He also hears an internal music that seems to play for him alone.

Neither the Bible nor the music becomes the focal point of this wonderfully imaginative, yet strikingly real, narrative of Marcelo’s entry into the “real world”—his summer employment at his father’s law firm. However, they remain recurring themes.

Marcelo encounters co-workers who shape his summer experience. Jasmine is his

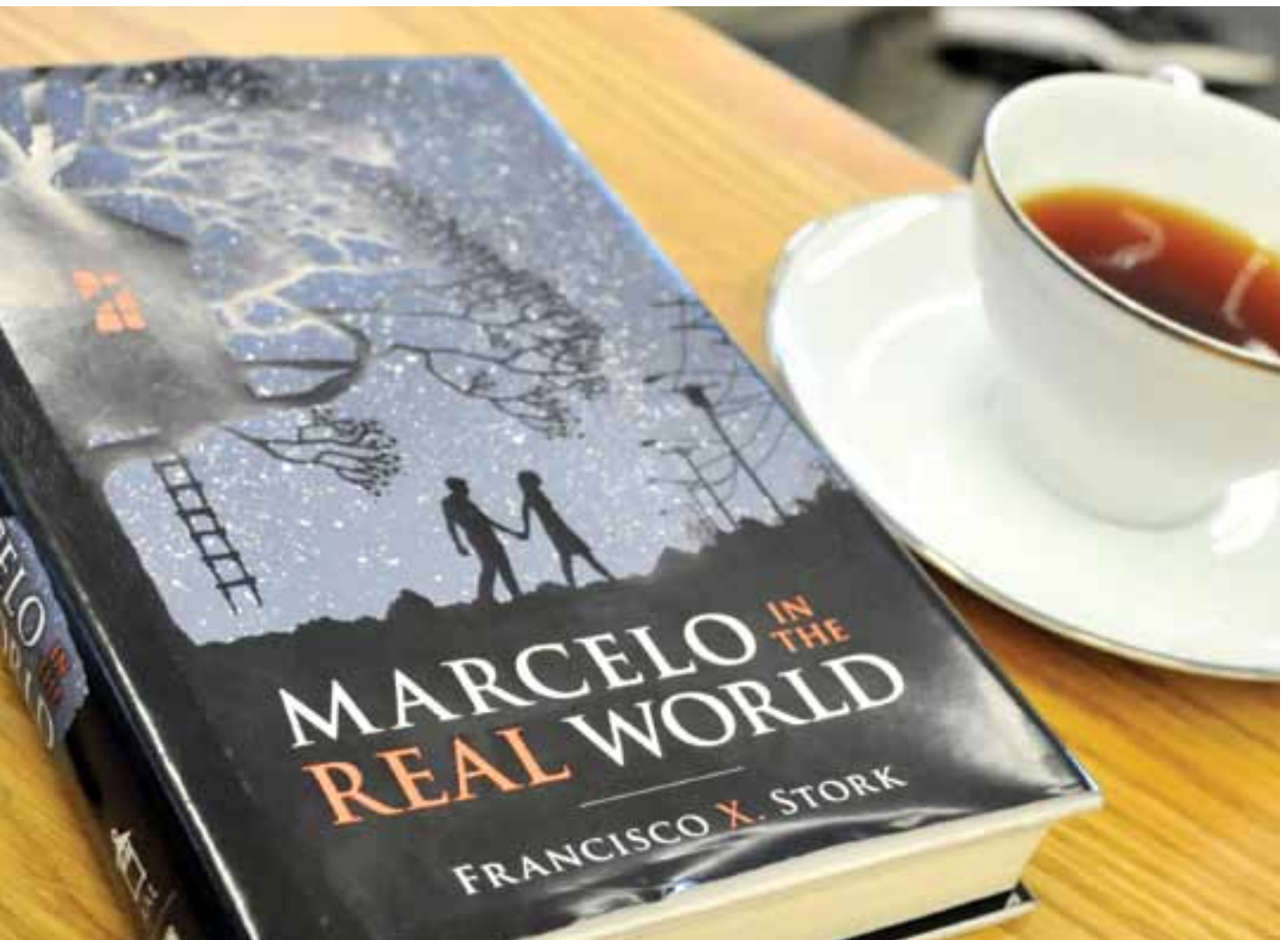
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Iraq and explained how the intensity of war never lessens regardless of how many times you face it. He spoke of feelings he thought Henry might have had in the Civil War. The students asked questions and enjoyed the class a great deal. Their ability to complete the unit with an essay relating to war and courage was a valuable experience.

Our final book for this year was entitled *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco Stork.

This book was chosen because of the content and its relationship to our students. Marcelo is a young boy with Asperger Syndrome (AS). Francisco Stork has also been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Students preset the stage by researching these diagnoses so that they understood the symptoms, coping strategies, and suggestions for successfully living with these challenges. Marcelo, the main character, is a student at a private special





needs school. He is faced with going out into the working world. He finds a way to succeed in addressing his challenges, making wise decisions, and staying true to his core beliefs. The story exemplifies how to look at life not as a series of obstacles but challenges. Francisco joined our class for an “author’s tea.” He told of his personal life challenges, difficulties, and successes. He focused on how goals can be achieved and life

can be a wonderful journey no matter what the challenge. It is all in what we make of it.

Through literature at Perkins we not only explore the complexities of authors’ words and hidden meanings, we also try to inspire each student through the journey of life’s great mysteries and potential victories. Literature brings to life wondrous experiences for the reader who dares to dream and believe.

A Review continued

boss and co-worker in the law firm’s mail room. She initially was coldly indifferent to him because she had someone else in mind for his job, but ultimately becomes a friend and confidante. Then there’s Wendell, the insufferable, stereotypical “spoiled brat” son of one of the firm’s partners. He routinely mistreats Marcelo and talks to him in a condescending, offensive tone. He simultaneously tries to enlist Marcelo as an intermediary to achieve his amorous objectives with Jasmine. Throughout the book we see Marcelo developing skills and progressing socially before our eyes. He has to make decisions – ethical and moral decisions – for probably the first time in his life. He knows that, should

he not be successful during his summer work experience, it will have implications for his ability to continue at his much loved private school. He will instead attend the local public high school.

His father wants to expose Marcelo to the “real world,” since he believes he is sheltered at Paterson School. In the end, Marcelo is faced with a decision that not only will have a huge impact on his future but on the future of the law firm and his relationship with his father. He carefully weighs his options and decides. While his decision and its ramifications form the culmination of the novel, it’s the process of moral reckoning and personal growth on Marcelo’s part that become

the book’s real story.

Stork has a unique ability to get inside Marcelo’s head as he reacts to the people, situations, and struggles with which he is faced. Over the course of the summer Marcelo does a lot of growing up. He learns to make mature, adult decisions and understands that they have consequences. The author is able to bring readers right there beside Marcelo throughout the book. We feel Wendell’s insults. We understand Marcelo’s dilemmas. We celebrate his growth in one summer’s exposure to the “real world.” Young adults would do well to take note of the lessons and experiences of Marcelo. It wouldn’t hurt older adults any either. It’s a great book.



Helping Kids to Learn and Grow Through Collaborative Problem Solving

What does the word “collaborative” mean to you? At Perkins it means working together to mutually solve problems. We do this through an approach called Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS).

CPS is an evidence-based treatment developed by Ross Greene and Stuart Ablon. In their book *Treating Explosive Kids* they reconceptualize non-compliance and its causes. The authors assert that deficits in five areas—executive function, language processing, emotion regulation, cognitive flexibility, and social skills impair a child’s ability to solve problems effectively.

Because our primary treatment goal at Perkins is to provide children with the skills necessary to move into the community, this approach is in sync with our philosophy. We prepare kids to meet the social expectations of living and working in collaboration with others.

“Children Do Well if They Can”

We would like to believe that everyone who works with children embraces this statement, but the reality is that it’s just not true. Children often get labeled as “attention seeking” and “manipulative.”

“We work side by side with children and embrace the philosophy that every child, regardless of behavior, has strengths that are unique.”





Their behavior is seen as under their control and they receive various diagnoses to fit these labels. Anyone who has worked with children has most likely fallen victim to this type of mindset at one point or another. It takes the responsibility away from us as caretakers, to take a closer look at just why children act the way they do.

Greene's and Albon's statement, "Children do well if they can" is the underpinning of their approach. Unless we embrace this philosophy, immerse ourselves in it, and eventually make it our own, we will not successfully integrate their approach into our work with children. Children do best when they view adults as helpers who understand their difficulties. It's really that simple.

Change Takes Time

Over the past eight years we have adopted a strengths-based approach to how we view all our clients—children and families alike. We consider ourselves "appreciative allies" (Madsen, 1999). This means we work side by side with children and embrace the philosophy that every child, regardless of behavior, has strengths that are unique. We also believe that children are influenced and motivated by the way significant people in their lives respond to them. This philosophy has worked well for us and the kids we serve. When children do not do



well, when they are challenged and struggling, we look to what we are not providing for them. It's too easy to emphasize what *they* are lacking in personal strengths or motivation.

The Model

The CPS model asks questions: What cognitive factors are contributing to a child's learning disability as far as flexibility, adaptability, and frustration tolerance? What are the skills this child lacks in order to do well? Why does he or she exhibit explosive, aggressive, and impulsive behavior?

According to Greene and Ablon, children act out for a reason. Their behavior is predictable. There is usually a "trigger" that exists prior to the behavior and the behavior often exists in specific situations. Without the essential skills to respond in an adaptive manner, kids with lagging cognitive skills will

"Children do best when they view adults as helpers who understand their difficulties."



respond in a maladaptive fashion. We need to develop those lagging cognitive skills in order to help children reduce the frequency of their explosive episodes, self-regulate their emotions, decrease their impulsive behaviors, and solve the problems that led to the maladaptive behavior.

Greene and Ablon identify five skill areas for children—executive functioning, language process-

ing, emotion regulation, cognitive flexibility, and

social skills. The task of the treatment team is to review each pathway in detail. The child's behavior is analyzed, with questions such as,

“When is this behavior most likely to occur, in what situations and with whom?” In addition to analyzing the child's behavior, we use this as an opportunity to also analyze the fit or compatibility between a child and his or her caretaker. Is it a good

“fit?” Does this child set off something in the caretaker that causes that person to possibly increase the likelihood of an explosive episode for the child?

We take a look at ourselves as caretakers. What skills do we possess? What skills do we lack? We need to self-reflect on what child behaviors cause us to respond or react in a certain way. We are all human and to deny that a particular child or behavior evokes something within us is also to deny that we have emotions and feelings, and we know

that isn't true!

Once the pathways within the context of a child's behavior have been examined, and lagging skills are identified, it is time to implement what Greene and Ablon call Plan B. This is a proactive approach to problem solving with the additional benefits of teaching essential skills. It has three components: empathy, defining the problem, and invitation. It starts with empathy.

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Plan B

Empathy: Let's say that every time we ask Sam to transition from one activity to the next he becomes frustrated and there is an angry outburst. We have identified that Sam lacks the skill in the executive functioning domain of shifting set, i.e., moving easily from one activity to the next upon the instruction or direction of an adult. We would choose a time when Sam is calm and we would say to him, “I noticed that when I ask you to clean your plate after dinner, and begin to get ready for your shower, you have a difficult time with that. What's up?” We have indicated to Sam that we have noticed his difficulty and we want to hear more about it. We listen to what Sam has to say and then we move to the second step.

Defining the Problem: This is an opportunity for the adult to put his or her concerns on the table. It might sound like this, “I hear what you're saying; you're not ready for your shower right after dinner. But in order to get everything done before bed, we need to make sure that you shower, do your homework, and have time for a fun activity.” The adult has now expressed his or her concern. This leads to step three in the process.

Invitation: The adult invites the child to brainstorm ideas to collaboratively solve the

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problem in a way that will meet both the child's and the adult's concerns. If Sam cannot come up with any solutions, then it is time to think for the child. This is what Greene and Ablon call acting as the child's "surrogate frontal lobe" (Greene & Ablon, 2006). By doing this you offer some suggestions and help the child to see that he or she can generate ideas but may need a jump start to do so. Only when the child and adult conclude a mutually agreed upon solution is the process complete. The key word according to Greene and Ablon (2006) is "let's." It places the responsibility on both parties to solve the problem together.

What have we accomplished with this? We have let the child know we care. We also share our concerns, and we have invited the child to generate solutions to the problem. We have taught the necessary skill of negotiation and the ability to shift from one activity to the next in a calm and reasonable manner. Most importantly, we have underscored our growing belief that when we solve problems together we are working collaboratively toward common goals.

Commitment and Approach

The program seems simple but is time-intensive and requires a strong commitment. So how does an agency achieve the goal of training people and then implementing this approach and making it part of the organizational culture? With other initiatives at Perkins we have found that simply getting down to business with a "hands on" approach is the most effective.

The approach we utilize is through a book club. Books were ordered for all staff who would be training others or who are directly involved with implementing the approach. Over a 10-12-week

period the book is read by the group and then discussed. Midway through the book, the staff begins to try out the approach in small ways until they feel comfortable utilizing it in its entirety. We have found that this is a great way to support one another and learn together.



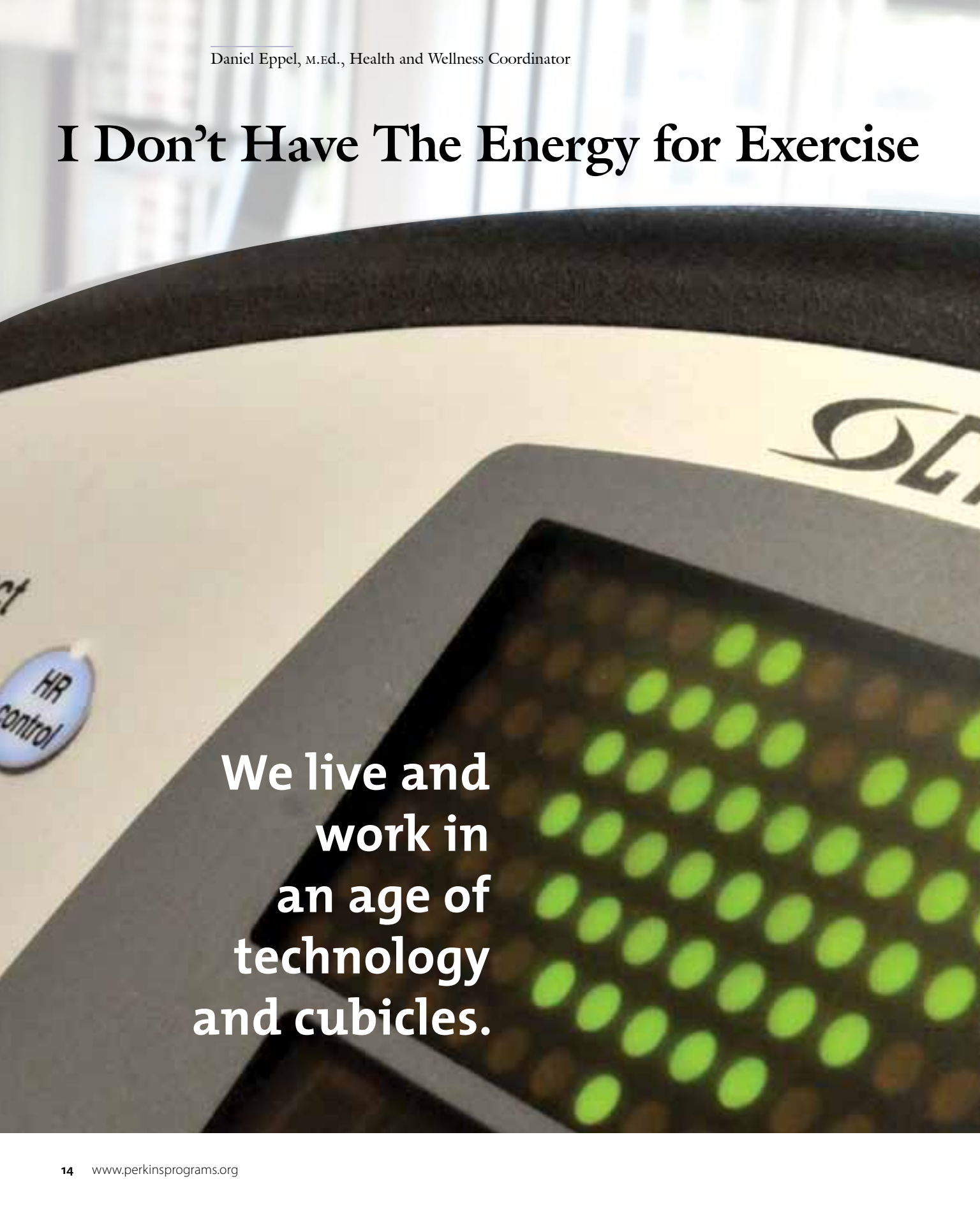
Staff discuss collaborative problem-solving as a team.

Standards of Care

Implementing CPS can raise standards of care in several ways. All staff become observers of behavior, assessors of skills, problem solvers, and teachers. While we still emphasize that children stay safe, follow the rules, and maintain responsibility for their behavior, we are also walking side by side with children in the journey of learning new skills and becoming effective problem solvers. Collaboration helps to solve problems.

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I Don't Have The Energy for Exercise



**We live and
work in
an age of
technology
and cubicles.**



Dan Eppel discusses the fitness program with a student.

Many people have desk jobs. Physical activity involves getting to the car, restroom or cafeteria. These are the bold truths of today's adult work environment. Our youth spend much of the day in class or committed to screen time including the internet, video games, television, and texting.

So you may wonder, "How can I be too tired for exercise if I work in a cubicle or at a desk all day," or "Why don't today's youth get excited about activity at the end of a school day." The answer has to do with how our body generates energy, as well as the stimulation of specific hormones that impact mood.

The human body needs, in fact craves, activity. However, it will only respond to what we put it through. This is our body's natural adaptive response to the lifestyle we choose to lead. If we don't provide a physical activity outlet, the body's natural response is to slow the metabolism and store energy for potential future activity. Unfortunately that stored energy often results in weight



gain which can lead to unhealthy body weight. There is also greater risk of heart disease, diabetes, low self-esteem, depression, and other chronic health conditions.

Our energy levels are directly related to the efficiency of our metabolism, which is the ability of our digestive system to process the calories from the food we eat. Our physical activity output has a direct impact on our metabolic efficiency. The more active you are and the more exercise you get, the more energy you receive. Think of exercise as an energizing experience, as opposed to exertion of an already fatigued body.

Behavior change expert, Mark Stibich, Ph.D., has shed light on the exercise vs. fatigue dilemma. He analyzed 12 large-scale studies over a 60-year period which link exercise to reduced fatigue. He concluded: “All of the studies found a direct link between a reduced risk of fatigue for people who were physically active compared to those who were inactive. Other research shows that even among

people with chronic illness like cancer or heart disease, exercise can ward off feelings of fatigue and help people feel more energized.” (Stibich, 2007). In addition to fighting fatigue, a consistent exercise plan has many other benefits including: a more efficient metabolism; quality sleep; stress management; strengthened immune system; greater cardiovascular and strength endurance; increased self-esteem; stimulation of neurotransmitters such as serotonin which naturally regulate mood; and secretion

of endorphins which provide a sense of well-being.

In a recent health and science article, Duke University, Dr. James A. Blumenthal, noted the treatment parallel between antidepressant medications and exercise in regulating clinical depression in patients. Blumenthal stated, “There is growing evidence that exercise may be an effective treatment for patients with clinical depression, and that its effectiveness may be comparable to other established treatments such as antidepressant medications” (Goldberg, 2008). He also reveals that experimental exercise programs for people with depression have turned up dramatic findings. Blumenthal has concluded that three sessions of vigorous aerobic exercise is comparable to the effects achieved with daily doses of Zoloft. This research is intriguing and demands that we explore the benefits exercise has, not only physically, but emotionally as well. We are also more likely to participate in some form of physical activity when we feel emotionally well.

“How to start?” you ask. The Centers For Dis-



ease Control And Prevention (CDC) offer multiple plans including the *3-2-1 plan*, which explains how to reach the 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity goal for most days of the week. The plan shows how to achieve the 30-minute recommendation in more than one way:

- 1 Complete three activities for 10 consecutive minutes at a moderately intense rate.
OR
- 2 Complete two activities for 15 consecutive minutes at a moderately intense rate.
OR
- 3 Complete one activity for 30 consecutive minutes at a moderately intense rate.

The CDC also includes a general guideline of moderate intensity and vigorous intensity activities for both indoors and outdoors.

Examples of activities considered moderate-intensity include dancing, jazzercise, riding a sta-



tionary bike, and actively playing with children. Outdoor activities include mowing the lawn, playing Frisbee, walking a golf course and shoveling light snow. Indoor and outdoor activities include playing basketball, walking at a brisk pace, water aerobics and jogging/walking combination. Incorporating up to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity may also help you manage your weight or help you prevent weight gain, whatever your goal may be.

Examples of activities considered vigorous-intensity include race walking, jogging or running, swimming laps, tennis (singles), and bicycling more than 10 mph, or on steep uphill terrain.

Conclusion

The next time you commute home from work, school, or “downtown,” take a look at the number of fitness centers that have sprung up. Reflect on the lifestyle changes our society has adopted over the past 125 years, and you’ll recognize that the fitness industry has become part of our culture. We don’t work in the fields anymore, but our bodies

and minds want that activity. The fitness industry has flourished since the 1980s and has inspired a wide variety of exercise equipment and diverse group exercise classes.

If you don’t like fitness centers, a daily activity such as a simple game of catch in the backyard, a hike at a state park, rollerblading, kayaking, canoeing, a brisk walk, gardening, or a short bike ride can produce similar results. Whatever your preference, always begin by speaking with your physician or a fitness professional about how to develop a safe yet moderately progressive exercise plan. Then start!

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Music Instruction, K-12:

Comprehensive Opportunities and Experiences



A student learns the three basic elements of music: melody, harmony, and rhythm.

There is no question about the benefits of music for the education and social/emotional development of young children and the ongoing advantages of music for adults. Improved creative thinking, problem solving, reading and math skills, as well as increased self-expression are benefits of music programs both in the classroom and as extra-curricular activities through private and group lessons.

The music program at Perkins introduces every student to the fundamental science and art of

sound and music. The program offers weekly opportunities for students to demonstrate social and emotional growth experiences in an academically “safe” environment. The program begins with exposure to the three basic elements of music-making: including melody, harmony and rhythm. This is our first goal. Each student is given opportunities to play, sing, read about, and listen to a wide variety of American, European, world, folk and popular songs.



A second goal for the music program is to widen each student's personal exposure and appreciation for diverse listening experiences. Students have opportunities for introductory guitar, keyboard, and percussion studies. Individuals who have previously studied in private lessons (guitar, violin, clarinet, trumpet, recorder and drums) or who own their own instrument, are encouraged to continue lessons. If the treatment team feels that a particular student will benefit emotionally or socially from individual studies, and the student expresses interest, individual or small group instruction is available.

A third goal is to familiarize students with recent music technology. A computer program called Music Ace is used to build and develop basic music theory, ear training, and computer based songwriting skills. Students who show an extra interest in this area are encouraged to progress. The classroom utilizes Internet T1 access to develop contemporary curriculum, biographical studies, and guidance for finding online music of diverse genres and styles. For those students who find traditional music less than interesting, this curriculum is particularly engaging.

Students in the general music program begin to understand the connections and relationships between music and the other disciplines. By un-



derstanding the cultural and historical forces that shape social attitudes and behaviors, students are better prepared to live and work in communities that are increasingly multicultural.

It is important to enable students to see and experience how music supplements their knowledge from the academic disciplines. Some composers use mathematical principles when forming their music. Science skills are necessary when discussing waveforms used in new recording and composing software. The history that was studied in another class is reflected in the arts and sounds of that civilization, culture, or country within the music classroom.

One way that the general program remains fresh is by encouraging students to share music that means something special to them. For many students this involves a deep emotional attachment and comfort



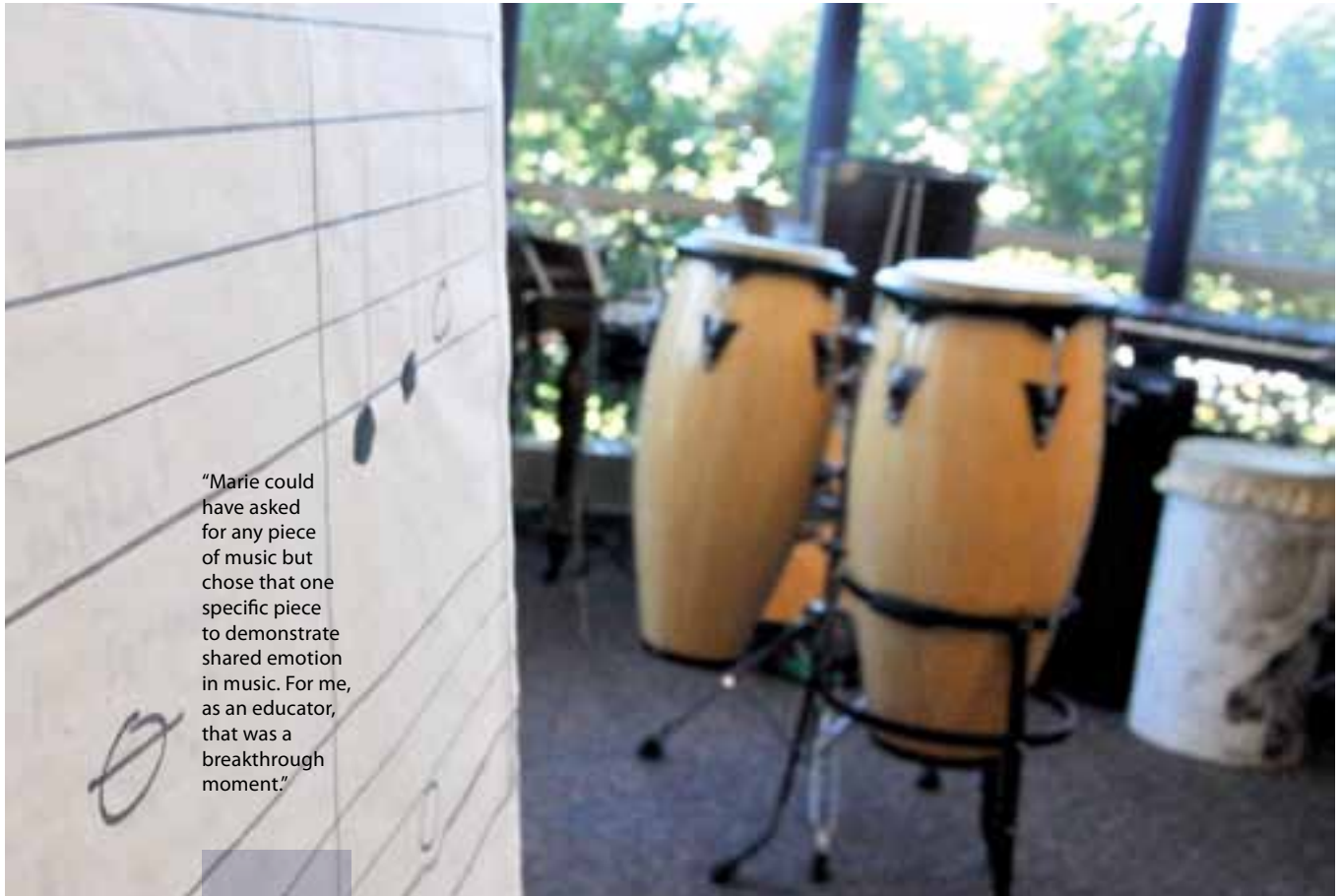
Teacher William Carrier plays alongside a student during a lesson.

level that may be difficult to achieve in other aspects of the therapeutic milieu or in the traditional classroom setting. When trust and respect are in place, we can accomplish what was once thought impossible in the music classroom. Some students write their own music. Others prepare sheets of lyrics and want to add music to their words.

Perkins's chorus group prepares music during the school year for various holiday and school events. This is an opportunity, too, for students who have enjoyed a more traditional singing program, to perform in front of an audience in a variety of

settings. Opportunities to practice cooperation, active listening, teamwork and public presentations provide students with lifelong lessons to benefit them as older learners.

Often those of us who work with children have an experience with a student that has an impact on us and our work. I think of a teenage student, Marie. Marie arrived at Perkins from a very rough neighborhood in Massachusetts. During her first few music classes she impressed her peers with her deep knowledge and recall of the works of Tupac Shakur. She was presented with the opportunity to



“Marie could have asked for any piece of music but chose that one specific piece to demonstrate shared emotion in music. For me, as an educator, that was a breakthrough moment.”

take a staff member on a tour of the new school building. She stopped by the music room and asked if I would play a piece of music by Beethoven. She wanted not an excerpt but the complete piece entitled Bagatelle/Fur Elise. She sat the staff down and said, “Listen carefully.” Minutes later she said “Ready? This next part is where he gets angry.” At the end of the piece Marie and the staff chatted for a few minutes. She was talking about the comfort that this specific piece of music gave to her. Marie could have asked for any piece of music but chose that one specific piece to demonstrate shared emo-

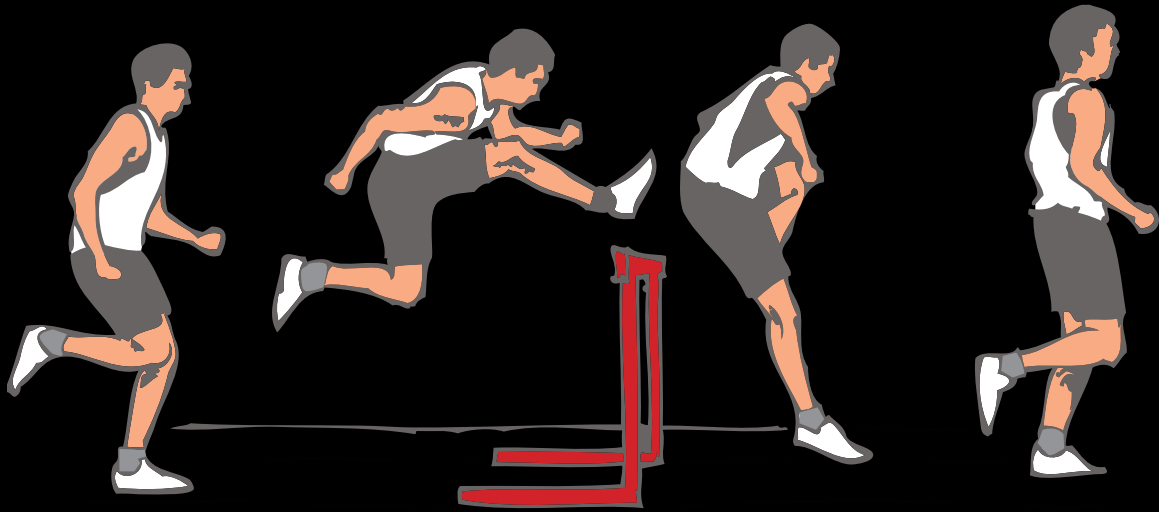
tion in music. For me, as an educator, that was a breakthrough moment.

The protection of strong music programs in schools is often the focus of parent advocacy when such programs are at risk of ending due to budgetary constraints. For some students, music programs are an extension of their success in academics and athletics. For others, music is the arena in which they shine, while academics or athletics are not a strength. Both groups of students are equally enriched by opportunities presented in a strong music program.



Hurdle Help for Children

with Asperger Syndrome



Children with **Asperger Syndrome (AS)** are very often bright, capable and caring. We see those strengths more frequently when we alleviate their challenges and hurdles. In the case of children with AS, “Hurdle Help” includes tools that assist these children in ways that are supportive and not overpowering; subtle and not embarrassing. The best supports for a child with AS are those that allow the success of the child to be the focus rather than the tools or approaches

used to lend support. Hurdle help is an effective way of assisting kids with AS.

Planning Your Day

When working with youth diagnosed with AS it is beneficial to help them make a schedule of what the day’s activities and expectations will include. This helps to eliminate anxiety about what’s to come and helps them prepare for upcoming tasks. Providing a schedule also helps



an individual with AS to improve executive functioning and to gather materials they may need to get through the day successfully. It's important to highlight for kids that, regardless of a set schedule, things will come up that may disrupt the set routine. It is helpful to create an alternate plan. That plan should involve strategies to help cope with disappointment and/or frustration, as well as problem-solving techniques.

If the child you are working with is functioning at a lower cognitive level, it may also be helpful to provide picture schedules, and task boards. Once they have completed an activity/event they can remove it from their schedule, or just visually acknowledge that the task is done, and can move on to the next one.

Checklists or task sheets can accompany the schedule. The sheets are typically a list of tasks or steps that the individual needs to complete to successfully finish a block on the schedule. If the schedule indicates morning routine 7am–8am, then the checklist may include: Shower (towel, soap, shampoo). Brush teeth (tooth brush, tooth paste). Comb hair (brush, gel). Get dressed (clean socks, clean underwear, clean pants, and clean shirt). Checklists are useful tools for completing any task throughout the day and to ensure that everything gets done.

Having the Right Tools

It is also helpful to have a “tool box” of coping skills to address a misunderstanding, unplanned event, or

anxiety. These tools can vary and might include music, taking a break, having a fidget toy or being able to speak to someone about these stressors. A psychologist, psychiatrist, clinician, or therapist can be a great resource to help build a coping strategies “tool box,” and an

occupational therapist is a great resource to give a list of exercises or strategies to have readily available when in need of self-regulation.

Sensory diets are also important tools to use to help remain regulated and focused on the task at hand. Due to the fact that weak central coherence is a common condition of individuals with AS, they don't always “see the big picture.” They tend to focus on the small details, which can lead to greater frustrations. For this reason, identifying coping skills is crucial, and having a variety of them is recommended in case one does not seem to be helpful in a particular situation.

Sensory What?

Most of us are aware of the five senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch). However, there are two other very important senses that have an impact on an individual's functioning: the vestibular system

“It's important to highlight for kids that, regardless of a set schedule, things will come up that may disrupt the set routine.”



(balance and movement), and proprioception (body awareness and muscle and joint sense). Being aware of these senses, and, most importantly, sensory processing issues related to them, is helpful. One way that individuals with sensory processing difficulties can remain regulated throughout their day is through sensory integration therapy, and

more specifically through a sensory diet. A “sensory diet” is a combination of activities or exercises that is built into an individual’s day to help keep them regulated and balanced. Things to be considered when building a sensory diet are frequency, intensity, duration, and rhythm.

An occupational therapist is trained to develop a





sensory diet. Working with an occupational therapist, one can come up with a sensory diet that can also be a part of a behavior plan. This will ensure that the individual gets the opportunity to perform the activities needed for them to remain regulated throughout the day, and provide further support with sensory processing.



Need a Break?

Breaks are an essential piece to a successful day. When a person begins to feel agitated, frustrated or anxious, it can be very beneficial to be able to take a walk, change activities, or maybe just get up and stretch. If a child with AS is in a situation where taking a break may not be acceptable (i.e. a school setting), then working out a plan, or code word, with a teacher may work best. In many cases specific plans can be written to provide support for the child who needs it.

Having Someone to Talk to

It is important for a child to have someone to talk to when he or she feels anxious. It helps individuals process what has caused the anxiety, as well as identify ways to prevent it from occurring again. Each individual has his or her own unique way of processing. It is important to learn the style of the child you are assisting (i.e. some of them need time in between the incident and processing, while others prefer to process the incident immediately). Some are more visual than others or struggle when it comes to verbal processing. In these instances, drawing or working on a project as a means of processing an incident would be more beneficial to support the child.

Helping children plan for the day and equipping them with the tools necessary to problem solve challenging situations is the assistance that many children with AS need and benefit from. When we support them with good planning, develop sensory diets, provide respite from the stress through breaks, and ensure there is a caring adult to talk with, we are offering the “Hurdle Help” that allows many children with AS enjoy success.



Lisa Beneche, M.S., OTR/L, Occupational Therapist,
Melissa McMurray, M.S., CCC-SLP, Speech and Language Pathologist,
Sara Russo, M.S., CCC-SLP, Speech and Language Pathologist

Addressing Life-Readiness Needs

of High School Students through a TEAM Approach



Collaboration

The Perkins occupational therapy and speech language departments teamed up to improve life-readiness skills for students who need help developing cognitive, social, executive function, motor, and sensory skills. Groups of three to four students in grades 10, 11, and 12 met for forty-five minute sessions. General goals targeted through this alliance include: (1) improving planning, organizing, sequencing, and problem solving skills;

(2) improving motor planning, fine motor abilities, utilization of adaptations, and accessing sensory strategies; (3) improving vocational readiness and independent living skills; (4) improving social pragmatics; and (5) improving self advocacy and self determination.

Topics included: (1) general hygiene; (2) use of small kitchen appliances; (3) exposure to the demands of food service employment through guest speakers and line work; (4) workplace safety (i.e.,



fire and first aid); (5) completion of entry-level carpentry skills (e.g., sanding, staining, and varnishing); and (6) running a simulated sewing business. This article describes our experience.

The Sewing Project

The speech-language and occupational therapy team developed a sewing project to target individual needs of students. Students designed and sewed pillows for several settings. Participants identified the aesthetic and coping skills function of the pillows within their small groups. The sewing project consisted of developing a mock business from planning phase to execution. Goals of the unit targeted motor planning, executive functioning, and social skill development through hands-on activities that, with completion, contributed directly to the Perkins community.

Students were enthusiastic throughout the unit. Each group took on its own identity via their brainstorming and creativity. They were eager to learn to use the sewing machines, despite the intricate demands and responsibility of operating small machinery. The students expressed a greater sense of purpose due to the usefulness, functionality and meaningfulness of the final product.

Motor Skills and Sensory Strategies

Some older students continue to benefit from occupational therapy to address motor planning and sensory strategies related to school and life readiness. Motor planning is the ability to plan and execute unfamiliar motor tasks. Sensory processing challenges refer to difficulties in processing and organizing sensory information. Some students re-

quire sensory strategies for calming, while others benefit from strategies for alerting/focusing.

Sewing the pillows exposed students to a variety of motor planning opportunities. Most students had little to no experience in sewing. Students began the pillow production process by tracing and cutting the fabric. Visual/verbal cues for body positioning and cutting skills were beneficial during these tasks. An orientation to the sewing machine was provided next. Students learned how to thread the machine and how to operate it safely.

The most complicated motor skill involved feeding the material through the machine and maintaining a straight sewing line by using the markings on the needle plate. Some students required additional visual cues, i.e. a dark line was drawn on the needle plate to aid with alignment. Other students needed additional prompts to determine the correct amount of force to use when guiding the fabric through the sewing area and hand positioning. After sewing, students turned the fabric right side out and stuffed the pillow with filling.

Completing the sewing aspect of the project involved pinning the opening and hand basting it closed. Interestingly, a number of students required additional visual and hand over hand guidance to motor plan pinning the fabric together. Visual/verbal cues and extra practice were provided when learning how to make a knot in the thread. In the final weeks, students learned how to package the pillows for mailing. Students then addressed the packages. Students benefited from visual/verbal cues to correctly label the package. Throughout the Sewing Project, several students accessed some sensory strategies used during the regular school



day for focusing, alerting, and/or calming. Some participants benefited from chewing gum for focusing/alerting, or to address oral-seeking behaviors. During less hands-on opportunities, some students benefited from gross motor movement breaks or hand fidgets to improve task focus and to address sensory seeking needs. One auditory sensitive student took occasional breaks in a quiet area of the room towards the end of a session.

While it was exciting to see the students sewing skills evolve over a short period of time, it was equally gratifying to watch students become more confident in their ability to use the sewing machine.

Executive Function and Social Skills

Executive function skills are those related to overall organization and time management, including: long-term planning and goal setting; sequencing and executing steps to complete a task; and adapting and modifying a plan as needed to be successful. Success with these skills can be compromised by difficulty with attention, memory, impulse control, organization, and/or planning which can also interfere with the ability to benefit from some traditional speech-language therapy approaches.

Various tasks throughout the sewing project were

devised to target improvement of executive function skills. The students developed a timeline for task completion and with support they were able to break down the components of each task further by identifying the necessary equipment and supplies. Through trial and error, however, the participants were able to adapt and modify the timeline as needed for things such as equipment malfunction, student

absences, and weather. Participants also identified goals for their business and designed a supply order form to be distributed and completed by selected staff in the educational unit.

Pragmatics refers to the use of language in context. This applies to: range of communicative functions (reasons for talking); frequency of communication; conversational discourse skills; and the ability to code switch for different listeners and social situations. "Failure in the broader social world coupled with a keen self-perception of being 'different' is likely associated

with the increase in anxiety and depression frequently observed to develop by adolescents." (Klin & Volkmar, 1997). Development and application of pragmatics is essential in preparing students for further education, employment, and independent living.

Pragmatic or social skills were addressed

"While it was exciting to see the students sewing skills evolve over a short period of time, it was equally gratifying to watch students become more confident in their ability to use the sewing machine."



Students enjoy the finished product.

throughout the project when the students joined forces to: select a name for their business; formulate a mission statement; choose fabric patterns; and delegate responsibilities. The participants had to take into consideration others' points of view, persuade and negotiate effectively, and problem solve to reach a common goal. The students facilitated the discussions required to complete the tasks with minimal guidance from adults. During these shared efforts, participants exhibited generosity, diplomacy, and unity. When the project was

completed, the pillows were delivered to customers and the students took turns demonstrating their professional business skills.

Student Response

Students have responded positively and with enthusiasm to the hands-on tasks approached through this team approach. They have been able to make associations between the activities completed and responsibilities they will encounter in the future.



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