



Happy Holidays

from Debra Schipper
and all your friends at West
Metro Learning Connections

What's Inside?

- ASD Teacher Tip — **pg 2**
- Buddy Circle: — **pg 2**
- Social Support for
School Lunches
- "As a Mother of — **pg 3**
an Autistic Child"
- Liaison Program — **pg 4**
- Useful Links — **pg 4**

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Debra Schipper	CEO, Director/Lead ASD Specialist, WMLC Excelsior
Mark McCaghy	Director/Lead ASD Specialist, WMLC Bloomington
Brenda Rutledge	ASD Specialist, Lead Social Skills Therapist
Ashley Geesaman	Executive Curriculum Coord./ASD Certified
Shayna Swanson	Director, Therapeutic Rec. and Specialized Programming
Katherine Schipper	ASD Support Spec./ Communication Spec.
Leslie Layman	Therapeutic Rec. Facilitator and ASD Support Specialist
Janet Gressman	Executive Director of Operations
Mary Wyatt	Director, Educational Placement
Bill Martin	Creative Director/ Marketing Manager

Making the Holiday Break a Social Success!

By Debra Schipper, M.Ed./Excelsior Director and Lead ASD Specialist

With two weeks off school, the usual routine suspended, and the likelihood of extra special people and places to experience, children with autism spectrum disorders are as excited as anyone, but they may also be more anxious and perhaps less prepared than most. Parents and friends can maximize the benefits of the break and set these children up for some extra success with social interaction and relationship-building! Here are some ideas to keep in mind while preparing for this special time:

TIP #1 Create a calendar for the break and a visual schedule for each day to reduce some of the anxiety "free" time can cause. Highlight potentially stimulating activities and allow for preparation time before and down time afterward. Avoid too much "electronic" stimulation by putting a variety of other fun activities on each day's agenda.

TIP #2 Prime children's skills and prepare them well in advance of guests' arrivals:

- Show children/teens pictures of who will be coming and help them review names and other key information about each person. Suggest possible conversation or small talk topics for each person.
- Review any food choices/menus and give reminders about table manners.
- Review the basics—Greetings, Introductions, Handshakes with the right grip and one nice look "right in the person's eyes," Taking turns talking and listening, "K.I.S.S."ing it (Keeping It Short and Simple) when talking, Giving and Receiving compliments, and Bidding Farewell at the end of the visit.
- Review the agenda for the visit and offer ideas and options for children's participation in the different parts of the activities.
- Remind children of their personal physical and behavioral signs that they need a break, review or create a "silent signal" to cue your child that a break appears needed, and prepare a break place and activity...with a timer...for children to use as needed.
- Plan and pace the activities, sights, sounds, and smells so as not to be overwhelming. Include "comfort" activities in the schedule.

TIP #3 Plan a play date or outing and prepare to facilitate at least portions of the time to help children practice friendship-making skills. Plan for quiet and active play time. Give time reminders to help prepare for transitions before, within, and at the end of activities. Plan non-competitive games or review self-management and "scripts" for winning and losing.

TIP #4 Write social stories to build social understanding and prepare children for special times during the holiday. Build meaning into the celebrations by explaining the reasons for the family traditions.

TIP #5 Review manners and expectations around opening and responding to gifts, including "scripts" for what to say (and not say) to express appreciation for gifts.

TIP #6 Review "hidden agenda" items for various situations and behaviors and words that people will expect (and will make good impressions), as well as "unexpected" behaviors that may surprise or annoy others and possibly cause them to think negative thoughts when they see them.

Above all, relax, don't plan too much, but plan some time each day to spend just enjoying and affirming your children and your relationships with each other. After all, children learn best about making and keeping friends by watching and learning from what you and others who care about them say and do to show and teach them.



Debra Schipper

Visit us online at:

www.wmlearningconnections.com

ASD Teacher Tip By Mark McCaghy, Bloomington Director and Lead ASD Specialist

An important mission of WMLC is to provide insight into the world of students with autism, as well as provide tips to help make their educational experience successful. There is a saying, “What works for the typical child does not work for the student with autism, but what works for the student with autism works for the typical child.” There will be a new tip in each newsletter. The tips are not meant to be extra work, so I will try to keep them simple and non-intrusive to your classrooms.

To help understand the importance of this first tip, imagine a couple scenarios. You have to plan Christmas dinner for 30 guests, but aren’t allowed to use a checklist. You have to teach five classes a day, but can’t use your lesson book to plan out your weekly activities—you must go with the flow. You have to drive some place new, but you can’t get directions. Feeling anxious yet?

THIS ISSUE’S TIP — PROVIDE A VISUAL SCHEDULE

Autism is a neurological disorder that impairs a number of brain functions. One function that is impaired is the ability to understand and predict social situations. This impairment causes a great deal of anxiety, which in turn can cause behaviors. We can help relieve anxiety by providing structured and predictable environments. By writing a schedule of daily activities, you provide structure that:

- helps students understand their environment
- helps students to be calm (reduces anxiety)
- helps students to learn
- helps students become independent (less reliant on verbal cues)
- helps students manage behavior

As you go through each step on the schedule (see sample to the right), somehow show that each step is completed. You can cross it out, put a check by it, or erase it. Draw attention to each step as you finish them. Also draw attention to any changes there may be as you go along. How good do you feel when you cross off that last item on your checklist?

Thank you all for being such great assets for our students with autism!

**Mark McCaghy, Director of
WMLC—Bloomington**

Shown here teaching a social skills class, Mark received his ASD Certificate from Hamline University and is currently working on his Master of Education. Mark has 7 years experience teaching Special Education at Lakeville, St. Louis Park, Eden Prairie, and Chaska along with 8 years at Camp Hand in Hand as a counselor and program staff.



Sample VISUAL SCHEDULE:

- 1) Turn in assignment
- 2) Review yesterday’s lesson
- 3) Open book to page 233
- 4) New skill
- 5) Write your assignment in planners
- 6) Work time
- 7) Get ready for next class

Buddy Circle: Social Support for School Lunches By Debra Schipper

Lunch and recess times are the best parts of the day for many students, but I hear from many of my young friends here at West Metro Learning Connections that they “hate lunch and recess!” Among the reasons they give are the loneliness and boredom they experience as they sit alone or are left out of conversations, inside jokes, and games. Even with skills for introducing themselves, starting conversations, and inviting others to play, the lunchroom and recess “scenes” can be complicated for our friends to understand and navigate alone from beginning to end.

One of my favorite “jobs” when I consult and serve as an ASD specialist in schools is to set students up with a “Buddy Circle” and a “Lunch Bunch.” I always so enjoyed facilitating the weekly to twice-a-week “Buddy Circle” Friendship Groups with my students and their classmates, but in many schools social workers and/or speech/language therapist prefer to facilitate this program as a part of their service time with children with ASD. Either way, you can guarantee your children’s teachers that “Buddy Circle” and “Lunch Bunch” are easily as fun for the teachers and adults who lead them as they are for the children who participate!

Below you will find my description of the first steps I take to set up this program. If you go to our web site, you’ll find more information on the “Buddy Circle” and “Lunch Bunch” programs.

SET-UP

1. My student and I go into his/her general education class and talk about how everyone has different things they’re good at and different things that are difficult for them. We’re sure to mention several things “my” student is good at, but we also talk about how “playing, taking turns, knowing what to say in a conversation, whatever” is hard for him/her. The class participates in sharing what’s easy and hard for them. I often make a list of easy and hard and then show how different skills are on different lists, depending on students’ strengths and needs.

As a Mother of an Autistic Child...

By Liza Robson

I am sure you can all relate to my experience. The first time I heard the diagnosis, the worst possible picture entered my mind. That overwhelming event was followed by a tiny list of suggested treatments that were to help my little boy, but of course, there was no guarantee of the outcome. I was relegated to speech therapy and occupational therapy for the most part, and even then, no one seemed to point me in the right direction as to where to get it. Don't get me wrong. When I finally found a private speech and occupational therapist—they were wonderful. Was that it?

I ALWAYS HAVE HEARD THAT WHEN YOU BECOME A MOTHER, THERE IS NO MANUAL.

Is this really true? You saw your own mom, grandmother, and your friend's mom raising children, so hopefully we learned a little along the way. But where do we learn about autism or treating our autistic children? Just by chance a school physical therapist showed me a flier she had gotten in the mail. She wasn't endorsing it—of course, but maybe Matty needed social skills classes. That flier was a lifesaver for both mom and son. The flier was from West Metro Learning Connections and they were going to open a satellite facility in Bloomington.

I quickly gave them a call. Like other emerging services, I wanted on the list now! Matty began classes the following term and has been going ever since. I am so thrilled at the emersion of his social skills. I guess it never occurred to me that he literally needed to be taught what comes so easily to the typical student. Jill Kuzma, West Metro—Bloomington's original director, all the staff, and especially current director, Mark McCaghy, were and are gifts. If we ran into problems at pre-school or kindergarten, **West Metro was there for us coaching us and his teachers onto victory.** West Metro was the first to



Matty Robson, 1st Grader

Each new term at West Metro, Matty takes on another challenging topic and looks forward to each class and the friendships of his classmates.

teach us how to use social stories, and how invaluable that has been! A good social story helps me introduce a new situation to Matty and get him used to the idea and his expected behavior. Some techniques we still use today, and some we have set aside, but they have been invaluable to Matty's growth and maturity. So much so, that Matty is in first grade and is attending a private elementary school in Hampton, MN and rarely needs the help of an aid in the classroom. Matty has a long way to go, but with each new term at West Metro, Matty takes on another challenging topic and looks forward to each class and the friendships of his classmates. Matty especially liked "Communicating in the Community" last summer. He still talks about the lessons and the corresponding field trips. He particularly talks about the "Chatterbox Pub" in St. Paul... I might have to check that one out myself sometime! The staff is as good as ever and really takes the time to get to know their students and their families. I know Matty will be safe and well cared for when he is at West Metro, and I can honestly say,

"West Metro has provided me with that proverbial manual as to how to be the Mother of an Autistic child."

Buddy Circle (continued)

- A. Depending on the student's age and parent preferences, the student may plan the talk with me, the parent may participate in planning and/or presentation, or I may plan and the student participates. The student always participates in the presentation, as I can't get beyond feeling I would be disrespectful to go in and talk about him/her without his/her presence. Others may feel differently about this. For me, it has always been a very positive experience and really a time to honor my student in front of classmates.
 - B. Depending on the same conditions as in A, we either use the label of Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or Asperger Syndrome, or we don't. When we have used the label, we have also read the book, This is Asperger Syndrome to the class, taking turns with teacher, parent, student, and me reading a page.
 - C. Same varying conditions as in A and B, we may open it up for questions from everyone.
2. We offer that the class may sign up to be a member of "Buddy Circle." We are very clear that whether or not they sign up, each student is still a friend. Signing up means they will also be a "Buddy-of-the-Week." (You can find a document on the web site that tells what a buddy does...this happens to be a first grade document; the content varies in depth and length depending on the children's ages). Everyone is given a small sheet of paper, and if he/she wants to be a buddy, writes his/her name on the paper. If he/she doesn't, they send it back blank or write "no thanks." No one is pushed to be a buddy. Those who choose to are given a permission letter to take home for parent signatures. When they bring those back, we make a "Buddy-Of-The-Week" schedule and set a time for the buddies to meet with me or case manager, either one or two times a week. We talk about how things are going and do an activity. A first grade schedule of what is done in group is also on the web site.

Please email me at dschipper@wmllearningconnections.com with any questions you may have...and, for sure, I hope to hear about some fun and successful "Buddy Circle" experiences your children have in their schools!

("Buddy Circle" is similar to the trademarked "Circle of Friends")

NEW Liaison Program

West Metro Learning Connections is Taking Excellence in Communication to a New Level!

We are in the process of setting up a Liaison Program at both the Bloomington and Excelsior centers that will begin in Winter Term 2008. This program is designed to keep our client families connected to our staff family. Each student will have a liaison. That liaison will ensure strong and healthy communication between parents/guardians and The Center. The goal in creating this program is ultimately to form bonds between families and employees that will flourish for years to come. West Metro liaisons will be responsible for ensuring smooth transitions, keeping in contact with schools, keeping in contact with families, and providing a contact point for any questions and concerns that might arise over the course of our clients' instruction at West Metro.

UNIQUELY EFFECTIVE

This distinctive program might be likened to a social worker/case manager who has a case load. What makes the Liaison Program uniquely effective is the focus on personal bonds and consistent communication. Liaison to family contact begins two weeks prior to term. This phone call will lay the groundwork for future communication. It is a chance for parents to ask important questions and to form a relationship with a specific person at West Metro. While every bond at West Metro holds great value, the liaison/client bond will be one of special importance. Regardless of class changes, teacher changes, or any other developments that occur, the liaison will be a consistent, reliable guide through the world of social skills therapy. Our liaisons are West Metro employees that have the benefit of experience and a deep understanding of West Metro procedures. The liaisons are also familiar with client background and West Metro curriculum, creating an ideal mix of professional expertise and personal regard.

INTEGRATES SCHOOL, FAMILY & SOCIAL ISSUES

A vital component of the Liaison Program is the integration of school, family, and social issues. This mixing of needs is made possible through steady and honest communication. Liaisons will not only stay in contact with the client family but also, provided a "Consent to Release Information" is in place, will stay in contact with the client's school. Liaisons will communicate with special education case managers and classroom teachers to formulate coherent, applicable goals for West Metro courses. This will increase generalization of skills making the West Metro experience that much more valuable. And, of course, parental input will still remain tantamount to social skills therapy progression.

The families we serve at West Metro deserve the very best we can possibly provide. The Liaison Program will enhance an already unique and stellar program. In all relationships communication is the key to success, to happiness, and to longevity. The relationship of liaison to client is no different: through communication, we hope to make goals achievable, enrich social skills therapy, and nurture lasting bonds.

WEST METRO LEARNING CONNECTIONS

is dedicated to serving individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Related Conditions throughout the Twin Cities and surrounding communities.

With two locations, Excelsior and Bloomington, our centers specialize in Social Cognition and Social Skills, Communication, and Interaction Development.

(952) 474-0227
EXCELSIOR

(952) 888-9652
BLOOMINGTON

Email:
info@wmllearningconnections.com

USEFUL LINKS

www.wmllearningconnections.com

Visual Schedules:

- www.autismnetwork.org/modules/envirom/visualschedule
(Click on Lecture to view four pages with explanation and tips)
- www.do2learn.com/picturecards/printcards
(Free cards to use on visual schedules)

Play Dates:

- www.ahany.org/documents/Playdates.pdf
- www.susanetlinger.typepad.com/the_family_room/2007/07
- www.funplaydates.com/nav_pages/etiquette.html

Social Stories:

- www.thegraycenter.org/store
- www.frsd.k12.nj.us/autistic/Parent%20Training/social_stories%20notes.htm
- www.frsd.k12.nj.us/autistic/Social%20Stories/social_stories.htm
- www.polyxo.com/socialstories/

Holiday Manners:

- www.selfgrowth.com/articles/A_Parenting_Tip_-_Holiday_Manners_That_Will_Help_Your_Kids_Sparkle.html
- www.statesman.com/life/content/life/stories/other/12/09/1209guide.html
- www.parentkidsright.com/archives/v6n12.html

For Grandparents of Kids with Asperger Syndrome:

- www.asdrendrewolf.org/Autism/lettertograndparents02.htm

Making the Holidays Happy for Children with ASD's:

- www.swscedservices.org/pages/uploaded_files/Holidaytips.doc

Holidays and Tantrums:

- www.understandingautism.org/uaorg_OTHPARENTTIPS/UAORG_1tantrumsDO.html



WEST METRO
LEARNING CONNECTIONS, INC.

355 Second Street
Excelsior, MN 55331
220 W 98th Street, Suite 1
Bloomington, MN 55420