



Making Time for Everyone By Katie Schipper

Family is an amazing thing! Family can be motivating, entertaining, and interesting. It can provide love, comfort, support, and nurturing. However, family can also be stressful. Work, school, sports, activities, and many other “things” can really keep parents on the move.

For families that have one or more children with special needs, stress levels increase and schedules swell with extra medical and therapy appointments. In these situations, parenting so that each child feels their fair share of love and attention is rarely an easy task if not downright daunting.

Complicating the “parenting happy children,” formula is the fact that no two children are alike, but all children are both fragile and resilient. Predicting where children will land with their perceptions and where they will allow their perceived situations to take them is impossible. Sometimes children pick up on very subtle non-verbal clues and unspoken feelings and somehow understand and accept with poignant insight, grace, and dignity things adults would never expect them to understand. At other times, these same children may lack the ability to comprehend the most straightforward, factual explanations and instead hold firm to complete misperceptions. They may act out according to these mistaken beliefs with anger or sadness, convinced that they are unappreciated, unnoticed, and less important to their parents than the sibling with the disability that seems to “have it all” from the parents.

Parents know that time is the most precious commodity they have and with time in such short supply under the best of conditions, quality time, rather than vast quantities of time, is what they have to devote to each child, so that he/she feels special and loved. The gift of “alone time” with one or both parents not only clears perceptions, fills hearts, and boosts self-esteem and confidence, but it also weaves a blanket of memories for the child to wrap up in for those times when time is in too short supply and the challenges of daily living take up every minute. These gifts, as simple as a fifteen-minute walk, a book or a story read together, or a weekly trip to a favorite fast food restaurant don’t take a lot of time, but they give “hugely” to the giver as well as to the receiver.

For single-parents or in homes where one spouse works long hours or is often out of town, even these short gifts of time for each child may be impossible without help. In these cases, if at all possible, parents should seek out and utilize whatever resources they can find to ensure that all of the children in the household get the devotion of time from their parents that they and the parents themselves need. If grandparents are not an option, parents may be able to enlist a trusted baby-sitter or personal care attendant (PCA). Other options may include enlisting the help of a neighbor, if for only thirty minutes, or setting up play dates with other families in similar circumstances. Parents also find they become very creative with time, as they perhaps find ways to do something special with one child while another is at an appointment.

Parenting and managing family relationships may be the ultimate challenge, but focusing on solutions for finding the time to spend with family is worth any effort it takes, as, in the end, the value of family and time with family is priceless.

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Steps of Hope Walk

On Sunday, February 24th, West Metro Learning Connections joined others in the Autism Community to rally together and walk in the name of Autism. As a team, West Metro raised over \$500. Employees and their families showed up to walk and support The Autism Society of Minnesota. Informational displays were enjoyed by all and the spirits of camaraderie and giving were abundant. We all look forward to walking again next year and in the years that follow.



Visit us online at:

www.wmllearningconnections.com

ASD Teacher Tip: *Theory of Mind*

By Mark McCaghy, Bloomington Director and Lead ASD Specialist

By the time a neuro-typical child is four years old, he/she has usually developed *theory of mind*. *Theory of mind* is the ability to understand that other people have their own thoughts, beliefs, and points-of-view that affect their behavior. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have deficits in the area of *Theory of Mind* so they have difficulty understanding other people's beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Lacking a *theory of mind* directly impairs a person's ability to:

- understand why people do what they do
- predict another person's behavior
- read another person's intentions
- understand why they themselves do what they do
- understand and predict during social interactions

"TESTING" THEORY OF MIND:

Sally has a basket with a lid. Anne has a box with a lid. Sally puts her marble in the basket and shuts the lid. Sally leaves the room. Anne takes the marble out of Sally's basket and puts it in her box and shuts the lid. Sally comes back to get her marble. Where will she look?

Two characters approach a box. One of them looks inside. The other student touches the box. Which student knows what's inside the box?

Individuals with ASD consistently fail tests like these because they lack the ability to predict another person's behavior or read the other person's intentions. Sometimes this is referred to as "mind blindness" because the individual cannot "see" other's intentions and behaviors. By the way, Sally should look in the basket.

A *Theory of Mind* deficit has an impact on social skills because individuals don't understand the unwritten rules of society - the rules whose violation can diminish one's social success. For example, most people understand the concept of personal space; we understand it is not okay to swear at the principal; we know it is not appropriate to pass gas in class; we know it is not appropriate to make threats. Individuals with ASD don't always or completely understand that those behaviors can have a very negative impact on others' opinions and impressions of the person displaying them, and could result in legal as well as friendship problems.

SO WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

Social skills need to be directly taught. Many students with ASD participate in social skills classes and other places, but they also need to learn why behaviors are inappropriate at the moment they happen. This is a purpose of therapeutic recreation. Other simple tactics also help. Writing down what the student is doing, how it makes others feel, what it makes others think about the student, and what would be an appropriate behavior or action.

A student with ASD may appear rude, egocentric, or self-centered, but it is important to remember this is a direct result of the *theory of mind* deficit. Direct teaching on appropriate behaviors and how to read someone's intentions help individuals with ASD experience success in social settings.

Choosing ASD Services:

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS & FAMILIES BE LOOKING FOR?

By Leslie Layman, ASD Support Specialist

In our social skills therapy and work with parents and families who have children on the autism spectrum, we see parent after parent go through the same process of trying therapies and searching for what works for their child. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is a fairly new challenge, and the approaches to treatment are varied and being intensely researched. The National Institute of Health has recently reorganized to form Autism Centers of Excellence with a focus on finding causes and identifying new treatments for Autism Spectrum Disorders. This and other recent increases in support and research create hope for more accessible information about best practices for treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorders, but until then what parameters should parents use when choosing support?



When looking at different services, supports and therapies, consider first your child and his/her needs and then use the following areas as a guide when considering options. It is not meant to be a conclusive list, and would be best used as a framework for thinking about your own intuition as a parent and asking questions of potential providers.

THE STAFF WORKING WITH YOUR CHILD HAS HAD SPECIFIC TRAINING IN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Autism research is complicated and rapidly changing. It is important to know that the people working with your child have an understanding of the challenges and attributes that come with a diagnosis of ASD. Inquire about continued training opportunities and requirements for employees.

THE SPACE AND ACTIVITIES ARE TAILORED TO MEET SENSORY NEEDS

Benefits of any treatment are maximized if the child feels safe and is in a state of mind that is conducive to learning. Ask for a tour of the facilities. Think about the seating in the classroom, how visually stimulating the environment is, lighting, noise level, and whether facilitators are willing or able to make special arrangements for your child's sensory needs. Learn the procedure for sensory breaks and what tools are available to your child if sensory support is needed.

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Most of the time, Nate was “in his own world..”

By Shyla Allard, WMLC Parent

We decided to enroll our son, Nate, in a class at West Metro after a friend recommended the center to us. Nate was 5 years old and had recently been diagnosed to be on the autism spectrum. At that time, Nate had trouble making eye contact, fixated on his special interests, rarely shared enjoyment with other kids and preferred to play alone. Most of the time, Nate was “in his own world,” rarely referencing or noticing what anyone else was doing and had a very hard time managing his emotions.

Nate is now 7-1/2 years old and beginning his 14th class at West Metro. We knew he really enjoyed the classes when he once asked his teacher “not to fire him from West Metro” because he got a reminder in class. He has also made tremendous progress which became very apparent at his recent elementary school IEP re-evaluation meeting. Although Nate still struggles with some impulsivity, his social skills have improved radically. Nate is well liked at school and has many friends who he plays with on a regular basis. He initiates play with others, is able to identify what things his friends like to do and holds meaningful conversations with them. Nate has significantly improved his eye contact and manages his emotions using the 5-Point Scale™. Additionally, he is often able to identify the emotions of others and respond appropriately. He has also fully embraced the use of visual schedules and has even developed some of his own.

We believe that this amazing improvement is God’s work and grace in his life, much through the blessing of West Metro Learning Connections and its teachers. We are very blessed to have this group of people who care so much about Nate and who have invested so much time



Sensory start



Hanging out with a friend



Nate has fun in “sensory start” wearing his favorite joker hat.

Nate Allard, 7-1/2 years old

“We knew he really enjoyed the classes when he once asked his teacher ‘not to fire him from West Metro’ because he got a reminder in class.”

and effort into knowing him and teaching him skills that will help him have meaningful relationships as well as live life to his God-given potential. “West Metro has provided me with that proverbial manual as to how to be the Mother of a Child with Autism.”

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ACTIVITIES ARE PREDICTABLE AND THERE IS A STRUCTURED ROUTINE

Many children on the autism spectrum thrive on routine and structure. For a child who may not be confident knowing what will happen next or who has trouble communicating his/her needs, it can be very comforting to know that certain elements of the experience will be predictable. This includes having a beginning and closing routine to help students transition between activities, and visual support for scheduling and changes. Another important consideration is the consistency of staff running the programs.

STAFF TO STUDENT RATIO

There should be enough staff to provide each child with the amount of attention he/she needs and so that children can be one-to-one with a staff person for breaks and extra support if necessary. A low staff to client ratio also helps to reduce the amount of distractions in a classroom by making sure that everyone’s needs are met quickly. Students should be given the opportunity to practice new skills both with support and on their own.

THE SERVICES ARE STRUCTURED IN A WAY THAT WORKS FOR YOUR LIFESTYLE AND YOUR CHILD

Even if a particular therapy has been effective for others, it will be little use if you and your family cannot continue to use it at home. Children with ASD need many opportunities to practice their skills and it is confusing for them to understand that behavior can be appropriate in one setting and not in another. If you do not feel comfortable using the same techniques at home or at school, you may want to look for a service that is more in-line with your natural parenting style and beliefs.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS ENCOURAGED AND FACILITATED

Staff working with your child should be willing and able to show you skills that were taught and how you, as a parent, can incorporate those skills outside the therapy room. Staff should also communicate effective strategies for your child. Each child’s progress should be measured and reported to the parents. This includes not only “incidents” when a certain behavior needs to be addressed but also milestones, new achievements and effective supports or strategies. Staff to caregiver communication must also be reciprocal. Make sure that staff have time to listen to you and your concerns and are asking your advice for working with your child.

COST AND COMMITMENT TO THE PROGRAM ARE BALANCED WITH THE BENEFITS TO THE CHILD

Many children with ASD participate in several different types of therapy. These children spend hours each week working on their skills in the school setting and outside of school hours. While children with ASD may need more direct skill instruction and practice than their peers, they are also easily overwhelmed. Consider whether you feel the programs you have in place are “too much” or “too little” for your child. Focusing on your child’s area of greatest need or the therapy that achieves the most “crucial” results to increase his/her happiness and quality of life may make better use of family time and resources than participating in 3 or 4 therapies at once. Strain on you and your family, whether it be time constraints, financial, or emotional, must be considered so that you are able to enjoy positive interaction time with your child as well.

I hope that these ideas provide a framework for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and/or Related Conditions when faced with the extraordinary task of choosing appropriate therapies and services.

FREE

My child has an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Now what?
Autism 001 Workshop—Offered Monthly

Presented each month as a service to the community.
Please visit us online or call for more information.
• Social Skills Groups • Therapeutic Recreation

SUMMER DAY CAMPS!

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(952)474-0227 (952)888-9652

Game-N-Hang Time

Game-N-Hang Time is a fun opportunity for great therapeutic recreation! The purpose of therapeutic recreation is to help individuals with autism spectrum disorders and related conditions develop functional skills and activities for daily living. The main purpose of Game-N-



Hang Time is for our clients to socialize with friends in a safe environment that is not the classroom and does not expect them to engage in formal instruction time, yet provides opportunity for skill-building, relationship-building, and interaction. Clients increase skills in conversation, cooperation, sharing, decision-making, problem-solving, compromising, flexibility, time management, responsibility, caring for others' games and materials, and competition. Although many clients share similar gaming interests, they are encouraged to try less preferred games or activities with their friends.

Game-N-Hang Time has a clear structure to support the needs of our clients. It is a two hour block divided into three game/activity periods and a lunch or snack time. Gamers have the choice of playing board games, video games, foosball, air hockey, watching a movie, or making crafts. Gamers can bring their own toys and games from home to share with friends at Game-N-Hang or use the supplies at West Metro. The only requirement is that gamers are always playing with at least one other gamer and they switch partners and activities with each new activity period.

Game-N-Hang Time allows our clients to interact with friends from group in a more informal social setting and engage in fun, often highly preferred, activities and games. It is a great opportunity for clients to practice skills they have learned in a comfortable environment.

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.

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(952) 888-9652
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Email:
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USEFUL LINKS

www.wmllearningconnections.com

Family:

Parental Stress

- www.autism.about.com/od/supportforparents/p/pyschhelp.htm

Siblings

- www.autism.about.com/od/faqs/f/typicalsibling.htm

Misc

- www.autism.about.com/od/supportforparents/Support_and_Ideas_for_Parents_of_Children_with_Autism.htm
- www.oreilly.com/medical/autism/news/stress_family.html

Theory of Mind:

- www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/education/TheoryofMind.html
- www.autism.org/mind.html

Can Social Skills and Behavior Be Improved?:

- www.autismfyi.com/social_skills_autism.html

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/

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