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WMLC Perspectives

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How to Work Successfully with Your Child's School

7 Pointers to Improve School

By Mary Z. McGrath, Ph.D.

Your child's academic effort and appropriate behavior are a large part of the formula for school success. The rest of this success formula is an interested and active parent. Consider these parental pointers to enhance your child's edge at school.

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1. Be there. Be part of the school culture as a gentle and positive force. Be a team player and supportive of the school's purpose and mission. When you have a concern to express it can be done smoothly and comfortably in the context of previously established respect and trust. Your thoughts are more likely to be accepted and received based on credibility created by time and contribution. In contrast, an absent parent who suddenly appears on the school scene to complain, positions themselves as a troublesome unknown, rather than a familiar part of the school community.
2. Be on time. Parental promptness indicates interest and also shows respect for the faculty's time. Some staff leave other sites and situations to attend the meeting about your child and appreciate your understanding of their complex and demanding schedules. If unforeseen circumstances require that you reschedule a meeting, offer optional dates as early as possible to prevent conflict of team availability.
3. Support the Staff. Send notes of appreciation for their work. Place an occasional treat in the staff lounge. Enclose a note indicating your understanding of their effort especially during a busy or challenging period such as conference time or near a holiday. E-mail feedback when your child comments positively about a class activity.
4. Honor the Accepted Communication Process. When you have a concern, start with the teacher. Beginning with support staff or a principal immediately positions you as excluding the primary player in your child's classroom. If you are unable to resolve a situation with the teacher, access an administrator for assistance in resolving your concern. When setting up an appointment with school staff, be sensitive to their prep time and daily schedule. Planning ahead as opposed to popping in unannounced saves you time and respects a staff member's need to attend to immediate issues and concerns.
5. Speak positively in public about the school, staff and programs. Be the one to share the good things you observe in school. Echo your child's enthusiasm for a teacher or activity. Avoid any neighborhood discussion sessions that tend to take on a negative tone. Address personal concerns directly to school personnel through a phone call or appointment.
6. Read school communications. Be aware of events such as field trips so you can return signed permission forms in a timely manner. Set up a system with your child so you can promptly receive all flyers intended for parent review. Determine a specific spot where your child can regularly place school communications. Put a brightly colored folder in their backpack to be used exclusively for carrying communications. Check this designated spot or folder on a regular basis. If your child's teacher already has an established system for communications use it consistently.



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Turn Summer Outings into **SOCIAL LEARNING WONDERS!**

Social understanding, social thinking, and the ability to use a wide array of social, emotional, and behavioral skills comprise what are widely considered crucial indicators and predictors of overall success in life. For individuals identified with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA), becoming proficient in these areas generally requires significant direct instruction, rehearsal, and facilitation over most, if not all, stages of life. With these goals at stake, parents and professionals can best help children* make the greatest long-term gains in these areas when they work together!

To facilitate social learning, we create opportunities to encourage/help/teach children to think, talk, and behave dynamically, considering the environments they are in, the known or hypothesized social norms and conventions, and, most important, the people around them, with their ever-changing thoughts, beliefs, and expectations. The following tips and ideas can get parents started on this fun and important summer mission!

1 Choose people and activities that facilitate social learning

- Adults and peers with whom your child feels safe and comfortable, enjoys, wants to be with, and can learn in the presence of
- Activities that promote social conversation and interaction—barbecues, picnics, outdoor games and sports activities, board games, charades, walks, scavenger hunts, shopping, parks and playgrounds, water and boating sports, fishing, bowling, archery, skating, coffee shops, museums, zoos, fairs, train rides, camping, and other types of sleep overs

2 *Before you go...* **“Prime” the necessary social thinking and social, emotional, & behavioral skills**

For example, you can provide practice and reminders for:

- Using “social detective skills” to “check out” total environments and all of the people in them
- “Whole body” listening and paying attention—(brain, eyes, ears, body, quiet mouth) to “read” others’ thoughts and adjust behaviors accordingly
- Communicating with face, gestures, eyes, body, & voice qualities
- Showing interest and care for others’ interests, thoughts, feelings
- Asking questions/making comments specific to people who will be present
- Following conversation rules—starting, maintaining, ending, taking turns, not talking too long, talking on others’ topics, etc.
- Staying safe and always in sight of adults/companions; paying attention to where others are; walking side-by-side with others
- Avoiding excess silliness, loudness, “unusual” comments & actions
- Saying people’s names and waiting for them to look before beginning talking
- Persisting politely to get a response if someone doesn’t hear the first time
- Ceasing attempts to get someone’s attention if they’re intentionally ignoring

5 **RECORD THE GOOD TIMES!**

Take plenty of pictures and videos! Maybe even make a “summer with friends” scrapbook. Watch the videos and look at the pictures often. Discuss them to build episodic memories, enjoy the memories and maybe teach a bit about what they can do “next time.” Take time to “reminisce,” including details, everyone’s feelings, funny events, and the “gist” of the outing or activity. This ingrains the shared experiences and shared enjoyment into memories, a foundational component of social connectedness, belonging, and self-esteem.

Think of yourself as the “wind beneath children’s wings,” supporting and lifting them up as they try out their new social thinking and social skills, SOAR into successful interactions, fly higher into relationships, reach for the stars with life-long friendships, and experience social success!

3 Prepare your child for what’s coming before you go

- Look at pictures or go to a web site of the outing/activity
- Describe and interpret the “social scenes” they’ll encounter
- Create scenarios of what your child might do or say in various situations
- Remind children of names and other information about others who will be present

4 *When you’re “in the social moments”* **Model, cue, support, and coach**

- Help interpret others’ verbal and nonverbal communication and behaviors and social scenes as they occur
- Be at the heart of activities when you’re needed, and stand aside when you’re not
- Help discern what others might be thinking by pointing out “clues” to thoughts, feelings, plans
- Anticipate
- Correct misperceptions regarding others’ motives—intentional/unintentional, friendly/mean
- Prompt friendship talk—questions, comments, compliments, invitations
- Prompt friendship behavior—sharing, taking turns, helping, apologizing, including everyone
- Point out children’s similar interests and encourage them to “link up” to share them
- Model and prompt managing difficult situations—losing a game, making a mistake, being left out, not understanding, choosing, solving social problems in ways that make a good impression and result in social success and personal dignity
- “Bait” or promote interactions for younger children during play dates by arranging materials, e.g., give all the puzzle pieces to one child and have other child ask for pieces one at a time, provide only one box of crayons so sharing is necessary, give two children one piece of paper to paint, color, glue, etc., have children pass one picture around or back and forth to create one picture together

*The word “children” in this article refers to young children through young adults.

WMLC's Therapeutic Rec Model Travels West!

When Michelle Garcia Winner launched her first annual national "Social Thinking Summit" in San José, California, June 21–22, Debra Schipper, Ashley Geesaman, and Brenda Rutledge were there! Not only did they benefit from a wealth of others' ideas and information on social thinking, but Debra also enjoyed the honor of presenting "Social Thinking in the Community," a description of West Metro Learning Connections' therapeutic recreation social learning programs to this group of like-minded, advanced social learning providers from around the world.

Debra Schipper, founder and president of West Metro Learning Connections (WMLC) began developing therapeutic recreation components as a part of WMLC's overall therapeutic recreation services for individuals identified with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA) when she launched the company in June of 2001. Since then the therapeutic recreation program has grown and expanded to become a model for others, now around the world.

The "Stand Alone" Model

While social skills therapy groups with adjunct therapeutic recreation remain the primary modality for providing concentrated therapeutic education and skill development at WMLC, the "stand alone" therapeutic recreation program has grown so that it now addresses and expands the development of almost all of the skills taught and practiced during the social skills therapy groups.

Defining and determining the importance of "social success" as a component of overall success in each of our lives is an on-going goal for teachers, staff, and clients at WMLC, just as it is for everyone. In addition, balancing priorities of achieving high quality work results, developing and maintaining quality relationships, learning, growing, and developing personally, while also finding time for personal

enjoyments are also worthy, but daunting goals. Since opening in 2001, WMLC has provided one component of its operations that successfully addresses these goals and balances these priorities for staff and clients—therapeutic recreation!



Debra and Michelle Garcia Winner after the Social Thinking Summit where WMLC's therapeutic recreation model was applauded by leading autism experts from around the world.

Therapeutic recreation has been a part of the vision and the practice of WMLC since the beginning. At first, the primary modality for therapeutic recreation was "guided play and goal reinforcement." This is the time after each social skills therapy group where participants practice the skills they just learned through creative/dramatic play, playing a social skills game, or some other recreational activity. Since the beginning, groups have also learned and practiced "party" skills as they celebrate their successes at least once each term when their "marble jars" are full, a sign that the group has worked together each week to earn marbles by demonstrating friendship and positive learning behaviors.

In 2002, the therapeutic recreation time progressed for older clients from role plays and social skills games to an outing after their group time. That same summer, Friday Excellent Adventures, full days of goal-based recre-

ation activities, were added, and in 2003, the very popular monthly sleep overs launched. Special camping and hotel sleep overs are currently interspersed throughout the year.

Myriad of Teaching Opportunities

In addition to building social understanding and social thinking skills, recreation activities provide a myriad of opportunities for teaching and promoting social, emotional, and physical health in individuals of all abilities. With preparatory and on-the-spot instruction, skill rehearsal, and on-going prompts, cues, and support, therapeutic recreation is a powerful venue for increasing and maintaining skills and independence in areas of socialization, home and daily living, recreation and leisure, community participation, gross and fine motor functioning, reasoning ability, self-confidence, and more. Well-planned and coordinated therapeutic recreation activities can even dramatically reduce symptoms and impacts of depression, anxiety, and stress. The best part is, engaging in therapeutic recreation activities is fun for everyone involved... the clients and the teachers and facilitators!

Over the years, therapeutic recreation has had many names at WMLC—Saturday Escapades, How to Do Recess and Choice Times, Day Camp, Camp Connections, and more. While the therapeutic recreation components of WMLC have grown and expanded over the years, so too have the procedures become more formalized, the goals and expectations for client progress become more and richer, and the methods for monitoring and tracking progress become more finely-tuned. While still growing and developing, therapeutic recreation at West Metro Learning Connections has been and remains the cutting-edge model for developing social understanding and social thinking and for building social, emotional, behavioral, and many more skills in the individuals who participate.

Working with Your Child's School, continued from page 1

7. Be a contributor. Sending contributions to school in your child's backpack is a convenient way to support your community, while giving your child a sense of pride and purpose as well. Offer outgrown clothing and toys to the school social worker or nurse for recycling to families in need. Ask about wish lists for less fortunate students during holiday time. Send cans for a food drive and supplies for needy students. Contribution of your time and experience also enhances the school community. You will be appreciated for everything you do, from serving food in the school cafeteria to accessing your business contacts for a special computer project. Creative contributions come in as many forms as there are parents of students.

Parental contribution completes the formula for a child's success in school. Offering support and volunteer time during your child's student years enhances their opportunity to make the best of their school career, benefits other students, supports staff and offers you fulfillment and fun. Keep completing the formula. The worthwhile payoff is a long term benefit to many!

Mary Z. McGrath, Ph.D., author of *Teachers Today: A Guide to Surviving Creatively*, offers presentations, seminars and workshops on the topics of self-care, support and personal development to educators and parent groups. She can be reached at Reflections Resources, Ltd., Phone: 952-894-7707, E-Mail: info@maryzmcgrath.com Fax: 952-890-3229.

Fall 2008 | WMLC Launches **SATELLITE SOCIAL SKILLS GROUPS!**

A priority for West Metro Learning Connections has been to reach out into the greater Twin Cities community to serve as many individuals with Asperger Syndrome (AS), High Functioning Autism (HFA), and related conditions that involve difficulties with social skills as possible. In order to meet the needs of more individuals and their families, WMLC will be replacing its Bloomington center with "satellite social skills groups" beginning Fall Term 2008.

Satellite groups will enable more families to receive social skills services closer to their homes, which provides many benefits. Perhaps the most important benefit is that participants will have less travel time, which will reduce anxiety and allow for even greater progress in their social skills groups! Greater accessibility also means families will feel less strain on their busy schedules, not to mention their gas budgets!

Satellite groups are not a new concept for WMLC, but a tried and proven model that started in 2003 when Debra Schipper taught several groups at Normandale Hylands United Methodist Church and other locations in the Bloomington area. The following year Elizabeth Schipper led the East Metro Social Club, a model that began with a discussion of various social skills topics held over dinner in Bloomington-area restaurants and followed with a social outing to various activities in the area. In 2005, a weekly Teens Talk Teens Rock social skills group hailed from District 112's transition program in Chaska. WMLC's most recent satellite group was contracted by Beacon Academy charter school in Eden Prairie and taught by Mark McCaghy.

WMLC's satellite groups are staffed by teachers and therapists from the Excelsior and Bloomington locations and operate with the same curricula options, supports, and procedures as the center-based groups. Final scheduling, curricula determination, and satellite locations for Fall Term 2008 are still being worked out, with special consideration being given to current Bloomington clients. WMLC expects to establish other satellite groups in a variety of locations with curriculum offerings based on the projected service needs of new clients.

Families and groups of families interested in having satellite social skills groups in their areas may contact Janet Gressman at 952-474-0227, x206 to express their interest.



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See our "Links" page for other Autism resources, such as:

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(952)474-0227 | Excelsior

(952)888-9652 | Bloomington

Email: info@wmllearningconnections.com

What the Professionals are Saying About WMLC...

"Our district's students, staff, and families have benefited greatly from the knowledge and expertise provided by staff from West Metro Learning Connections. Their collegial approach makes working with each of them a rewarding professional experience."

Director of Special Ed., Public School District

"I have greatly appreciated their reinforcement of IEP goals!"

ASD Teacher, Public School District

"WMLC is a unique and valuable agency through which young people benefit from expert services and caring adults. A respectful, creative and collaborative approach allows for partnerships with schools, families and other agencies... [they] take on the challenges necessary to facilitate and celebrate the contributions of every individual. Thank you, West Metro Learning Connections!"

Director of Student Services, Public School District

"The services supplied by West Metro Learning Connections were done with a high level of professionalism and care."

Director, Charter School

"The best thing about WMLC is that they see each child as a person, as a unique individual who has strengths and struggles. They value each person as someone very special. WMLC combines a depth of knowledge of autism, insight into each client, and practical and effective strategies."

Occupational Therapist, Public School District

"Deb Schipper has been a wonderful resource and has worked with our team on some very specific strategies for individual planning. WMLC has provided wonderful services for students that needed alternative options for their learning. I have learned a lot as an educator from Deb and value her opinion greatly."

Special Ed. Teacher, Public School District

West Metro Learning Connections is dedicated to serving individuals with Asperger Syndrome, High Functioning Autism and related conditions throughout the Twin Cities and surrounding communities.