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EDUCATION

Specialized-education programs for autistic vary in approach

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is the second in a two-part series about autism, and the resources, educational and support programs available.

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The New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community (COSAC) states Autistic Disorder (autism), Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) are commonly referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Early diagnosis and appropriate intervention are crucial to an individual's future development. Research suggests people with autism respond well to highly structured, specialized-education programs.

Among these is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), or behavior modification, which research has shown to be effective in improving behavior and quality of life.

Other methods include the Miller Method, which targets an autistic individual's organizational systems, using creative visuals to teach language and understanding while teaching specific skills.

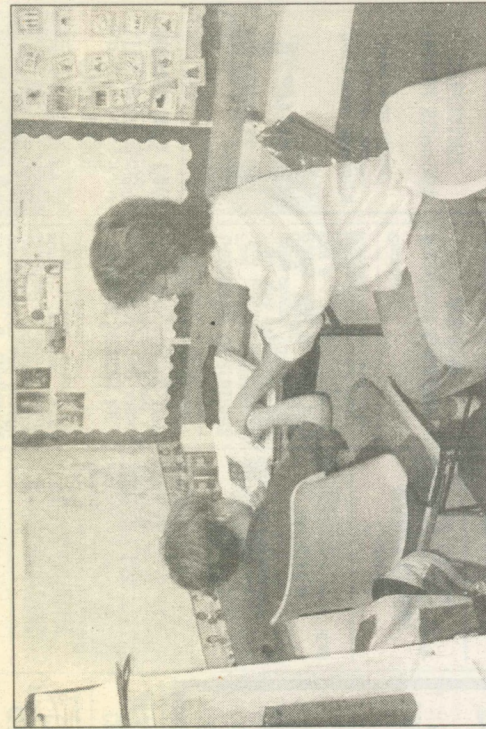


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Mini Ruiz, a teacher with the Eden Family of Services in Princeton, prompts a special-needs student to play appropriately during isolated toy play.

Yet another method, the Developmental Individual Relationship-based intervention (DIR-Greenspan/Wieder), is an intensive program in which autistic individuals are taught through meaningful, experienced-based interactions.

Irene Cook, director of autism programs at The Children's Place at Pompton Lakes and Ringwood schools, said teaching at the facilities are based on ABA principles. Cook said the program applies ABA components such as dis-

crete-trial teaching, in which a concept is broken down into very small steps and presented through repetition, and eventual chaining of all the steps.

In addition, Cook said the program offers something extra special: its location. "What makes us rather unique is that we're a public-school program that offers the specialized teachings of ABA along with mainstream and inclusion opportunities. All of the kids have a portion of their day in mainstream.

"It's important because it does allow children on the spectrum to participate with typically developing children so they can watch the appropriate modeling behavior. It also enables my regular-education kids to learn how to deal with kids with differences," she added.

At Celebrate the Children (CTC), Director Monica Osgood said the program is based on the DIR-Greenspan/Wieder model. Based in a public school in Mt. Arlington for children ages three to nine, CTC opened a therapy center in Netcong last April, and plans to open a private school for the disabled in mid October.

Osgood said the DIR approach was chosen as the preferred method after she saw gaps in students' development using the ABA approach and other approaches. Osgood said ABA, and the Miller Method all share a behavioral philosophy, and accomplish change through teaching isolated skills. However, she said, as such, students in these programs memorize the skills taught but their ability to use and generalize these skills are limited.

"Children who had received strictly ABA intervention were unable to be independent in mainstream environments. They could

not problem solve, be creative, or basically, 'think for themselves,'" Osgood said.

On the other hand, Osgood said, the basis of the DIR approach is experience-based (i.e. with an emotional component) and highly motivating instruction. "The idea is that all learning is emotional and if a child experiences a concept, he or she will more likely internalize it and generalize the concept to other settings," Osgood said.

Among the components in the program are Floor time, which is intensive child-led play therapy, structured-social skills training, as well as behavior-modification techniques when needed to change specific inappropriate behaviors.

Osgood said students are mainstreamed after they have demonstrated consistent ability to do some things independently and to stay regulated (organized) in the classroom setting with minimal support. She said CTC has had many positive experiences mainstreaming children.

Elise Edelstein, a preschool coordinator of the Preschool Intervention Program at Verona's F. N. Brown School and one of the district's school psychologists, said instruction at her facility is

eclectic, using primarily the Greenspan method, while incorporating the Miller Method, and modified ABA, among others.

Edelstein said the program is language- and sensory-based, and emphasizes social skills.

"A lot of these children have difficulty with sensory stimuli, such as smell, touch and loud noises. These children don't like social interaction, and we, therefore, have to get them to let us into their space to make them available for learning," Edelstein said.

Edelstein said students in the program, ages three to five, are re-evaluated at age five to determine whether they need more specialized education, a mix of special and regular education, and/or related services, such as occupational, physical or speech therapy.

Edelstein touted the eclectic approach for allowing customization. "I don't think there's any one approach that's right all the time for all children, forever. How you work with any child should be flexible. They may need to learn in a structured way for one skill, but not another," Edelstein said.

For more information, visit www.njcosac.org.