

## **A Best Practices Success Story** **Johnny, a Student with Autism**

In the Putnam County School System in Cookeville, Tennessee the number of children diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum continues to rise. Educators there are servicing 102 students with autism who are on Individual Education Programs (IEP's). Their implementation of best practices to increase the academic and social skills of these children has resulted in repeated stories of success.

**Johnny's Story:** Johnny was diagnosed at the age of two with developmental delays. He seldom looked at people and when he did, he didn't react. At that age he was able to speak only six words and began to receive services through Tennessee Early Intervention. Just before he turned three, the Putnam County School system attended his transitional meeting. Recognizing his limited speech, he was placed in a developmental preschool class the day he turned three years old. Johnny qualified for speech and language services, so the speech pathologist and the preschool teacher worked together using PECS (picture exchange system) to help him with communication.

Even though Johnny was not officially diagnosed with autism until he was four, the preschool class he attended at age three was structured for children with autism. The strategies in the classroom created social opportunities for children to play and communicate in centers. Social situations were staged in this classroom so children would acquire the skills needed to interact on the playground and in circle time. Picture schedules were used to teach the children how to transition from one activity to another without anxiety. Johnny gained skills in this environment and progressed well.

When Johnny turned five and it was time to transition to kindergarten, the IEP team came together to discuss the best options for him. It was a difficult decision because the parents believed that Johnny needed one more year in the preschool setting since his birthday was not until September. Although the data indicated Johnny could transition, after meeting with the parents, the team respected their wishes and Johnny stayed in preschool. The parents were grateful their opinion counted.

After spring break of that year, the team took action and worked out a plan to help Johnny transition to kindergarten. His preschool teacher and the regular education kindergarten teacher worked together to learn how he would perform the following year. He attended the kindergarten class for calendar time, a work session time, and playground time. The team used that data to determine the type of support and the kind of program Johnny would need as a fulltime kindergarten student. His parents were kept informed, and they felt comfortable that Johnny's needs were being addressed.

Based on the information/data gathered, Johnny successfully transitioned to a regular education kindergarten class with some support from an assistant. His individualized program was implemented, including the use of a daily notebook which was established for communication between his teacher and his parents. Johnny's parents endorsed this strategy and agreed this communication was not only instrumental, but crucial to Johnny's success at home as well as in the inclusion class.

It's heartwarming to observe Johnny today in his kindergarten class. He enjoys going to social skills training to work on improving interaction with peers, and is academically a straight "A" student. His language skills are much improved, while he still works on pragmatic language in language therapy. He doesn't require a full-time assistant, but still has some support from an assistant who is in the classroom to aid multiple students. Best of all, he has a great group of friends who help him socially. And his smile? It can melt your heart!

**BEST PRACTICES** -- A wide variety of best practices are implemented by Putnam County with each student with autism, including Johnny. They understand improving the academic performance of students with autism *requires* improvement of their social skills. The earlier the social skills are improved, the better are the educational and life opportunities for all students on the autism spectrum. Johnny's story illustrates two selected best practices for helping improve social skills: use of naturalistic teaching strategies and use of schedules.

**Naturalistic Teaching Strategies** [32 studies] -- These interventions involve using primarily child-directed interactions to teach functional skills in the natural environment. These interventions often involve providing a stimulating environment, modeling how to play, encouraging conversation, providing choices and direct/natural reinforcers, and rewarding reasonable attempts. Examples of this type of approach include but are not limited to focused stimulation, incidental teaching, milieu teaching, embedded teaching, and responsive education and prelinguistic milieu teaching.\*

**Schedules** [12 studies] -- These interventions involve the presentation of a task list that communicates a series of activities or steps required to complete a specific activity. Schedules are often supplemented by other interventions such as reinforcement. Schedules can take several forms including written words, pictures or photographs, or workstations.\*

Three key philosophies have made Putnam County successful. First, they recognize training LEA personnel and peers how to improve the opportunities of students with autism is critical; second, they encourage and expect team commitment; and finally, they communicate openly and actively with each other and with the parents. These three philosophies supported by best practices, have made all the difference.

\***Reference:** National Autism Center. 2009. Evidence-Based Practice and Autism in the Schools. *National Autism Center Educator Manual*.

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