

Putnam County Autism Research

Outcome of Educator Training and Coaching

Over the past decade, the Putnam County School System located in Cookeville, Tennessee, has developed a program of autism intervention that has resulted in dramatic gains for children with autism. One of the key philosophies to their success has been the recognition they must train their educators how to improve the opportunities of students with autism. The training they have designed and implemented has been exceptional: the outcome, positive and remarkable.

Training and Coaching -- Putnam County's preparation and continuing development of its teachers, paraprofessionals and IEP teams includes preservice training, inservice training, and ongoing coaching. All teachers who have at least one child with autism in the classroom, all certified special education teachers, and all paraprofessionals participate in preservice training. The local education agency (LEA) makes available experienced coaches who are on call to teachers, providing them with support and suggestions when difficult situations are presented. In addition, the coaches make periodic classroom visitations to observe teachers and paraprofessionals with students. Their observations are important, not just to guide staff members, but for IEP reviews and modifications. Personal classroom visitations also enable coaches to interact positively and knowledgeably with parents.

Putnam County's educators strive to place students with autism in inclusion (general education) classes whenever possible. There is considerable evidence to suggest children with autism who can function successfully in an inclusion program make both social and academic gains more rapidly than those whose experience is limited to a classroom composed only of students with autism. Further, Putnam County's educators consistently pursue the objective of helping children with autism transition to the point of total independence from paraprofessionals. They understand children who transition from one-on-one paraprofessional support to reduced, or no paraprofessional support, have acquired the skills necessary to successfully perform in both academic and non-academic settings.

In addition to regular training and coaching, Putnam County instituted the Summer Social Skills Academy to further enable their teachers and paraprofessionals to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to help with children with autism reach their full potential. Free of their academic responsibilities, teachers, coaches, paraprofessionals, and students learn to move in and out of situations which help transition students to independence. Educators gain confidence as they modify the environment to increase student success. They learn to meet behavior challenges with strategies that bring positive results. Students, with the help of their peers, learn to attend to task, follow directions, listen, and work in a group.

Outcome – The results of Putnam County’s training/coaching program have been significant.

- ❖ The LEA has successfully placed an ever-increasing number of students with ASD into inclusion education settings, more than doubling from 38 in 2007 to 82 in 2011, and thereby giving these students greater access to the full curriculum.
- ❖ Giving access to the full curriculum to more students has enabled Putnam County to achieve the goals of IDEA and No Child Left Behind.
- ❖ The number of paraprofessionals needed to assist children with ASD has *decreased* from 25 in 2007 to 16 in 2011, in spite of the increase in the number of ASD students.
- ❖ The ratio of paraprofessionals to students has improved dramatically. In 2007 there was 1 paraprofessional for every 2.9 students with autism. In 2011 there is 1 paraprofessional for every 6.4 students with autism.
- ❖ The county has benefited financially as a result of less need for paraprofessionals. Current budget constraints would not have supported the increase in the number of paraprofessionals needed if the ratio had not improved.

Research shows the most significant result of Putnam County’s training/coaching program has been, and continues to be, the positive impact it has had on the children themselves. The children with autism who have been in Putnam’s program have made remarkable gains and achieved goals that could only be imagined a decade ago. The Putnam County program works, providing a model from which all educators can learn.

IDEAS, Improving the Development & Education of Autistic Students, follows the Putnam County model. **IDEAS’** training is authored by Putnam County’s SPED consultant, Tonia Wheeler, who has been a major contributor to their success since their program started.

IDEAS implements research-based best practices and provides educators with knowledge, practical teaching strategies and support materials, all of which can be applied immediately in the classroom. Learn from **IDEAS**. Become one of the people who can make the difference for children with autism.