

Succeeding in Autism Intervention

The Putnam County Report

Putnam County, Tennessee, located half way between Nashville and Knoxville, is a county with a school population of about 10,700 students. A decade or so ago, Putnam County was no different from hundreds of others across the country, dealing with the same challenges in trying to meet the needs of its students. Faced at that time with a SPED lawsuit brought by a parent with a child with autism, in particular they were looking for solutions to the question almost every educator is asking today: how do we better serve children with autism.

That was then in Putnam County ...

- ❖ Students exhibiting varying degrees of autism, today known as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were placed in self-contained classes mixed with other highly involved disabled children. There was no separate program for children with autism. It was the job of the Special Education Supervisors to prepare themselves and their school personnel to deal with the unique social and academic needs of students exhibiting varying degrees of autism.
- ❖ At the same time, parents of ASD students all around the country were coping with the myriad of issues with which all parents of autistic children are so familiar. What causes autism? Is it my fault? What can I find out online? What can my pediatrician tell me? How can the local school district help my child? How can I make it better? Who can make it better? How do we afford specialized help? Parents began networking, becoming more knowledgeable about special education and how to access services for their child.
- ❖ Classroom teachers were asking questions too. What is autism? How do I help this one student? How do I keep my class as a whole progressing academically while helping a boy who tends not to pay attention to me and can be somewhat or very disruptive?

For all constituents, it was a call to action – a time to go to work. That’s when then Special Education Supervisor Kathleen Airhart, with the push and pull from parents and fellow educators, took “the road less travelled.” Kathleen, who is today’s Superintendent of Schools in Putnam County, remembers that neither she, nor the parents, nor the teachers, nor the supervisors, nor the administrators knew where the road would take them. All had varying degrees of optimism and pessimism; all had different ideas about how to accomplish their goals. But they all knew change was required.

Putnam County tried a wide range programs before arriving at their present research-based best practices program. The results have been more than noteworthy. Today, parents and educators alike, agree Putnam County has been successful in meeting the unique needs of their children/students with ASD.

This is now in Putnam County ...

The Big Picture:

- ❖ The autism program represents the results of the efforts of large number of people. It is composed of many elements, all designed with the individual student's educational needs in mind. All efforts focus on answering the question, "What is the best course of action for each individual student in our county?" In short, there is no "one size fits all!"
- ❖ The program begins with three-year-olds who have been identified as needing special assistance, whether or not they are autistic. At the opposite end, upper-age students with autism who are not high school graduates can remain in the county's program until the age of 22 through participation in vocational, transition activities.
- ❖ The program actively involves input from all constituents -- students, parents, teachers, supervisors and administrators. It also takes research and legal issues into consideration. The program is concerned with all students with autism -- from those who are in general education classes all day whose instructors have a minimum of special education training, to those who are in special education settings with instructors who are special education certified.

Professional Development:

- ❖ Professional Development is a critical component of the program. All teachers who have at least one student with ASD are offered pre-service training. Participants include general educators along with certified special education teachers and paraprofessionals.
- ❖ The relationship between teachers and paraprofessionals, and the responsibilities of each in the classroom, are clearly defined in the program fostering a cooperative working environment and a positive educational experience for the students.
- ❖ Teachers are provided with concrete materials to use when teaching students with autism.
- ❖ Coaching is an integral part of professional development, ensuring best practices are being implemented and teachers are gaining confidence. Following pre-service training, ongoing support is provided by coaches in a variety of forms throughout the school year.
- ❖ Each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) is monitored by a consulting teacher with extensive experience, who makes classroom visitations to observe and make recommendations. The IEP is revised by the IEP team in concert with parents.
- ❖ The county's Summer Social Skills Academy provides Putnam County School personnel – speech therapists, general and special educators, and paraprofessionals – the opportunity to receive in-depth training and "hands on" practical experience while working with students with various degrees of ASD. Consultant teachers organize and conduct the Academy to provide opportunities for teachers to review and evaluate their instructional practices, and

for students with autism to develop social skills without the additional responsibility of improving their academic performance. Videos enable teachers and students to observe themselves, and where appropriate, for self-analysis. Parents, too, are provided an opportunity to come together during a brunch so they can begin to develop a network of support.

The Parents:

- ❖ Putnam County's schools recognize all children present challenges to parents; however, they know parents of children with ASD face unique challenges which frequently result in angst between the parents themselves, the parents and their children, and between the parents and the school system.
- ❖ The program facilitates close contact between the school and the parents of children with autism. Parents are provided with information in a number of ways, and are given many opportunities to discuss their child's program with teachers and consultant teachers.
- ❖ Each IEP meeting is carefully planned, keeping in mind the impact the proposed plan may have on the family, and how difficult both the setting and content of the meeting may be for the parents. Once a final plan is agreed upon, careful monitoring of the child's data takes place, always keeping in mind the best interests of each child.
- ❖ Other meetings are also given careful consideration, and are held for students who have multiple services in an effort for continued continuity within the program. They provide parents further explanation of how the child is progressing towards mastery of IEP goals/objectives. Nine-week meetings are held with some parents to discuss IEP progress.
- ❖ Additional progress reports are made available to parents throughout the year, reporting both successes and challenges.
- ❖ Consultant teachers attend local autism parent groups, review online information, and review training opportunities made available to parents across the country. This enables educators to better understand the parents' point of view and to better help parents filter the quality and accuracy of the information they are getting outside of the school environment.

The Students:

- ❖ It is the primary goal of the program to help the county's autistic students meet success, both academically and socially. The program involves a combination of child-directed and adult-directed teaching activities utilizing a variety of best practices for working with individuals with ASD. Strategies include structured teaching, visual cueing, direct instruction, work-reward routines, choice, cueing and prompt fading procedures, video self-modeling, peer-training, self-management procedures, and Social Stories™. The IEP team is the driving force that determines which approaches will be utilized with individual students.

- ❖ Students are taught routines which help them deal with personally frustrating situations both in the classroom and outside the classroom without interrupting other students. The program never loses sight of the fact that developing social skills presents unique challenges to students with autism, even those who have the ability to perform well academically.
- ❖ Assisting students with autism through transitional periods is another focus. The transition from elementary to middle school may require multiple field trips to acclimate them to the school and a team of identified teachers. Another example is weaning a student from a full-time, assisting paraprofessional to a different or no paraprofessional.
- ❖ Putnam County gives careful consideration to post secondary transition. It provides students who are unable to graduate with a high school diploma the opportunity to practice independent living skills on the campus of a local university. The Summer Social Skills Academy provides a similar opportunity for students who are fourteen years of age and working towards a high school diploma.
- ❖ Peer relationships between students with autism and those without are encouraged beginning in the preschool program. Blended classrooms provide a great opportunity for peer models to develop an understanding of others who are different, fostering long term friendships, character and leadership skills. As a result, potential bullying is greatly reduced. As students get older, these relationships become very important in social situations – the lunchroom, playground, sports activities, even high school dances.
- ❖ The Summer Social Skills Academy provides an important growth opportunity for peers as they help develop the social skills of their autistic counterparts.
- ❖ Beginning with the three-year-old program, students requiring language/reading intervention receive academic instruction through Direct Instruction’s *Language for Learning*. Reading intervention in higher grades is provided through other Direct Instruction materials.

Putnam County’s ability to handle the unique needs of students with autism puts them in a very different position from where they were a decade ago. They have implemented a research-based best practices program that is so effective, families with children who have ASD are moving to the area. The reports of how they have helped students are dramatic and inspiring. Kathleen Airhart says today, “My role as Superintendent is to make sure I give top down support to the SPED Supervisor and the principals so that *all* kids get the best services and education we can give them. I would never say we ‘met our goal’ – only that we continue to strive to do better.”

IDEAS -- Improving the Development and Education of Autistic Students
Implementing Research-Based Best Practices for Children with Autism

Learn how Putnam County’s success can become your own program of success.
 Find out how to make the difference for children with autism!

Call JP Associates at 516-561-7803 or email us at IDEAS@jponline.com