



Summer Opportunities in Socialization: A School District Responds with an S.O.S. for Students Making the Transition to Middle School

Warren and Tommy were 5th grade classmates making the transition to middle school. They both attended the Summer Opportunities in Socialization program produced by the Parkrose Autism Center in Portland, Oregon. Warren came as a “buddy.” Warren said about being invited to attend the program: “I was going to a different summer school but then I was invited to see the Center. It sounded fun. I got to see my friends and we got a field trip every day.” To Tommy, who has been diagnosed with autism, and to his family, the program was appealing not just because it offered a variety of fun recreational and educational activities, but also because the program offered a systematic education in social interactions.

I asked Tommy how he came to attend the program. “Fun stuff, entertaining. I still like being a silent person,” he admitted, even though he interacted more intensely and successfully in the summer program than in his classroom this past year.

“Yes, but we have a ‘Bowler Bashers’ team now. Tommy learned to join the group!” Warren added, speaking about the bowling team on which the two boys continue to play. Warren also valued what he had learned through the program, commenting, “After the summer I paid more attention to [being] a better friend.”

Parkrose School District Autism Center, based at Sacramento Elementary School, was started in January 2001. The Center was developed to provide a continuum of services to Parkrose students with autism. Student services range from weekly socialization groups to full, self-contained programs. The Center also provides staff and community members with teaching techniques and strategies for working with children with autism, as well as strategies for working with high functioning students with autism or Asperger’s Syndrome.

Parkrose had a sizeable elementary population of children with social communication challenges who were

making the transition to middle school. Many were diagnosed with high functioning autism or Asperger’s Syndrome. In a good faith effort to meet the needs of all students, Parkrose developed the Summer Opportunities in Socialization program. A total of 11 students (typically developing “buddies” and students identified as having significant difficulties with social communication) attended for 5 weeks, 4 hours daily. The program attempted to provide a systematic teaching approach to learning the social communication skills that are so critical for success at the middle school level. The regular schools’ incidental social programming was not completely meeting the needs of this unique population of students.

The Summer Opportunities in Socialization summer school program focused on increasing appropriate communication skills. The exceptional quality of this program was evident in the natural summer environments used to practice the skills, as well as in the balance in attendance between typically developing school-aged peers and students with autism or related challenges. Activities were chosen for their unique sensory and communicative potential.

The program targeted the following social and communicative skills:

- Alternating topics of conversation
- Involvement in other’s interests
- Teasing (being or doing)
- Initiation (peer contact)
- Self-control
- Anxiety
- Sensory issues
- Rule systems
- Values in middle school

- Receiving information through facial expression
- Self-esteem
- Personal space
- Dealing with rejection

Buddies were invited on the recommendation of the student with challenges and the regular classroom teacher. Staff, who were called coaches, monitored and encouraged appropriate social targets for the day. Coaches gave positive reinforcement tokens when teams exhibited target skills during activities.

The program also sought to help students with “centering,” a set of skills often slow to develop in children with autism. Centering involves receiving sensory information through sight, touch, hearing, and movement to better control and balance behavior. As a basis for centering, yoga, deep breathing, and relaxation training were practiced on an ongoing basis. Various other activities helped students practice centering while also working on other social skills. Swimming helped with complete sensory neural input. Bowling encouraged turn-taking and provided a focused team activity with limited distractions. Horseback riding was taught within a program specially designed to encourage cooperative care of the horses, including confidence building and social interaction. Sensory experiences in horseback riding include balance, mobility, and tactile opportunities. Trips to the local zoo and science museum taught appropriate community mobility by using public transportation. Finally, general and cooperative art activities (including paper maché, clay, multi-media drawing, and large sculpture building) provided opportunities for tactile, sensory, and visual integration.

The student and buddy teams earned points throughout the day by exhibiting target social skills. Tokens were used to redeem a special reward at the end of the summer. All students chose their own rewards through a novelty toy catalogue.

A typical day during the summer program began with a meeting to review the daily activity and to discuss, role-play, or cartoon target social communication skills for the day. (Comic book cartooning is an effective method of teaching social skills to children with disorders on the

autistic spectrum. For information, visit <http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/socialcarolgray.htm>) After this preparation, coaches and student teams departed for community activities. All teams met for lunch at a large table so discussion about the day’s events could take place. After lunch, everyone worked on a written and comic pictorial journal of the day’s activity, including a tally of the positive reinforcements for demonstration of the target social and communication objectives. Coaches guided students through this activity. Students also received tokens for after school team communications, such as phone calls or extra meetings. Students needed two hundred tokens to redeem their selected novelty item.

At the end of the summer, the kids took their journals home to share with their families. They remained in contact with each other until school started in September, when follow-up occurred weekly at school. When asked if they had any comments about summer school, they all responded, “We want to go again.”

References

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