

December 11, 2006

Mr. Tory Niles
Principal
The Kennelly School
180 White Street
Hartford, CT 06114

Dear Mr. Niles:

We are students at Trinity College working on a Public Policy Project focused on autism, specifically the academic development and social challenges of autistic children within a classroom setting. We are aware that Hartford Public Schools have recently mainstreamed their classrooms. Since the mainstreaming process can be challenging for schools to implement effectively for children with learning or social disabilities, we are proposing a solution for the successful transition of autistic children into a standard classroom setting.

Research has shown that autistic children benefit academically from integration into local mainstreamed schools. However, persistent stereotyping, and lack of essential social skills prevent children with autism from benefiting fully from inclusion into a standard classroom. It has been shown that even high-functioning autistic children frequently are unresponsive to their peers' attempts to communicate with them and typically prefer to be solitary. The absence of typical peer interactions has been shown to cause autistic children to withdraw socially or even to behave in negative ways, which may increase the rejection and resentment they receive from their peers, and consequently may detrimentally affect their academic success in the classroom.

After reviewing past research on this topic and consulting with experts on this issue, we believe that for integration of autistic children into mainstreamed schools to be successful both socially and academically, it is crucial to address any deficits autistic children typically face that may delay or inhibit their integration into a standard classroom. Therefore, we are proposing an after-school program for your school for autistic children that will encourage appropriate academic progress *and* promote healthy interactions and communication between autistic children and their normally developing peers, as well as other autistic students. The program makes use of well-researched methods for promoting academic achievement and social skills development, as well as involving children in interactive ways to talk about their days and their feelings.

Most importantly, the program we propose for your school will engage autistic children in an encouraging and positive social-learning environment that will address and work to overcome the rejection and challenges they may experience during the day in their mainstreamed classrooms. Enclosed please find a detailed lesson plan for the after-school program we are proposing. The process of mainstreaming schools is certainly beneficial in many ways, especially if the appropriate students are given the necessary support and encouragement throughout the process. Therefore, we urge you to consider the program we have designed for your school. Thank you for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Lee
Trinity College
Box #701781
300 Summit Street
Hartford, CT 06106

Gabriele Geier
Trinity College
Box # 700191
300 Summit Street
Hartford, CT 06106

December 11, 2006

Ms. Susan Ferency
Special Education Teacher
The Kennelly School
180 White Street
Hartford, CT 06114

Dear Ms. Ferency:

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AFTER SCHOOL ALL STARS

*An After School Program for
Autistic Children*



Gabriele Geier
Vanessa Lee
Trinity College
December 11, 2006

AFTER SCHOOL ALL STARS:

AN AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

GOAL: *After School All Stars* is a program designed to offer the Kennelly School's autistic students a place where they can receive individual attention and an education that accommodates their specific needs. The program aims to facilitate the mainstreaming process for autistic children through structured activities, dependable academic and social support, and a comfortable environment to learn in. The program is designed to be a two hour after school program (3-5pm) for the autistic children at the Kennelly School. The program is directed toward elementary school children between the ages of 5-7 years of age.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES: This program aims to help students adjust to mainstreaming by working to improve their communication skills, academic progression and to encourage them to participate in appropriate social interactions. Specifically, the program is designed to:

- To decrease problems with stereotyping and lack of social integration of autistic children into mainstreamed classrooms
- To increase autistic children's interest in engaging in interactions with other children
- To encourage communication between autistic children and their typically developing peers
- To reduce bullying
- To provide strategies for developing friendships with peers
- To help autistic children learn important social skills such as cooperation, negotiation, problem solving, trust and empathy
- To assist children with academic issues and to reinforce appropriate academic progression in the mainstreamed classroom through assistance with schoolwork
- To create a comfortable environment that will facilitate social and academic development

FOUNDATION: The following components are the basis of *After School All Stars*, and are based on **TEACCH** (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children). TEACCH is a program that was created in response to the growth of mainstreaming. It is a behavioral management system that delivers more predictable behavior and greater cooperation from autistic children in a regular classroom environment. Four of the main components of TEACCH are:

1. Structured teaching: structure fits the "culture of autism". Organizing the physical environment, developing a schedule and work systems, making expectations clear and using visual materials are effective ways of developing skills and working independently.

2. Cultivate strengths and interests: the program focuses on building on the strengths that the child has, rather than emphasizing the skills they lack. Often autistic children excel in visual skills, recognizing details and memory, which can become the basis of successful adult functioning. Autistic children often have bizarre and specific interests, but by incorporating their interests into the program it will increase their motivation and understanding of what they are doing.
 3. Broad based learning: the program focuses on all aspects of the child's life. For example, the development of communication skills is emphasized since this is a difficult, but necessary task for most autistic children.
 4. Systems level: the program tries to maintain continuity, while slowly integrating new ideas and only after they have proven effective. These then become life long strategies, building to their independence.
- The person who will teach this program will be a special education teacher who is specifically trained to work with autistic children. There will also be a teaching assistant, which could be a parent, volunteer or teacher.

ASSESSMENT: In order to see if the objectives of the program are met and that appropriate development and learning take place, the teacher of the program will monitor each individual child's progress throughout the year. Each individual child is different and has special needs. Therefore, the teacher must know each student and assess each student individually.

Specifically, the teacher will evaluate:

- The student's ability to communicate their feelings, needs, etc.
- The student's ability to understand other people's perspectives and feelings
- The student's ability and interest in forming friendships with their normally developing peers in their mainstreamed classroom, as well as with other autistic students in the program
- The appropriateness of the student's behavior in social situations.
- The student's academic progression both in the mainstreamed classroom and within the program

The teacher will keep a weekly journal that will note each child's progress on these elements through an evaluation of their performance on various tasks. These journals will be made available to each child's family and primary classroom teacher.

Because this program is designed to work in cooperation with the activities and lessons taught in the students' mainstreamed classrooms, progress will also be assessed through regular evaluations of academic work by the students' primary classroom teachers.

Also, there will be a designated supervisor who will ensure the advancement and progress of the program twice a month.

DESCRIPTION OF DAILY ACTIVITIES

WELCOME MEETING: In the beginning of the program, each child will receive their schedule. Depending on the severity of the student they might receive a schedule consisting of pictures of the various activities, rather than text. A teacher will go over this with the children on a large board with correlating pictures of the activities. The schedule helps the children to distinguish between events and determine what will be happening next. If the child knows the schedule, he/she might be more motivated to complete the task because the child will see more enjoyable activities to follow.

At this time we will also discuss the weather and the season through large visual pictures that the children can place onto a board. These pictures will either be magnetic or have Velcro on them so that they can be moved around. They will have labels with their names on them to place under the activity they are currently doing. This allows them to recognize their name and to inform others of what they are doing.

PECS: (Picture Exchange Communication System): Once the child has accomplished and is accustomed to a stage they can move to the next one.

1. Phase 1- Two teachers will be working with the child. The first teacher shows the child something the child really likes, like a toy truck. The second teacher stays behind the child and waits for the child to reach for the item. Then, the second teacher holds the child's hand and helps the child pick up the picture of that item and give it to the first teacher. When the first teacher has the picture, he/she immediately gives the item to the child. The first teacher gives verbal confirmation, like saying "Oh, you want the truck?" The second teacher slowly backs off till the child learns to independently reach for the picture and hand it to the first teacher. When the child can independently ask the first teacher for the toy and hand them the item picture, then they can move to Phase 2.
2. Phase 2- The child can now independently request objects or activities, but must move a great distance to get to the picture from the first teacher. The child does these actions in different settings, with different people and requesting different reinforcing items.
3. Phase 3- The child chooses between many items on a board, causing the child to make personal decisions. The teacher starts by saying, "what do you want?", but fades this out so the child makes spontaneous choices.
4. Phase 4- The focus turns to sentence structure. The child uses sentence strips to make longer requests. They start by combining a picture of "I want" with a desired activity. The two pictures would be attached to a sentence strip and this would be exchanged for the item or activity.

Phase 5 and 6- These two phases occur at the same time. Adjectives and other words are added. This allows them to comment on elements of the environment by using pictures for "I see", "I hear", and "I feel".

MUSIC TIME: In order to improve the students' language skills music will be used. Music has shown to be a helpful way for children to learn objects and responses repetitively in a more memorable way. Songs with simple words, repetitive phrases, and even repetitive nonsense syllables can assist the autistic child's language. Meaningful word phrases and songs presented with visual and tactile cues can facilitate this process even further. Music is effective because it is a nonverbal form of communication and it is a natural reinforcer. It is also immediate in time and provides motivation for practicing nonmusical skills. Most importantly, it is a successful medium because almost everyone responds positively to at least some kind of music (social aspects of music therapy).

Examples of music therapy:

In order to teach the child speech, the teacher sings simple question/answer phrases set to a familiar melody with full rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. The child holds the objects while singing:

Do you eat an apple? Yes, **yes**.
Do you eat an apple? Yes, **yes**.
Do you eat an apple? Yes, **yes**.
Yes, yes, **yes**.

and

Do you eat a pencil? No, **no**.
Do you eat a pencil? No, **no**.
Do you eat a pencil? No, **no**.
No, no, **no**.

Music therapy can also help autistic children learn noun and action verb phrases. For example, a large doll is manipulated by the teacher and a song presented:

This is a doll.
This **is a doll**.
The doll is jumping.
The doll **is jumping**.
This is a doll.
This **is a doll**.

ACTIVITIES: Work stations help the child to become accustomed to activities and obtain proficiency at the skills they are learning. In the specific work area, the child works with a teacher on activities dealing with shapes, colors and organization. The individual activity is done many times until the child is capable of doing it on their own. Finally, the activity is moved to the independent learning station in which the child gains more autonomy working by themselves to complete accustomed tasks.

Stations:

Structured Play: The child works with a teacher in "playing" with toys and games to help gain attention skills and learn to work with different objects, such as blocks or balloons.

Play Station: The child can relax and use his/her imagination to participate in whatever game or toy he/she chooses. Each child has their own time to each activity, allowing for personal interaction with the teacher and station.

SNACK TIME: The teacher distributes a portion of food to each child only when the child has asked for that specific food. The child must say the name of the food or hand a card indicating the preference. This encourages the usage of the child's communication skills and provides a motivator to do so.

SOCIAL STORY INTERVENTION: This is a method of teaching children with autism how to "read" social situations and how to behave appropriately in social situations. This method aims to help autistic children understand other people's feelings and perspectives by helping them to understand and recognize social cues and respond in an appropriate manner.

Typically a teacher will read a story to a child out-loud about a particular event such as going to the doctor, or going out to eat at a restaurant. These stories are designed in a way to give the autistic child information about the demands and typical processes of events in situations that may be unfamiliar to them. Specifically, social stories can be designed to teach routines, how to ask for help, how to do a certain activity and how to respond to particular social situations.

Social stories are typically made up of four types of sentences:

1. **Descriptive Sentences:** Factual sentences describing the who, what, where and why of a situation
Example: "Children play many different types of games."
2. **Perspective Sentences:** Sentences that give information about a person's thoughts or feelings
Example: "The teacher likes it when we put away the toys."
3. **Affirmative Sentences:** Sentences that offer reassurance
Example: "It's okay."
4. **Directive Sentences:** Sentences that suggest possible appropriate responses to the particular situation
Example: "I will try to use my words."

These stories are frequently presented in the form of a picture book, with images or photographs of the possible series of events of the situation being described. For example, a book about a child going to the doctor might include pictures of a doctor listening to a child's heart or taking the child's blood pressure. It has been shown that listening to a story and looking at pictures of a situation that the child may experience at some point in their life helps them to respond to unfamiliar situations without anxiety. It also helps them to better understand their experiences in general. The Social Stories Method ends with a short "peer brainstorming" time, where children are asked to match appropriate social skills with sentences in the social story.

CLOSING CIRCLE: The children sit and sing songs to end the day. They sing the same song each day, allowing the children to become familiar with the song and anticipate this event.

LESSON PLAN FORMAT

After School All Stars

3:00- 3:15: **Welcome Meeting**- discuss the schedule for the day visually and verbally.

3:15-3:35: **PECS** (Picture Exchange Communication System)- improvement of communication skills.

3:35- 3:55: **Music Time**- use songs to help speech skills.

3:55-4:05: **Snack time**- encourage proper responses and social appropriateness.

4:05-4:30: **Station Cycle**- structured play and play station, depending on the child's progression.

4:30-4:55: **Social Story Intervention**- to practice proper social skills.

4:55-5:00: **Closing Circle**- concluding song to end the day.

** Refer to "Description of Daily Activities" for further details.

CLASSROOM LAYOUT: The classroom will have minimal decorations, since autistic children are easily distracted and over stimulated. During activities children will face a blank wall so they will focus on the activity and not what is going on in the rest of the room. There will be several distinct areas in the room for specific activities. For example, the play station might be designated to a specific corner of the room and the children know when they go there that they will be doing play station activities. This helps the children to differentiate between events and activities.

RESOURCES

For further information on the programs, activities and classroom layout, please refer to the following websites:

1. www.polyxo.com

“Teaching Children with Autism”: This website includes instructional techniques for implementing the social stories intervention and PECs. There are also examples of activities for the different programs.

2. <http://www.teacch.com/>

“Division TEACCH: Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication and handicapped children “: This website gives a detailed description of TEACCH goals and criteria for teaching.

3. http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.bernstein/social_stories&

“Education and Autism”: This provides examples for the social story intervention activity.

4. <http://www.nas.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=297&a=3348>

“The National Autistic Society: Music Therapy”: This website gives examples of different songs that are used in successful music therapy for autistic children. It also illustrates the most effective ways for the teacher to teach music therapy.