

A Best Practices Success Story **Billy, 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.

Billy's Story: Billy is a middle school student who has been attending school in Putnam County for eight years. He was diagnosed with Autism and provided with early intervention services beginning at age four. When it was time for him to start elementary school his parents looked long and hard for a district that accepted diversity and special needs students. After visits to many districts, they selected Putnam County where he was placed in the mainstream classroom with an assistant to help him with his academic and social skills.

Academically, Billy's reading skills were his strength, and math skills his weakness. Immediately he was given differentiated instruction in math. His assistant would preteach the lesson which the teacher was going to cover in class each day, and provide him with additional opportunities to complete his work. However, even with all of these strategies, Billy was not keeping up with his peers. Billy's IEP team recommended he should move to a resource classroom for math.

For Billy's parents, the decision to move Billy out of the inclusion math class was a difficult one. Even though they understood Billy's different needs, and the extra services offered through special education, it was hard for them to accept. The IEP team worked closely with them, providing them with sound data, and discussing the best options for helping their son. After the change was made Billy's math progress improved. Both the IEP team and his parents agreed it was the right decision.

Billy's social progress has been gradual and remarkable. His parents and teachers know academic success is related to social success. Billy participated in group social skills lessons and the summer social skills academy each year, working with typical peers and educators to improve his social skills. Last year Billy was offered, and he accepted, the opportunity to be the boy's basketball assistant where he gives inspirational speeches before and after games and at the end of time outs. He was also placed in charge of a clipboard where the coach helps him apply some of his math skills.

Billy's parents were thrilled he was made part of a team so he could experience normal activities. The resulting interaction has benefited his parents and his teammates as much as Billy. Because of the relationships Billy has made with his teammates, his parents are able to drop him off in front of the school with a sense of relief because his peers greet him, accept him, and support him. Billy's family will tell you it has been a great journey to watch his typical peers learn how to interact and socialize with Billy so that it now comes naturally to all of them. Even though Billy still uses social stories and prompts to interact with his peers and parents, they make it easier for him because of the skills Putnam County has made it possible for them to learn.

Nothing describes that better than what happened at the end of Billy's 8th grade year. His family made sure he was dressed just like everyone else to go to the 8th grade dance. When they arrived, Billy's peers greeted him and took him inside. His mother wanted to go along to make sure everything was fine, but his buddies said, "No, he's going with us! He's fine!" Billy participated in that dance successfully and had a great night – something his family never really believed could ever happen. But it did. And now? Well, there's this dance called the prom.

BEST PRACTICES -- A wide variety of best practices are implemented by Putnam County with each student with autism, including Billy. 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. Billy's story illustrates two selected best practices for helping improve social skills: use of the peer training package and use of the story-based intervention package.

Peer Training Package [33 studies]. These interventions involve teaching children without disabilities strategies for facilitating play and social interactions with children on the autism spectrum. Peers may often include classmates or siblings. When both initiation training and peer training were components of treatment in a study, the study was coded as "peer training package." These interventions may include components of other treatment packages (e.g., self-management for peers, prompting, reinforcement, etc.). Common names for intervention strategies include peer networks, circle of friends, buddy skills package, Integrated Play Groups™, peer initiation training, and peer-mediated social interactions.*

Story-based Intervention Package [21 studies]. Treatments that involve a written description of the situations under which specific behaviors are expected to occur. Stories may be supplemented with additional components (e.g., prompting, reinforcement, discussion, etc.) Social Stories™ are the most well-known story-based interventions and they seek to answer the "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why" in order to improve perspective-taking.*

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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