

A Best Practices Success Story **Joe, 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 in the county are servicing 102 students with autism who have been placed 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.

Joe's Story: Joe is a young man with autism who just graduated in 2011. He came to Putnam County at the beginning of his freshman year of high school and was assigned a one-on-one paraprofessional who was with him full time. By his senior year, he had someone checking with his teachers only once or twice a week because his academic needs were being met.

Joe, however, was not satisfied with his social skills by his senior year. He would often say in social skills groups, "I just want a girlfriend. Why do girls not like me?" He was unaware he was making inappropriate comments to girls about how pretty they were. He didn't realize he was making the same statements over and over, and he did not "pick up" on the girls' body language.

Joe continued to attend the social skills group once a week to work on his interaction skills and to learn how to be aware of the body language of his peers. He was also invited to travel with the girls' basketball team to some away basketball games which helped his self-esteem and made him feel a part of something socially acceptable. The assistant coach for the team encouraged social interaction between Joe and the basketball players. After some time, he was voted onto the basketball homecoming court by his senior peers who had learned to respect his differences and understand how hard he had worked on his social skills his whole high school career.

Toward the end of his senior year, one special education teacher took him under her wing and coached him on how to ask a girl to his senior prom. Every day the teacher rehearsed his script with him as they took their lunch walk together. When Joe finally asked the girl out, he was delighted when she accepted. Then he began making plans for the big night. The teacher and Joe practiced how prom night would go. They discussed the restaurant, the flowers, the curfew, and the events following prom. The night of the prom turned out to be everything Joe hoped it would be.

At his exit IEP meeting, the team of professionals, paraprofessionals and Joe's family celebrated all his accomplishments in high school. Joe's mom read the poem *Never Quit*. Tears streamed down the faces of the team members who felt mixed emotions as they realized Joe was finishing a chapter of his life that they had been such a big part of. The tears were joyful because he had achieved so much success, yet sad because they didn't want to lose such a wonderful young man.

Joe is going to attend a community college in the fall. His mother repeatedly comments that he has no choice but to be successful and make it in this world. He has had a good support system in high school and Putnam County will make sure he has a strong support system in college.

To educate students with autism it takes a team dedicated to an agreed-to plan. There are many people that have to buy into the system to get a program to work and to see the success that Joe has been able to accomplish. If it were not for the general education teachers, special education teachers, the family, and the autism specialist, Joe would not be where he is today.

BEST PRACTICES -- A wide variety of best practices are implemented by Putnam County with each student with autism, including Joe. 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. Joe's story illustrates two selected best practices for helping improve social skills: use of an antecedent package and modeling.

Antecedent Package [99 studies] -- These interventions involve the modification of situational events that typically precede the occurrence of a target behavior. These alterations are made to increase the likelihood of success or reduce the likelihood of problems occurring. Treatments falling into this category reflect research representing the fields of applied behavior analysis (ABA), behavioral psychology, and positive behavior supports. Examples include but are not restricted to: behavior chain interruption (for increasing behaviors); behavioral momentum; choice; contriving motivational operations; cueing and prompting/prompt fading procedures; environmental enrichment; environmental modification of task demands, social comments, adult presence, intertrial interval, seating, familiarity with stimuli; errorless learning; errorless compliance; habit reversal; incorporating echolalia, special interests, thematic activities, or ritualistic/obsessional activities into tasks; maintenance interspersal; noncontingent access; noncontingent reinforcement; priming; stimulus variation; and time delay.*

Modeling [50 studies] -- These interventions rely on an adult or peer providing a demonstration of the target behavior that should result in an imitation of the target behavior by the individual with ASD. Modeling can include simple and complex behaviors. This intervention is often combined with other strategies such as prompting and reinforcement. Examples include live modeling and video modeling.*

Anecdotal evidence suggests peer relationships have two positive effects on *typical* students. First, particularly in middle school and high school, bullying incidents are reduced. The general student body comes to accept and integrate students with differences. Second, peers tend to understand their important role, take pride in their responsibilities, and develop leadership skills. Putnam County educators find significant progress for both during their Summer Social Institute where social behavior becomes the focus because neither the peers nor the students with autism have academic responsibilities.

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*.

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!

IDEAS will provide you with **knowledge, practical teaching strategies and support materials** you can apply immediately in your classroom and your community.

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