Autism Awareness: Treating Autism--the Earlier the Better

Center for Persons With Disabilities
AUTISM AWARENESS: TREATING AUTISM--THE EARLIER THE BETTER

As pediatricians and educators become better trained in identifying the “red flags” for autism/ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorders), children are being diagnosed much earlier, receiving services much sooner, and therefore, having a brighter prognosis.

Yet, when a child is first diagnosed with autism, many families feel overwhelmed and don’t know what to do first or where to go for help. They are at the beginning of a journey they weren’t prepared for.

Their pediatricians and family doctors are the best place to start and are good sources of information and can share with parents the resources and services that are available locally. They will continue to be part of the medical support team the family will have as they begin their journey into the world of autism.

Treatment

Most parents would welcome a cure for their child, a pill that would “make it all better,” or one therapy that would improve all of the symptoms and challenges that their child has, but autism is not that simple. Each challenge must be addressed with the appropriate intervention. What works for one child may not work for another. Before parents choose an intervention, they will want to learn as much as they can about each therapy option so they can choose the one that will work best for their child.

Treatment for autism is a very intensive, comprehensive undertaking that involves the child’s entire family and a team of professionals. Some treatment programs may take place in the child’s home with professionals and trained therapists and may include parent training for the child under supervision of a professional. Some programs are delivered in a specialized center, classroom or preschool.

Early Intervention.

For very young children, parents can turn to their local Early Intervention program that serves children from birth to age three who have developmental delays or disabilities.

The CPD is the home for the Up to 3 Early Intervention program that serves Cache, Box Elder, and Rich counties in Utah. Because autism can now be detected at a much earlier age, Up to 3 created their ABC classrooms to answer the need for interventions that are focused on young toddlers with autism/ASD.

Lead teacher of the ABC classes, Janel Preston, states “The benefits of children receiving early intervention are amazing. The children in early intervention learn to interact with their families and peers. Their language takes off and parents meet other families who are struggling with the same issues they are.”

Parents are an important ingredient in the treatment of young children with autism. Parents in Up to 3 are introduced to the Autism Support group where they learn ways to deal with the grief that they are going through when their child first gets a diagnosis. They also learn many
techniques and strategies to increase interactions and improve communication with their child.

Because of the intensive early intervention provided at such a young age, Janel reports that “some of our children were not eligible for Part B preschool.” What this means is that, as they turned 3 years old, the developmental gaps had closed enough because of the early intervention they received, that they were no longer eligible for special education services. That’s a good thing!

Preschool Services

For those three year old children with autism who still require intensive treatment, special education preschools are available through local school districts and specialized classrooms.

The CPD houses ASSERT (Autism Support Services: Education, Research, and Training), a state-of-the-art preschool directed by Dr. Thomas Higbee, a national expert on both assessment and intervention strategies for people with autism.

In the ASSERT preschool, the focus is on teaching the children social skills and encouraging leisure and play activities with structured interactions with their peers. The teachers work with the children on the challenging behaviors that come with autism, and then turn around and teach the parents how to use those same the methods in the home.

"Intensive behavioral intervention for young children with autism is important because the earlier you work with the children, the bigger positive impact you can have on their progression," states Dr. Higbee.

As the children turn five years old, they transition into the school districts’ Kindergarten classrooms and continue to receive the level of services that they need. Some of the students will go into regular education classrooms; some will split their time between Special Education and regular education classrooms; and some of the students will spend most of their time in the Special Education classrooms because that is the environment where they will most easily learn and gain the skills they need.

Dr. Higbee explains more autism and the need for intense intervention for young children diagnosed with autism this month on a local radio show called Crosstalk (KVNU 610- April 11, 2011) in honor of Autism Awareness Month.

Note: This is the 3rd in a series of blog posts during April’s Autism Awareness Month of how the CPD is supporting and providing services and resources for children with autism.