CARD’s 3rd Annual Statewide Autism Conference
Current Information on Research and Practice

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities held its 3rd Annual Statewide Conference at the Adam’s Mark Hotel in Buffalo, NY. The conference was attended by more than 500 professionals and parents from 36 counties across the state.

Keynote presenter, Dr. Celine Saulnier of the Yale Child Study Center, provided participants with an engaging overview of ASD from assessment to current treatment. Breakout workshops ranged in topics from our own Dr. Kristin Christodulu’s talk on best practices in autism treatment and Dr. Gregory Liptak’s presentation on the neurological basis of autism, to Dr. Woody Johnson and Dr. Toni Van Laarhoven’s program for using video ipods to teach individuals with autism new skills.

Dana Battaglia provided a framework for promoting speech and language in children with autism, Dr. Audrey Blakely-Smith spoke of cognitive-behavior interventions for children and adolescents with anxiety, and Dr. Sean Smith discussed how to utilize technology in working with individuals with ASD. Dr. Lara Delmolino of Rutgers University encouraged participants to motivate individuals with ASD to learn and gain greater independence and Dr. David Meichenbaum spoke of fostering and developing social skills in children.

The conference keynote address and seven breakout workshops were videotaped and a 5-disc DVD set is currently available for purchase. Order forms are available online at http://www.albany.edu/psy/autism/DVD_order_form.pdf or by calling our office at 866-442-2574.

The Regional Centers for Autism Spectrum Disorder

The Regional Centers for Autism Spectrum Disorders (RCASD) were established in 2007 to identify, disseminate, and assist in the implementation of evidence-based practices to build capacity to improve services and outcomes for children and youth with autism spectrum disorders. Regional Centers are located at the following colleges and universities across the state: Hunter College, CUNY; Queens College, CUNY; Westchester Institute for Human Development; University of Rochester; and Canisius College/Summit Educational Resources. The headquarters for the Regional Centers is located at CARD Albany. Each of these centers meets regional needs by providing cost-effective training and resources to parents, school, and/or community professionals.

All Centers provide high quality educational programs and technical assistance to individuals across New York State, but site-specific activities vary depending on regional need. Activities include trainings for school and community personnel, conferences featuring nationally recognized speakers in the field, publications such as manuals and articles to assist programs in replicating evidence-based models of practice, and distance education programs that are accessible to individuals across the state. In addition, sites routinely collaborate to enhance educational impact and bring a variety of knowledge and expertise to participants.

If you would like to learn more about the Regional Centers for Autism Spectrum Disorders and which center serves your geographic area, please visit the following website: http://www.albany.edu/psy/autism/RCASD.htm.
New Training Requirements for Special Educators and Administrators

In response to the growing number of children being diagnosed with autism, the New York State Legislature has enacted Chapter 143 of the Laws of 2006 to amend Sections 3004(4) and (5) of the Education Law to require that all persons applying for a teaching certificate or license on or after February 2, 2007, as a special education teacher or as a school administrator who works in special education, complete course work or training in the needs of children with autism. A recent amendment to that law extended the deadline for training until September 2, 2009, and clarified those that are required to receive the training to include the following: special education teachers that receive their certification on or after September 2, 2009, and all school administrators or supervisors assigned to serve as special education administrators, regardless of when they received their certification.

To address this training need, the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities has developed a 3-hour seminar and become a NYSED approved provider of autism coursework.

A statewide listing of approved providers of “coursework or training in the needs of students with autism” can be found at [www.highered.nysed.gov/ocue/documents/cityautism.doc](http://www.highered.nysed.gov/ocue/documents/cityautism.doc). For more information about the distance education format being developed through the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University at Albany, please call us at 866-442-2574.

Book Review

Courage, Heart & Wisdom: Essays on Autism
S. Joshi, B. McLaughlin, & C. Riggi, (Eds.)
Outskirts Press, Inc. Denver, CO. 2009

With multiple books being published every day on one aspect of autism or another, this book stands out with its intimate personal perspectives on a disability that has been at the forefront in our national press and media, and in many people’s lives. It is a compilation of essays by physicians, psychologists, educators, teaching assistants, therapists, social workers, parents - and even students - about the role autism plays in their professional and personal lives. The essays are written from the perspective of how the individual came to “discover” autism, in many cases years ago before there was a term for this devastating, confusing, complex neurological condition. Approximately 1 in 150 children being born today will receive this diagnosis. In the book’s liner notes, autism is compared to a fractal image; that is, an image that is a pattern of order within an apparently random and chaotic activity. It is an image, the authors state, that “increases in beauty and complexity as our awareness and vision of it grows.” (back cover)

The essays, though varied and written from several different perspectives, almost all reference specific children with autism who were pivotal in the authors’ life journey, whether as a student, patient, child, sibling or grandchild. And they all speak, too, of how much that child taught them, inspired them, and helped them grow professionally, creatively and personally. There are common themes among the diverse essays; among them, the need to establish trust in the educational and therapeutic relationship – a trust that is born first out of respect for the person and the unique ways that person communicates with his or her world. As one author states, “When I am respectful and create a learning environment that is reflective of their needs and preferences, I become a trusted partner in their learning.” (p.252)

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Research: Are kids that stim really anxious?

Many children with autism spectrum disorders may exhibit stereotypical or self-stimulating behaviors (sometimes called stimming behaviors), such as hand-flapping, finger twirling, or body rocking. Children may also seem to enjoy playing with objects in repetitive ways or repeat certain sounds and words. These behaviors can often stigmatize a child and sometimes be harmful (as in the case of heavy body rocking or headbanging). In addition, it is often difficult for parents, family members, and educators to understand why children with ASD display these types of behaviors. Some researchers are interested in trying to understand the motivation behind these self-stimulatory behaviors. Recent findings from a study published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders has shed some light on this issue.

Recently, researchers (Joosten, Bundy, & Einfeld, 2009) modified the Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS; Durand & Crimmins, 1988), a well-established tool to help determine the motivation behind challenging behaviors, to include items that measured anxiety as a motivator for self-stimulatory behaviors. Based on findings from previous research, they believed that for some kids these stimming behaviors helped to reduce their anxiety as opposed to just providing sensory stimulation (i.e. giving off a sound that they like or providing an enjoyable sensation). In addition, they believed that anxiety was a greater motivator for stimming behaviors in children with a diagnosis of autism than for children with other disabilities.

Results from the study supported the researchers’ theory. In children with an autism diagnosis who displayed stereotyped and repetitive behaviors, anxiety was more often the reason for the behavior than sensory seeking reasons. The opposite was true for the children with intellectual disability (but no autism diagnosis) - seeking out sensory needs were more likely the motivator for the stimulating behavior.

These findings are an important contribution to our emerging understanding of why children engage in stereotyped and repetitive behaviors. In the past, many researchers thought that these behaviors served no real adaptive function outside of providing enjoyment for the child. This study helps show us that these types of behaviors may serve multiple functions and be motivated by very different factors. This is important because when we know the reason behind a child’s behavior, we are able to create more effective intervention plans. For example, children who engage in stimming behaviors in an attempt to cope with anxiety could be taught other ways to calm themselves down, such as breathing deeply and/or muscle relaxation. In addition, helping make the child’s environment more predictable by providing clear rules and instructions and preparing them for changes in routine could also be beneficial to reduce anxiety and the self-stimulatory behavior itself. Future research will hopefully continue to investigate the role of stereotyped and repetitive behaviors so that we can help children with ASD cope with sensory needs or feelings of anxiety. For more information on this topic or others, call CARD’s toll free number 866-442-2574

Website Review

Indiana Resource Center for Autism (IRCA)

Dr. Cathy Pratt, the keynote speaker for the 2006 CARD annual conference, is also director of the Indiana Resource Center for Autism (IRCA). In addition to training and consulting, IRCA provides articles on a wide range of topics such as educational programming, behavior, family issues, social/leisure, and sensory. What is nice about the articles written by IRCA staff is they give practical recommendations and are brief. The website also has articles by Temple Grandin, Ph.D., such as “Making the Transition from the World of School into the World of Work.” New features on IRCA are learning modules that are downloadable for free.

IRCA website:  http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/fmain1.html

Interactive Collaborative Autism Network (ICAN)

The Interactive Collaborative Autism Network (ICAN) is a project supported by a U.S. Department of Education Grant. The site is a collaborative effort among three states: the State Departments of Education of Connecticut (CT) and Minnesota (MN) and the University of Kansas (KU). ICAN offers online instructional modules on autism spectrum disorders. Module topics include Characteristics of ASD, Academic Interventions, and Assessment. Each topic includes an introduction, lecture, quiz, FAQs, and references. What is nice about ICAN is the modules are comprehensive and the ICAN staff includes experts in the field, such as Brenda Smith Myles and Sean Smith, both of whom presented at CARD conferences.

ICAN website:  http://www.autismnetwork.org/index.html
CARD Albany Welcomes New Staff Member!

Melissa L. Rinaldi, Ph.D., Research Coordinator

Melissa L. Rinaldi received her B.A. degree in psychology from New York University, and her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in clinical psychology from the University at Albany, State University of New York. She is a licensed clinical psychologist in the state of Rhode Island. Dr. Rinaldi has worked with individuals with disabilities, their families, and members of their support team in both clinical and research capacities for over a decade. She recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University where she provided individual and group therapy to children and adolescents with combined developmental disabilities and psychiatric conditions. Dr. Rinaldi has extensive experience conducting diagnostic, cognitive, and adaptive assessments of individuals with developmental disabilities and providing behavioral and educational consultation services to homes, schools, and residential facilities. Her research focus is on the development, administration, and evaluation of training models and treatment approaches for individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

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There is a strong emphasis on the role of teamwork and how much each member of the child's team, including family members, has to offer each other in helping the child develop. According to the authors, the learning and sharing that occurs with the team creates a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. "When a group of people work as a team, miraculous things happen with students." (p.281) In many essays, the authors also credit the child with teaching them so much...they tell us we only need to listen, for these children are forever communicating to us, whether in words, gestures, looks, or behaviors. "When we patiently suspend judgment, raise expectation, and pay attention, we are enriched by the emergent individual...and it is truly worth the wait." (p.259)

This is a different, but welcome addition to the literature on autism, both for professionals involved in the field as well as persons who simply want to understand more about autism.