CARD’s 8th Annual Autism Conference
Research and Practice: A Partnership to Improve the Lives of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

The Desmond Hotel was the setting for CARD’s 8th Annual Conference on October 30, 2009. This year’s conference was titled, “Research and Practice: A Partnership to Improve the Lives of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders” with more than 500 professionals and family members attending.

Keynote speaker, Linda M. Bambara, Ed.D. provided participants with a presentation on quality of life issues for individuals affected by ASD and their families. Dr. Bambara is a professor with the Education Department of Lehigh University. Her specialization is in developmental disabilities, with a particular interest in children and adults with moderate and severe disabilities who engage in difficult problem behaviors. Dr. Bambara’s research has focused on positive behavior interventions as well as choice and self-determination strategies for helping people with severe disabilities. More recently, her interests have focused on understanding systemic issues that affect the long-term adoption of positive interventions in school settings and supports needed by team members to sustain their commitment to students who engage in challenging behaviors.

A series of morning and afternoon break-out workshops were held on topics such as “Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Anxiety Disorders,” “Bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorders,” and “Preparing for Transition to Post-Secondary Education for Students with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism” among others. Presenters included Erin Berical, M.S. Ed., CARD’s Coordinator of Training and Technical Assistance, Audrey Blakely-Smith, Ph.D., Barbara Gruber, Ph.D., Chris Fuller, R.N., David Kuhn, Ph.D., David Meichenbaum, Ph.D. Izel Obermeyer, OTR/L and Lisa Canniff, SLP-CCC.

We’d like to thank all our presenters, The Bookhouse of Stuyvesant Plaza, and The Desmond for helping to make this 8th Annual Conference a success.

CARD’s 8th Annual Autism Conference

CARD Albany Staff Present at National Conferences

Several CARD Albany staff had the privilege of presenting breakout sessions at the 2009 National Conference and Exposition in Columbus, Ohio sponsored by the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence. Lindsay Washington, M.A. and Kristin Christodulu, Ph.D. presented research on a peer mentoring project entitled “Effects of a Classroom-Wide Social Peer Modeling Program for Children with ASD.” This program evaluated a Stay-Play-Talk model of peer modeling in a first grade classroom. Kristin Christodulu, Ph.D. and Erin Berical, M.S.Ed. presented a model of training session entitled “Increasing Capacity of School Teams to Reduce Challenging Behavior in Students with ASDs.” This session discussed the model and outcome data of CARD Albany’s statewide training and technical assistance initiative.

In Spring 2010, CARD Albany will be presenting two sessions at the Association for Positive Behavior Support’s 7th Annual International Conference on Positive Behavior Support- “The Expanding World of PBS: Science, Values, and Vision.” The first session will be presented by Erin Berical, Erica Davis, and Jane Ann Worlock on a statewide technical assistance model entitled, “Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders Using a School Consultation Model.” The second session, presented by Kristin Christodulu is titled (Continued on Page 4)

CARD Albany Staff Present at National Conferences

Save-the-Date
4th Annual Statewide Autism Conference
Sonja de Boer, Ph.D. Keynote Speaker
Friday, April 16th, 2010
The Oncenter Complex
Convention Center
Syracuse, NY
CARD Albany continues its Successful School Consultation Project

As the number of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders entering and continuing to be educated in the public school system continues to grow, and as school budgets are facing significant cuts, the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities is proud to continue to offer its School Consultation Project. This program, entering its 4th year, gives teams the tools they need to provide students with ASD an effective educational environment. It is offered at no cost to participating school districts through a grant from the New York State Education Department (districts need to provide release time and coverage for participating teachers and other education staff).

Through the School Consultation Project, CARD Albany staff work closely with school teams over a number of full- and half- day sessions to address the needs of individual students with an autism spectrum disorder. Activities may include further assessment, and development of supports and programming to better meet the needs of the identified students with autism spectrum disorders. Teams that have participated in this program in the past report that not only are they able to better support the identified students, but also are able to apply the knowledge and skills they have developed to other students with autism spectrum disorders in their programs.

Applications for the 2010-2011 school year will be available beginning in March 2010. If you would like to receive an application, or learn more about this program, please contact Erin Berical, Training Program Coordinator toll-free at 866-442-2574.

Upcoming Physician Training and Parent Seminar Series

CARD Albany and New York Medical College/Westchester Institute for Human Development are co-hosting a physician seminar series featuring Brown University researcher Stephen Sheinkopf, Ph.D. Dr. Sheinkopf is an Assistant Research Professor the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown Medical and conducts his research at the Brown Center for the Study of Children at Risk. He is also a clinical psychologist and is a member of the Developmental Disabilities Program at Bradley Hospital. Dr. Sheinkopf has extensive clinical experience in the area of early childhood, with particular expertise in the area of early diagnosis and development of young children with autism and developmental disabilities. His research interests include the identification of very early signs of autism and the development of joint attention and social communication behaviors in young children with autism and children at risk for autism spectrum disorders. Dr. Sheinkopf’s research is funded through the National Institutes of Mental Health, the National Institute on Deafness & Other Communication Disorders, and other federal grant sources.

If you are interested in attending either the physician or parent seminar, please contact CARD toll-free at 866-442-2574 to register. Seating is limited.
Research: Theory of Mind Difficulties in Children with Autism

As social dysfunction may be the most disabling feature of autism, researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to trying to understand the sources of this issue. One topic that has received a large amount of attention is theory of mind (ToM). ToM is the ability to conceive of mental states or know that other people know, want, feel, or believe things (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). Baron-Cohen (2000, p.3) has stated that ToM is "one of the quintessential abilities that makes us human." In typical development, ToM is apparent in children between the ages of 3 and 5. It is at this age that they begin to appreciate the fact that another person can hold a belief that may or may not mirror their own (Morgan, Maybery, & Durkin, 2003). By 4 years of age, most children are able to attribute mistaken beliefs to themselves and to others. Although typically developing children may vary somewhat in their ToM abilities, it is considered a component of typical cognitive and social development.

Several methods exist for assessing ToM in children, one of the most common of which is a "false belief" task, in which children's ability to understand that another person can hold a false belief is appraised. This insight is often examined through an exercise similar to the Sally-Anne task (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). In this task, children are asked to observe a scenario involving two dolls named Sally and Anne. Sally places a marble in a basket and then leaves the room. While she is gone, Anne moves the marble from the basket to a box. Sally then returns to the room. Children are asked, "Where will Sally look for her marble?" (Belief Question), "Where is the marble really?" (Reality Question), and "Where was the marble in the beginning?" (Memory Question). If the child points to the previous location of the marble (the basket) in response to the Belief Question, he or she has demonstrated an understanding of Sally's false belief. The other two questions are considered control questions and ensure that the child has knowledge of the real current location of the marble and an accurate memory of its original location.

A majority of children with autism typically struggle with ToM tasks such as the Sally-Anne task. Research now indicates that individuals with ASD who have more verbal skills perform better on these ToM tasks than individuals who do not have strong verbal skills. Researchers believe that children with better verbal ability are able to essentially "hack through" the scenario to figure out the answers. However, even if these individuals are more successful at figuring out ToM situations in laboratory settings, they still struggle in real-life social situations. Children with Asperger's Disorder and PDD-NOS might be able to reason through social stories in controlled environments, but they will usually have a difficult time demonstrating their social understanding in actual social environments. Bowler (1992) hypothesized that this may occur because individuals with Asperger's compute solutions to social problems with strategies that are slow and cumbersome. These strategies might disrupt the timing of their responses or make them appear odd in everyday social situations.

There are several possible reasons why children with ASD can complete ToM tasks correctly in controlled settings but not in "real life." One possible explanation is that individuals with autism do detect relevant social information, but they do not always know the functional significance of what they observe and are unable to incorporate it into their own responses or actions (Loveland, Pearson, Tunali-Kotoski, Ortegon, & Gibbs, 2001). In other words, they are able to identify what is happening in a social interaction but cannot figure out why the social actions of others matter or how to use them to form their own response. (Continued on Page 4)

Book Review

Successful Inclusion for Students with Autism: Creating a Complete, Effective, ASD Inclusion Program
Author: Sonja R. de Boer

Sonja R. de Boer, Ph.D., B.C.B.A, keynote speaker for the CARD 4th Annual Statewide Autism Conference in Syracuse on April 16, 2010, is the author of this book, which gives teachers in both special and regular education as well as administrators the information they need to begin and maintain an effective inclusion program for children with autism spectrum disorders. Included in the book are forms, checklists, and handouts that will assist with implementing an inclusion program that involves school staff, family, and the student to make the program successful. Topics covered are legal guidelines for appropriate placement, managing behavior, facilitating social and communication skills, and transitions. CARD staff has used this book with teams in its programs and can attest to the helpfulness of this resource.

The Social Skills Picture Book
Author: Dr. Jed Baker

There are two books in this series, Teaching Play, Emotion, and Communication for Children with Autism and for High School and Beyond. Dr. Baker earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University at Albany and is also the director of the Social Skills Training Project for Milburn Public Schools in New Jersey. These two books use photographs of students engaging in a variety of real-life social situations, such as maintaining a conversation, dealing with losing, and accepting "NO" for an answer. Parents, teachers, and children can role play the skills to gain confidence to use them in real-life interactions. There are sections on "how to" teach the skills using the book as well as how to make your own social skills picture books. This book understands and utilizes the importance of visual aids in teaching individuals with autism spectrum disorders.
CARD Albany Welcomes New Staff Members!

Laura Hiruma, B.A., Graduate Assistant
Laura Hiruma received a B.A. degree in Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. While at UCLA, she worked as a research assistant in a lab studying cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) as an intervention for anxiety in children with autism spectrum disorders. She has had extensive training in Applied Behavior Analytic (ABA) interventions working as a one-on-one behavioral aide for young children with autism, along with experience contributing to the development and assessment of individualized behavioral, self-help, and social skills plans for children and adolescents with autism. Laura’s professional experience also includes working with families and siblings of children with autism in the home-setting, as well as working as a one-on-one aide in a special education classroom. She is currently enrolled in the doctoral program for clinical psychology at the University at Albany, SUNY.

Jillian Tobia, B.A., Graduate Assistant
Jillian Tobia received a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from the State University of New York at Albany. Her professional experience includes working in a residential setting with children and youth who have severe emotional and behavioral problems, developmental disabilities (including autism spectrum disorders), and who have experienced trauma. In that program, she helped create a therapeutic environment while teaching independent living skills and setting goals for future growth. Jillian has had extensive training in crisis intervention both as a hotline counselor and a residential counselor. She is currently enrolled in the School Psychology Certificate of Advanced Study program at the University at Albany.

CARD Conference DVDs
DVD copies of the 8th annual conference will be available for purchase soon. You may contact CARD’s office toll-free at 866-442-2574 to pre-order a copy.

DVD copies of CARD’s 3rd Annual Statewide Conference held in Buffalo in April 2009 are available for purchase. Please visit CARD’s website for more information about the conference sessions at http://www.albany.edu/psy/autism or call CARD toll-free at 866-442-2574.

National Conference Continued
“Increasing Capacity of Schools to Develop Effective Programs for Students with ASD”. For more information on CARD’s National Conference presentations please call CARD’s office toll-free at 866-442-2574.

Research Continued
Although ToM is only one way of investigating how children with ASD see the social world, it has provided us with valuable information and has important implications for social functioning. Children who have a deficient ToM, do not attribute social characteristics to the actions of others, and fail to attend to socially relevant stimuli will obviously face unique challenges with regard to social interactions. We now have a strong research base that clearly indicates the presence of ToM deficits in children and adolescents with ASD. Future research should continue to explore the effects of ToM on general social functioning and investigate whether targeted interventions can be effective at improving ToM in children with ASD. For more information about this research article, please contact Melissa Rinaldi, Research Coordinator toll-free at 866-442-2574.