The Key Elements of an Effective Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Transition Program

Jennifer Fong
Pacific University
School of Occupational Therapy
My Experiential

Easter Seals-Goodwill
Salt Lake City, Utah

Administration
Director of Services
• annual surveys
• review grant writing
• program evaluation

Children Services
• Wiggly Worms
• Handwriting Camp
• Lego Club

Adolescent Services
• Peer Connections
What is ASD?

**Autism Spectrum Disorder**

1. Impaired social communication and interaction
2. Restricted and repetitive behaviors
3. Present in early childhood

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)
ASD and Employment

Statistics
Less likely to:
• become employed
• work full –time
• earn competitive wages

(Christensen et al., 2016; Roux et al., 2013; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011)

Barriers to Employment
• sensory sensitivities
• resistance to change
• impaired communication
• understanding social cues

(Hume, Boyd, Hamm, & Kucharczyk, 2014)
Work as a Meaningful Occupation

Increased independence
Pursue areas of interest
Contribute to society

Decreased financial stress
Increased social engagement

(Christensen et al., 2016; Roux et al., 2013; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011)
Peer Connections

The Program

9 week program
Non-profit community sites
Peer Partners
Site Facilitators

Desired Outcome: Higher education or employment

The Clients

“Students”
Age 16-24
Social communication difficulties
Average to above average cognition

PEER CONNECTIONS®
Explorations in Life Skills
My Capstone Project

My question: What elements make transition programs effective for ASD populations?

Part 1: Review the literature

Part 2: Evaluate a single transition program: Peer Connections
Key Elements Identified in the Literature

Element 1
Peer support
(Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung & Sisco, 2011; Weiss & Rohland, 2015)

Element 2
Meaningful work experience
(Hendricks, 2010; Higgins, Koch, Boughfman, & Vierstra, 2008; Laugeson et al.)

Element 3
Client-centered services
(Higgins et al., 2008, Lee & Carter, 2012)

Element 4
Initiation of services at a young age
(Cimera, Burgess, & Wiley, 2013; Lee & Carter, 2012; Rusch, Hughes, Agran, Martin, & Johnson, 2009)
Tools to Evaluate the Program

Student surveys
Staff surveys
Structured observations of program
Evaluation of Peer Connections

Comparison of the Peer Connections Program and the four key elements
Element 1: Peer Support

Young adults age 18-25

Responsibilities

• role model
• encouragement
• practice skills
• feedback
Structured Observations
Element 1: Peer Support

- Student asked for help: 3
- Student attempted same task: 3
- Partner demonstrated work task: 8
# Survey Results: Element 1: Peer Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at All (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Helpful (%)</th>
<th>Very Helpful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students: Was it helpful to have your partner teach you skills to work?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff: Was it helpful to teach your student work skills?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students: Was it helpful to see your partner interact with guests before you tried?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff: Was it helpful to model talking with guests before he/she tried?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perception of Peer Support

“My favorite part of this program was talking with my peer. She was really nice and helped me talk to other people.” - Student
Element 2: Meaningful Work Experience

Non-profit community sites
• aquarium
• museums
• retail stores

Emphasis on customer service vs. repetitive tasks
Structured Observations
Element 2: Meaningful Work Experience

Observations

- Applied weekly goal
- Independently attempted job skill
- Attempted to solve problem
- Experienced a problem

Frequency per 20 min
## Survey Results
### Element 2: Meaningful Work Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Helpful (%)</th>
<th>Very Helpful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students: Was it helpful to practice problem solving?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students: Was it helpful to practice talking with guests and staff?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perception of Meaningful Work Experience

“Having the confidence of doing a job in a volunteer setting. It was nice to gain work skills in a practice environment.” - Student
Element 3: Client-Centered Services

- Students reflect on experience
- Strength-based feedback
- Collaborative goal setting
- Individualized supports
## Survey Results

### Element 3: Client-centered services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful (%)</th>
<th>Very Helpful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students: Was it helpful to make your own weekly goals?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff: Was it helpful for the student to make their weekly goals?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perception of Client-Centered Services

“For most students, the before and after feedback yielded the greatest changes in behavior.” - Staff
Element 4: Age of Service Initiation

Peer Connections
Student Demographics

Number of Students

Age of Students (years)
N=20

16-17
18-19
20-21
22-23
24-25

0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
Perception of Age of Service Initiation

“I think starting services at a younger age would be helpful for the students. It is difficult to change habits they have developed for over 20 years.”-Staff
Peer connections successfully implements 3 of 4 recommended evidence driven elements of effective ASD transition programs.

Findings indicate expanding the target age of program participants.
Reflection on Experience

Easter Seals Disability Services

PEER CONNECTIONS®
Explorations in Life Skills
Thank You

Janet Wade
Senior Director of Family Support and Transition Services

Crystal Emery
Youth and Children’s Services Manager

Sandra Pelham-Foster
Faculty Advisor
Questions?


