Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an umbrella term that encompasses a continuum of diagnostic categories including Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. Autism Spectrum Disorders are biologically based, lifelong developmental disabilities that are usually present in the first few years of life. ASD disorders are collectively characterized by the presence of abnormalities in social functioning, deficits in social interactional skills, and the presence of specialized and/or restricted interests or patterns of behavior.

The social impairments most commonly seen in children and adolescents with ASD include: deficits in social and emotional reciprocity, difficulty relating to others, failure to share enjoyment with others, limited social expressiveness, sensitivity to social cues, and deficits in recognizing facial expressions. These impairments can put ASD children, adolescents and adults at risk for experiencing a host of adjustment and mental health problems such as isolation, academic underachievement, increased victimization and employment difficulties.

The need for effective treatments designed to address the key social skills deficits of children, adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorders has never been greater. In fact, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention report that 1 in 88 children are currently diagnosed with ASD, a number that marks a 78 percent increase from the last decade (APA Monitor, 2012). It is likely that earlier intervention and more inclusive diagnostic categories combined with the development of increasingly sophisticated and sensitive assessment tools have bolstered this striking rise in prevalence rates.

Need for Treatment

While the increasingly early recognition of this disorder marks a major advancement in the field, finding a therapist or provider who is skilled and trained in administering empirically supported treatment interventions for this population may prove a daunting task to many parents and families of those newly diagnosed with ASD. Although the rates of the diagnosis have sharply increased, the development of treatment options for children, adolescents and adults with ASD has lagged behind the demand for services in and around Northern Colorado.

As part of my doctoral training, I have been fortunate enough to work for 4 years as a staff therapist in the Autism Clinic, housed in the Psychological Services Center at Colorado State University and under the supervision of Dr. Lee Rosén, an expert in early childhood development and the director of the Psychological Services Center. Through my work at CSU, I have observed the increased demand for entry into our social skills group programs. These programs are designed to treat High Functioning Autistic (HFA) children, adolescents and adults. In fact, at our Autism Clinic we are often met with the difficult task of accommodating long lists of new referrals, some of whom are families commuting from as far away as Cheyenne, WY and Colorado Springs, CO. These families describe the dearth of programs or the lengthy waitlists in their communities as reasons why they endure the long commutes to our program.

Social Skills Groups Curriculum

Over the past sixteen years, the Psychological Services Center has established several social skills groups that successfully treat children, adolescents and adults with High Functioning Autistic Disorder (HFA). Our groups range from 6-10 individuals per group and cover topics like initiating and maintaining conversations, cell-phone etiquette, flexibility, sportsmanship, maintaining friendships, self-presentation, assertiveness, bullying and romantic relationships.

(Continued on page 2)
Connections

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www.healthdistrict.org/connections

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Connections is published 6 times/year. The purpose of Connections is to offer information on current therapy groups and services in the community; provide updates on services available through the Connections Program; and offer a place where information on community happenings of interest to mental health and human services providers can be shared.

Submissions are welcome. E-mail them to Emily Leetham at eleetham@healthdistrict.org by the following deadlines:

NEXT EDITION: Jan/Feb 2013
Article Deadline: Dec. 15, 2012

Submissions printed in Connections do not necessarily reflect the views of the Connections Program. Our editorial staff do not check the credentials of individuals wishing to submit groups or other listings. If you have concerns regarding credentials or other issues, please contact the group leader or author of the article directly. Thank you.

(Continued from page 1)

Our social skill’s curriculum is based on three key factors that research has shown to contribute to enhanced outcomes for ASD/HFA children and adolescents.

1. Parental Involvement: Parents are seen as critical “agents of intervention,” and their support and efforts to practice the targeted skills at home are important to behavioral change. Targeted practice, prompting, and reinforcement are critical for the child or adolescent to be able to generalize to settings beyond the group. Weekly parent-feedback sessions and the parent-handouts offer suggestions for practice and reinforcement.

2. Didactic Format: New skills are taught using specific scripts that are appropriate for the age and adaptive functioning level of the group members. The purpose and the skills are discussed, and the broad skills are broken down into component behavioral parts.

3. Behavioral Techniques: Group participants are encouraged to practice the target behavior through guided role-plays. The behavior is then prompted during an interactive group activity, such as bowling or team building exercises. The behaviors are reinforced via verbal praise and/or food-based or monetary incentives provided as rewards for the successful completion of skill-enhancement homework assignments.

Autism Speaks-Sponsored Training Opportunity

This past April our agency was awarded an Autism Speaks Grant to provide training to teachers and mental health professionals. Our aim is to assist 10 northern Colorado communities in establishing similar social skills programs by providing comprehensive instruction and low-cost educational materials. This grant is supervised by Dr. Lee Rosen, an expert in early childhood development and the director of the Psychological Services Center at Colorado State University.

Our comprehensive training program consists of a four-hour long instructional seminar led by two doctoral students who have over 6 years of combined experience developing and implementing these social skills groups. The workshop costs $45, which covers the cost of the printed materials distributed during the workshop and the book Social Skills Groups for Children and Adolescents with Asperger’s Syndrome: A Step by Step Program. Upon completion of the training, attendees will receive certificates from the Colorado State University authorizing their completion of the course.

We’ll be offering this exciting training opportunity to key professionals and educators in the Northern Colorado community who would be interested in learning how to run their own social skills group. The training will be held on Friday February 8th, 2013, from 12pm-4pm. The workshop will be held on Colorado State University’s campus. Please email me at: Elizabeth.christensen@colostate.edu or leave a message on my voicemail at (970) 460-6332, if you are interested as space is limited and registration is required. I look forward to hearing from you!

Elizabeth Christensen, M.S. is a Doctoral Student in the Psychology Department at Colorado State University. Please email or call her with any questions you may have regarding this article or the Autism Speaks Training Opportunity.
**Announcements**

### Connections’ New Hire!

We are pleased to announce that Megan Winick is the new Connections Client Advocate. Megan comes to us from QOL Meds and Touchstone Health Partners. She holds an Associate Degree in Medical Specialties and is pursuing her degree in Psychology.

Megan enjoys working in the mental health field and is passionate about helping others. When Megan is not at work or studying, she enjoys relaxing and spending time with her cat, Giovanni. She is very excited about being part of the Connections Team and looks forward to helping people in the community.

We are thrilled to have Megan join our team!

### Touchstone Health Partners Breakfast

**Transforming Lives Free Fundraising Breakfast**

Join Touchstone Health Partners as they speak about some of the innovative things that have been going on at Touchstone in the past year. Enjoy an inspiring morning featuring stories of Touchstone clients. Learn how you can make a difference in the hearts and minds of the community.

**When:** Thursday, November 8th, 7:45-9:00 a.m.

**Where:** Fort Collins Hilton
425 W. Prospect Road
Fort Collins, CO 80526

If you would like to attend, please contact Kathy Forrest at kathy.forrest@touchstonehealthpartners.org or (970)494-4342.

### Wholeness Center Open House

The Wholeness Center would like to take a moment to update the community on exciting things that have been happening. In appreciation of the community’s warm support, they invite you to attend their Professional Open House from **3:00-6:00 p.m. on Friday, November 9th**. They will be providing wine, cheese, as well as other culinary treats. There will be a neurofeedback demonstration at 4:30 and chocolate truffle preparation and sampling at 5:30.

The Wholeness Center also invites you to learn about their Integrated Mental Health Professional Enrichment Series. This is an hour-long session education series designed to help you advance your practice and takes place once a month.

If you would like more information about the Open House or the Professional Enrichment Series, please contact the Wholeness Center at (970) 221-1106.

2620 E. Prospect Road, Suite 190, Fort Collins, CO 80525
This is an ongoing group providing supervision for people who need hours for licensure. Space is limited. This group meets two times per month for an hour each time.

The cost is $35.00 per session. The location is in Old Town, Fort Collins. There are two facilitators: Rachel Isenberg, LCSW, ACSW and Maggie Tibbitts, LCSW.

If you are interested in participating in this group, please call Rachel at (970) 490-6851, or Maggie at (970) 988-4173.

Andrea Holt, LMFT, CAC III, EMDR II, is providing a Supervision Group for LMFT, LPC, and CAC. This meets the second Tuesday of each month.

Time: 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.
Location: 612 S. College Avenue, Suite 23
Fort Collins, CO 80524
Cost: $30-35 per hour ($60-70 for the 2 hour block)

Contact Andrea at (970)691-9007 for more information and to check availability.

When we connect and share across disciplines and orientations, we all benefit. This group is for professional counselors and therapists of all flavors (LPC, LCSW, PhD, LMFT, CAC, etc) to connect, build community, talk shop, share ideas, resources, network, and learn from each other in Fort Collins. License not required, but a professional orientation, a desire to relate, connect, learn, and be helpful to your peers is. If you love to exchange ideas, resources, upcoming events, and just connect with others doing similar work, we would love to have you join us!

Website: [http://www.meetup.com/Fort-Collins-Counselor-and-Therapist-Community/](http://www.meetup.com/Fort-Collins-Counselor-and-Therapist-Community/)

For more information, please contact Chuck Hancock, M.Ed., NCC, at [chuck@innerlifeadventures.com](mailto:chuck@innerlifeadventures.com)