

The Building Blocks Autism Assessment Program: Finally an Answer to a Much Asked Question

by Linda Massucci

Where do parents go when they know their child isn't mastering the typical early childhood development stages? Most parent's turn to their pediatrician and then their doctor may recommend a program that offers assessments and treatment. What if there is no program to recommend? This was the problem many pediatricians encountered, but now there is an answer-the Building Blocks Autism Assessment Program at the Community Child Guidance Clinic in Manchester, CT.

The coordinator of the program, Trish Sloan, has seen the program benefit many families since its inception in August 2008. "There is so much support for identifying children at the shoreline area of Connecticut, but there isn't much around here. Pediatricians would call the clinic and ask 'what can I tell this family'...it was frustrating." And so, Mrs. Sloan and a team of professionals at the Community Child Guidance Clinic, developed a program that offers assessments, treatment and support to the family and all those involved in the child's life.

"It is important that the whole family receives support. Having a child with autism affects everyone...parents can learn effective play therapy...schools learn how to adapt and best support the child..." states Trish Sloan. Mrs. Sloan, a graduate of Brigham Young University and a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Central Connecticut State University, works with a team that includes a child psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, clinical social workers, an occupational therapist and a speech and language pathologist. The team conducts formal assessments during a three week period that may include sensory sensitivity, fine and gross motor skills, peer interactions, play skills, receptive/expressive language, attention, temperament, toileting skills, pivotal response behaviors, social interactions, behaviors and sleep. Also, the team may conduct observations at the child's home, school or other settings where the child interacts in the community.

Social Symptoms

- prefer being alone
- slower to interpret others thinking or feeling
- difficulty seeing things from another's perspective
- difficulty regulating emotions

Communication Difficulties

- unable to combine words into meaningful sentences
- facial expressions, movements and gestures rarely match what they are saying

Repetitive Behaviors

- repeatedly flapping arms or walking on toes; freeze in position
- persistent, intense preoccupation
- need and demand absolute consistency in their environment
- instead of pretend play-focus may spending hours lining up their cars in a certain way

'Autism Spectrum Disorders'

U.S. Department of Health & Human Resources, 2008

Presently, the common age spans of the children assessed at the clinic are between four and eight years old. Mrs. Sloan states early intervention is important. When asked what is the best advice she can give parents who may be struggling with a child who is not yet identified, she responds "...go to school and ask for assessments, advice...make use of these resources and ask a lot of questions...go on the internet...listen to people

around you and access your resources...early intervention is critical- ages three to five- critical ages for intervention of autism...” Mrs. Sloan also added legislation was recently passed which allows some insurances to pay for occupational and speech therapy. A parent may also ask their school for assessments to be conducted or seek ‘outside assessments’. **It is also vitally important to always have a referral from a physician.**

The most recent statistic states one in one hundred fifty children are diagnosed with autism. Thanks to the many grants, private donations and funds from insurance groups- the Building Blocks Autism Assessment Program is able to help identify and support many families in need. Mrs. Sloan takes pride in the process of their assessments and support provided to the family. “After the testing, the family receives a book of all the assessments conducted, we review the results and provide outreach programs. I am constantly updating my information of services for families. We try to answer all their questions and continue to provide support to everyone involved in the child’s life...(having a child with autism) is much better managed as a family than as an individual.”

Trish Sloan states the best part of her job is “...working with kids... there is always a new story.” Although the process of identifying and finding support for children with special needs is stressful for parents- with people like Trish Sloan constantly seeking a better way- I think the path is becoming a bit smoother.

For more information, please contact Trish Sloan at the Community Child Guidance Clinic via www.ccginc.org The program attempts to provide support to all children, families and parent advocacy groups regardless of town and/or finances.

Linda Massucci is a freelance writer and always interested in writing about programs that are making a difference in education. You may contact her via www.lindamassucci.com