A preschool student uses a communication device during snack time in the ASSERT classroom.

The ASSERT preschool classroom is a place where everyday tasks are broken down into the smallest possible steps, where the tiniest victories are celebrated and monumental obstacles are conquered one baby-step at a time. Autism Support Services: Education, Research and Training (ASSERT) is a program at Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities for preschool-age children on the autism spectrum. ASSERT uses applied behavioral analysis to change the negative behaviors of children with autism, said Lyndsay Nix, ASSERT program coordinator. The preschool is in session year-round, with two-week breaks at the beginning of June and the end of August. Each child has their own cubicle and a teacher who uses ABA techniques to reinforce specific, desired behaviors. Recently, a small group of children practiced social conversation and behavior during snack time, which doubles as a teaching experience. “Mary, please give me a cookie,” said one boy at the table. Mary responded by picking up a piece of cookie and flying it over her head before placing it in the boy’s hand. After a few tries and some coaching from their teachers, the two children were able to exchange cookie bits more quickly. Often, teachers have to engage in a little detective work to figure out what a child is trying to communicate. At a different table, the children ask for a particular snack by pointing to picture cards. One boy pointed to a picture of a gummy treat and received a small piece, resulting in screaming and squirming as he tried to leave the table. Soon his teacher realized that he wanted a specific color of gummy treat. She quickly placed color cards on the table so he could communicate what he wanted, and relative calm was restored.

The ASSERT preschool class celebrates the Week of the Young Child with a parade down the center of campus. ASSERT is also a training site for the Autism Enhancement strand of Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (URLEND). Trainees attend a week-long training at the clinic and receive the same training as staff members. They work with the children in the morning and have didactic sessions in the afternoon. “They learn the policies, techniques and strategies we use so that when they leave, they have the full experience and have been trained as ASSERT staff,” Nix said. “Those who aren’t on the AE track are still welcome to set up observations as often as they like to get as much of an experience as they want.” In addition to being a URLEND training site, ASSERT provides consultations for school districts throughout Utah and provides training to school district personnel on effective educational and behavioral strategies for children with autism. ASSERT also provides monthly training especially for the parents of children in the program and children who are on the waiting list to get into the program, although anyone can attend the classes. In addition, ASSERT staff members give presentations to USU classes that are interested in autism, as well as providing short-term consulting services for parents on the waiting list. “We’re pretty much open to anyone who needs support in dealing with people with autism,” Nix said.