CPD Clinic Offers Interdisciplinary Evaluation of Autism

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Graduate student Merrill Jones conducts an assessment for the ASD clinic.

Often, the diagnosis of autism comes from a single professional—a psychologist, a medical doctor, a social worker—and parents are left with that diagnosis, but no clue about what to do next. The Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Evaluation Clinic at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities offers interdisciplinary evaluations of children and a comprehensive list of resources to parents.

“We realized that one of the complaints of parents of kids with ASD is that they have to go six different places to get help,” said clinical psychologist Marty Toohill. “We asked, ‘Can we do this under one roof?’”

Sue Olsen, CPD Director of Exemplary Services and the clinic’s administrator, said that in addition to the “gold standards” of autism testing—the Autism Developmental Inventory (ADI) and the Autism Developmental Observation Schedule (ADOS)—the clinic evaluation team also conducts speech/language evaluations, occupational therapy evaluations including sensory processing and overall motor development, and medical evaluations through the CPD Biomedical Division to determine if there are any genetic or other health reasons that can contribute to the diagnosis.

“We used the best practices from each discipline to build the clinic,” said Vicki Simonsmeier, assistant clinical professor in USU’s Communication Disorders and Deaf Education department. She coordinates speech-language evaluations and, with Toohill, coordinates the clinic’s operations.

The ADI, an 80-page scripted interview that can take as long as three hours to complete, is often the first experience parents have with the clinic, said nurse practitioner George Wootton. He and Simonsmeier each administer the ADI. Toohill administers the ADOS and cognitive testing, which includes direct observation of the children as they play and interact with others.

Pediatric occupational therapist Ryan Winn also observes and engages in pretend play to determine how a child responds to sight, sound, touch and movement. Dennis Odell is the director of medical services and co-director of the CPD’s Biomedical Division, and is in private clinical practice in pediatrics. In the autism clinic, Odell performs the health evaluation and developmental screen, looking for diagnostic signs and symptoms of autism and its associated problems.

In many clinics, the children are seen by one person who administers one test, Simonsmeier said.

“We really feel they are best evaluated by a group of professionals … Our evaluation takes two days, so everyone sees the child on multiple occasions,” she said. “We see them at their best and we see the things they struggle with.”

Fees for a clinic evaluation are assessed on a tiered, income-based scale, Simonsmeier said. The waiting list for an evaluation is shorter than at many clinics, she said, and encouraged parents who have concerns about their child to call for more information.

After all of the evaluations have been completed, Toohill and Simonsmeier meet to discuss and work through the findings, prioritizing interventions according to the child’s needs. They then meet with the family in a feedback session to provide the diagnosis and make recommendations for the treatment and education of the child.

The reports generated by the interdisciplinary team are often more than 20 pages long, and are written without a lot of medical and academic phrases that can be confusing. In addition to the extensive report, the clinic maintains a list of community resources so parents have a better idea of what their next steps might be.

For more information, call the CPD at (435) 797-1981.