Assert Celebrates 10 Years of Success | CPD

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An ASSERT student looks at a book while his teacher keeps track of the time.

Six years ago, Frankie Hinkle was a preschooler on the autism spectrum who could repeat words, but could not carry on a conversation. Today, the 10-year-old is successful in her neurotypical classroom, rides her scooter around the block, earns an allowance and goes to sleepovers with her friends.

The difference, said her mother Shelly, was ASSERT.

The ASSERT (Autism Support Services: Education, Research and Training) preschool at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities serves children ages 3-5 who are on the autism spectrum. With a 1:1 staff to student ratio, the preschool utilizes applied behavior analysis (ABA) to change the often challenging behaviors of autism.

“It was life-changing for us,” Hinkle said. “I don’t know what we would have done without ASSERT.”

“ABA works so well because it’s based on science,” said Thomas Higbee, director of ASSERT. Data gathered during ASSERT research projects have been presented at 60 state, regional and national conferences, and 18 research papers have been published.

“All the techniques have been carefully researched and refined over many years,” Higbee said. “It’s completely individualized based on each child’s specific needs.”

One technique that is used is called discrete trial teaching and involves repetition, practice and positive reinforcement.

“It involves breaking down complex behavior into its basic parts and giving many opportunities to practice these basic skills,” Higbee said. “Over time, these build into complex skills.”

To improve the children’s independence, a photographic activity schedule is used.

“We teach them to follow photographic cues to move from one activity to another instead of depending on adults,” Higbee said. “Over time the schedule looks more and more like a calendar you or I might use.”

Another technique is called social scripting.

“We analyze the social situation and script it out like you’d script out a movie,” Higbee said. “Once we teach them their lines, they start recombining that language and saying new things.”

These behavioral strategies are used to decrease the problem behaviors that many children on the autism spectrum exhibit.

“We teach them how to request things they want and need, to allow them to control their environment and get their needs met,” Higbee said. “We teach them more socially acceptable ways to get what they want so they don’t have to rely on tantrums and aggression.”

Individualized instruction

One-on-one instruction is an important component of the ASSERT model.

Dax Drysdale, now 8, attended the ASSERT preschool from age 3 to 5.

“He was really non-compliant a lot,” said his mother, Jill. “A lot of problem behaviors were nailed in the ASSERT program. He’s doing super now, and he’s in a mainstream classroom. He pretty much functions with his peers.”

Drysdale said Dax’s progress is due to the ASSERT staff and the unique way the program is tailored to each child.

“The majority of time is spent in their cubbies for individual one-on-one time with their instructors,” said ASSERT program coordinator Lyndsay Nix. “There is no down time. Everything they do is to facilitate social skills and interactions. They are always working on something.”

Even during snack time, the focus is not on eating, but on practicing social language and how to request what they want, she said.

The preschool runs for four hours a day, five days a week, with two-week breaks at the beginning and end of summer and at Christmas. Each child works with two different staff members each day.

Drysdale said before Dax was enrolled in ASSERT, she visited the classroom to see how it all worked.

“It looked like it was so much time and effort and structure, but then as we got into it we knew it was the right thing,” she said. “We loved that it was not like a preschool where everyone was doing the same thing. The staff was super. It was a really great experience.”

Hinkle said the ASSERT door is always open.

“Nobody has ever turned us away for help or advice, and she’s 10,” she said. “They’re always willing to communicate and they never get tired of answering questions.”

ASSERT started as an idea in 2002, Higbee said, when he was interviewing for a position in the department of special education and rehabilitation at USU after earning a doctorate in behavioral analysis from the University of Nevada-Reno and working as a senior clinician at a school for children with severe disabilities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“That topic kept coming up in my interview; the need for more services for kids on the autism spectrum,” he said. “We decided to build a preschool program because that’s where we could have the most impact. Sally Rule, then the CPD director, gave us office space for the classroom and my department gave us staff.”

The 10-week pilot program began in the summer of 2003.

“It’s gratifying to think back to those early days in a 10x10 office with four kids, and how many families we’ve helped in the last 10 years,” Higbee said. “We look forward to helping even more in the future.”

Over the last 10 years, about 50 families (some with more than one child) have been through the program.

Beyond USU

In addition to providing services to children on the autism spectrum and their families, ASSERT is also a training facility for USU students, Utah Regional Leadership
Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (URLEND) trainees and for special educators. Eighteen graduate students and more than 160 undergrads have been trained in the ASSERT model.

“The thing we are most proud of is the children who have gone through the program and what they’ve accomplished, and the trainees that are carrying the message of ASSERT to many other areas,” Higbee said.

Park City and Granite School Districts are just two of the 14 school districts across Utah that utilize the ASSERT model.

Park City’s special education coordinator, Nicole Stewart, said about five or six years ago the district had a student who was showing classic signs of autism at his third birthday.

“We started to integrate him into the special ed preschool and Head Start,” Stewart said. “The parents weren’t well-educated, but they wanted what was best for their child. We had meetings, Bill Jensen from the U of U (department of educational psychology) came up and said ‘you need to get in touch with Tom.’ We contracted with ASSERT the next year.”

Park City’s program was developed initially based on two students.

“Those children are now third-graders, and we’re still doing a very ABA program with them,” Stewart said. “Since that time we’ve opened a district-wide preschool.”

Children with disabilities are integrated into all classrooms and teachers are trained by USU, Stewart said.

“We have a much more systematic approach and a certainly much more effective approach,” she said. “It’s data-based and it has bled out into special ed in general. We have happy parents and teachers with better skills than they’ve had before. Our district has really benefitted from this training.”

Granite School District’s model uses ASSERT strategies at the elementary level, said Noelle Converse, Granite’s special education coordinator. The district serves West Valley City, Taylorsville, South Salt Lake and Holladay, as well as Kearns, Magna and Millcreek Townships and parts of West Jordan, Murray and Cottonwood Heights.

“We have a strong interest in using ABA generally in our district to guide all of our programs in special education,” Converse said. “We’re really trying to apply ABA into all of our programs, not just exclusively the students with autism.”

Granite began a targeted discrete trial program in one preschool classroom two years ago and has now extended it past kindergarten.

Converse said the model is a project in process, and the district is working with Higbee and his staff to maintain the integrity of the ASSERT model and see the same kinds of gains for students with special needs in mainstream classrooms.

“We’re going to have the ASSERT style available in the early years of elementary school so they’ll still have access to some of the ASSERT programs,” Converse said. “We want to apply it to whoever needs it without having to pull the students out of their classroom.”

Converse said the most amazing thing about the program is when a team diagnoses a child appropriately and sees the change in behavior.

“ASSERT really works,” she said. “We value it.”

From an administrative perspective, Converse said, she appreciates the professionalism and the support that have come from USU.

“They really understand how school districts work,” Converse said. “They bridge the gap between research and practice in a way that makes sense.”

Former and current ASSERT students, parents and staff are invited to a 10-year reunion celebration at 5 p.m. Friday, August 9 at Willow West Rotary Pavilion, 500 W. 700 S. in Logan. RSVP to Lyndsay Nix at (435) 797–8278.