

American College of Mental Health Administration



ACMHA ARM CHAIR REFLECTIONS Training Clinicians, Teachers, and Family Members to Support Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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The American College of Mental Health Administration (ACMHA) is committed to broadly informing behavioral health stakeholders about key issues and innovations in our field. This piece focuses on a crisis in an area of child and adolescent services that is overwhelming families, schools, and service providers. A partial solution to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) work force development and caretaker support is presented. Subsequent articles will explore additional needs and trends in child and adolescent services.

Autism Facts

- 1 in 166 children is diagnosed with autism.
- 67 children are diagnosed each day.
- A new case is diagnosed almost every 20 minutes
- More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes, and cancer combined.
- Autism costs the nation over \$90 billion per year. By 2013 this figure is expected to reach \$400 billion per year/
- Autism receives less than 5 percent of the research funding of many less prevalent childhood diseases.
- There is currently no medical detection or cure for autism.

The Problem

Given the facts about autism, one of the most significant challenges facing the nation is a work force issue: *How to equip clinicians, special education and mainstream teachers, and caretakers with the skills and understanding of how to work with and maximize the opportunities for individuals diagnosed with ASD.*

Today, the training of new teachers and clinicians is inadequate to meet projected personnel needs. The problem is particularly acute in education, resulting in a large number of teachers entering the profession with significant staff development needs. There are also parallel shortages of behaviorally trained clinicians in most regions. The net result is the inability of the professional workforce to meet the critical needs of children and young adults with ASD as well family members and caretakers.

Towards A Solution

With advances in online learning, one can continuously research and update scientific findings and incorporate them into web-based training programs and courses. Online courses are also cost effective; accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week; and incorporate competency testing.

These programs should ideally use technology and design that is built on sound human learning theory. With the focus on learning outcomes the structure, content, and interface employed in quality programs allows participants to successfully learn and to subsequently demonstrate and apply their knowledge in practice.

In this case, course content should specifically focus on the key elements of effective best practice and educational models for people with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Accordingly, key competencies covered in the course would include unique characteristics of autism and a variety of systematic instructional methods and behavioral approaches of Applied Behavior Analysis.

Through the presentation of the course material and competency testing, participants can learn how to support, teach, and work with people who have autism and understand what is involved in changing and learning new behaviors. Fortunately, user friendly training programs in the field of autism are beginning to appear in the market place and are worthy of investigation. I would be happy to assist readers in locating references or by providing guidance on this subject.