Field Report

Stepping Stones Learning Center

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Stepping Stones Learning Center, located in West Irondequoit, NY, has sustained high-quality, specialized applied behavior analytic programs since 1996 within an agency that has a broad mission of serving children with and without special needs. The agency's success reflects long-standing commitment from its leaders, frequent expert consultation, substantial experience and knowledge within the agency, and well-established relationships with community partners.

Can a community agency with a broad mission sustain high-quality, specialized applied behavior analytic (ABA) services? Stepping Stones Learning Center (SSLC) exemplifies an agency that has successfully done so. Located in West Irondequoit, NY, bordered by the city of Rochester to the south and Lake Ontario to the north, SSLC opened in 1994 as an early childhood program for children with and without special needs. It was founded by a certified speech and language pathologist and school district administrator, Mariellen Cupini, who continues to serve as the agency chief executive officer. SSLC now offers inclusive and specialized classrooms for children ages 2–5 years in West Irondequoit and at satellite locations in adjacent counties, home-based services for children with a variety of special needs, wraparound services before and after the regular school day, a respite camp during school breaks and summer for children up to 12 years old, and behavioral consultation and support services for children and youth up to 21 years old.

Amid all of these other programs, SSLC has provided ABA services for children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) since 1996. The services were developed in response to parent requests for ABA services. Young

children are placed into the early intervention and preschool programs through their individualized family service program or individualized education plan. About 60 children with ASD are currently enrolled in these programs. Older children qualify for Medicaid service coordination, autism support, social skills development, respite, or behavioral consultation by meeting New York State requirements for these services. Fifty children with ASD are enrolled in programs for school-age children and youth. Because interventions for all children with ASD in the agency are publicly funded, the children come from highly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

SSLC has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of its ABA services. It arranges for consultants from Autism Partnership in Seal Beach, CA, to fly across the country six times per year to provide technical assistance to the agency. The consultants are leading authorities on ABA for children with ASD: John McEachin, Ph.D., who was a supervisor and researcher in the original study by Lovaas (1987; McEachin, Smith, & Lovaas, 1993), and his long-time colleague, Sandy Slater, Ph.D. The consultants stay for up to a week at a time to work with children, parents, and teams of educators. On site, SSLC

employs three Board Certified Behavior Analysts®, and its services are overseen by coordinators who have been at the agency for more than 16 years. New service providers take part in a week-long training workshop prior to each school year, with additional training as needed.

The coordinator of autism services, Mary Richardson, commented, “I have extraordinary staff that does extraordinary work with children with autism every day.” She added that SSLC’s autism programs emphasize

providing children and families with skills that make their daily life easier and more enjoyable. For some that means increasing the repertoire of food a child is willing to consume, for others it means toilet training a child that parents thought could never be trained, and for still others it means a child can now go to the grocery store, or the doctor, the park, or a photo studio, play with other children, or respond when their name is called without crying.

SSLC collaborates with the University of Rochester on multiple research projects. It is currently taking the lead on one of the first studies on ABA interventions implemented by community providers for feeding difficulties exhibited by children with ASD. Agency personnel are working with Kimberly Brown, Ph.D., a feeding specialist at the University of Rochester, to design and carry out the study. According to Richardson, SSLC developed ABA protocols for feeding difficulties because such difficulties have become increasingly common among children with ASD seen by the agency over the past decade.

SSLC has also provided a unique resource for studies initiated at the University of Rochester. For example, in a study on the gluten-free, casein-free diet (a popular but under-researched intervention for children with ASD), the researchers sought to introduce the diet to children who were already in a stable ABA program, in order to minimize the possibility that chil-

dren would change educational programs while on the diet. Most study participants were recruited from SSLC. In another study, researchers examined predictors of response to early intensive ABA. Many participants for this study were also recruited from SSLC. In two ongoing studies, researchers are comparing the effectiveness of an ABA instructional program (discrete trial training) and a developmental, play-based intervention for children with ASD who have little or no expressive communication despite a history of receiving appropriate services. SSLC is once more a vital partner for these studies. Interactions with and inservices by University of Rochester researchers enable SSLC staff to keep up to date on new research findings and projects that are underway.

SSLC illustrates the key ingredients needed for a specialized ABA program to thrive over many years in a community setting: long-standing commitment from its leaders, frequent expert consultation, substantial experience and knowledge within the agency, and well-established relationships with community partners. Far from showing signs of slowing down, the agency is taking a major step toward expansion by embarking on an ambitious capital campaign to move into its own building. This move will situate the agency to stay at the forefront of ABA services for children with ASD in Western New York.

References

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