

Asperger's/NLD Social Skills Group

A Blog Andrew Schlegelmilch, Ph.D.

September 2008 to June 2013

Introduction

Below are the contents of a blog kept between September 2008 and June 2013. This blog used to be located at www.orionacademy.blogspot.com. If you go to the link now you should find it inactive. Old blogs with no recent updates are something I find dismaying. This blog served several purposes for me. First and foremost, it was the warm-up to my first parenting book. Readers might see a strong overlap in themes between the blog and the book. Second, writing was instrumental in my work process (and still is). Writing is something that helps me move to the next stage in thought and practice, and so many of these posts were not conclusions so much as part of the process of my day. This was also helpful in avoiding the writing of weekly morality tales, another blog style I find dismaying. Finally, I loved, and still love, the process of writing. It is no mystery that I wrote most of these posts on Friday, another thing that I love. Even though I wrote these while at work, none of what I wrote was work. Instead, it was usually my favorite time of the week.

Most of these posts were written on company time, and with the permission of my employer, Orion Academy. Orion Academy (www.Orionacademy.org) is a college preparatory high school for individuals on the Spectrum, including Asperger's Syndrome and Non-verbal Learning Disorder. I worked at Orion Academy from August 2007 to July 2014, and for much of that time I was the Head Psychologist. I feel I can now reveal that the title was given to me as something of a joke by a former co-worker who thought there was more irony in being a "Head" Psychologist than a "Lead" Psychologist. I suspect I will never again work with so many focused and dedicated people as the years I spent at Orion. In this assessment I include parents as well as co-workers. I am also equally certain that there is not a better program out there to serve the needs of teens on the Spectrum.

Those that know me will not be surprised to discover that I edited this document from the original html text. That process required moving each post (it originally presented from most recent, to oldest) from the bottom to the top of the document, removing all of the command lines (before, after, and throughout each post), and turning all of the hyperlinks into footnotes, among other things. There was also a surprising number of spelling and grammar mistakes that I fixed. The editing process was extensive, but I will warn the reader that there are likely still mistakes to be found. I encourage you to email me (docschleg@gmail.com) those corrections and I will update the document.

Andrew Schlegelmilch
March 2015

September 14, 2008

Unique minds, unique needs, unique perspective

Orion Academy educates some of the most fascinating highschoolers I have met. Our kids have unique minds, and because of that, I have one of the more dynamic and challenging jobs of the people I know. Part of my job as a psychologist at Orion is to teach a class called Social Skills Group. The purpose of this class that meets twice a week for 45 minutes is to train our students in the spectrum of social skills, including basic skills like how one introduces oneself to more advanced skills like planning for one's future. All social interaction requires sensing and processing large quantities of information, and our kids often struggle under the load. They benefit from having someone such as myself help them through the cadence of conversations and nuances of relationships. Much of our class work involves pulling apart, defining and explaining, and then putting back together what others might consider ordinary aspects of the human experience.

It is because of how routine my life has a tendency to become that I look forward to going to work, and specifically to bringing new topics to the class. Having a loose grasp on the rules of social interaction also means not being bound by the rules, so when I present a topic to a group, the perspective that these kids bring to it is unique. Our synergy has resulted in brief but relevant discussions and the human experience that I felt were too good not to share. What will be presented here represents the aggregate of multiple conversations that happen over the course of several days (and sometimes weeks). My goal is to replicate the process of our class by letting you, the reader, pick up where our class discussions have left off. I hope for many of you this will give you insight into our experience at Orion Academy.

Friday, September 26, 2008

Emotion

If you know our students, it is not difficult to figure out why I chose this topic for group discussion. Emotion is at the core of the human experience and is therefore a topic we stress in our social program. Also not surprising is the fact that our students demand an argument for emotion. I suspect that many of them, if given the choice, would wash their hands of emotion forever; evolve beyond the need to encounter and process emotion. Indeed, when asked, many of the students describe emotion in negative terms. I heard, "It's evil", more than once and in several different groups.

Below is the beginning of the argument for emotion. Moving quickly past the discussion of "what is emotion?", we dove into "what is the purpose of emotion?". I swore to them that emotion was at the core of the human experience for a reason. Nature tolerates it in our DNA because it serves some useful purpose. In reading future posts you may notice that describing the purpose of esoteric concepts is commonplace at our school. Our kids benefit from this style of discussion because it capitalizes on their strengths in logical, concrete, argument-based thinking. Below is the culmination of several hours-worth of discussion, the writer being the only participant who had to sit through it all.

The kids were able to identify three main purposes for emotion. I will add a fourth.

- 1.) Emotion increases the efficiency of communication. With our kids we often comment that, beyond what one says, it's how one says it that also matters. Adding emotion to words and phrases gives the receiver a lot more information, thus speeding up information transfer.
- 2.) Emotion is a universal form of communication. It allows people to communicate despite language barriers. It also lets us communicate with preverbal infants and others who can't, don't or aren't using verbal communication.
- 3.) Emotion promotes affiliation with one another. This will come up in future posts, but science purports that we are social animals and connecting with others is another part of our nature. Emotion is one of the avenues that allows us to (through empathy) or drives us to (through need or desire) affiliate.

Number 4.) is mine and not one I expected to hear from the kids, but emotion is a primary source of enjoyment (spice) for people. This is not one, based on their definition of evil that I was expecting the kids to generate or believe. I think for most of our kids, emotion is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and more trouble than it's worth.

Friday, October 3, 2008

3 Topics, 3 Groups

Culturally and historically, Americans are not very willing to admit that there are limits to what we can talk about. I would make the proposition, however, that there are certainly topics that we do not discuss and consider out of bounds and inappropriate. Our kids, perhaps taking their First Amendment¹ rights too literally, have no qualms talking about whatever is on their mind, wherever they are. To their parents and psychologists, this can actually be a refreshing change to the typical clandestine moods and thoughts of adolescents. To a fellow commuter on the 106 bus, this can be quite annoying.

There are 3 topics which the American culture views as "out of bounds" or inappropriate for polite conversation: Money, Politics, and Religion. In social skills group I ban nearly all discussion of these topics outright (we don't exercise democracy). My reasoning is that discussing these topics in an orderly and fruitful manner requires much more social skill than they currently have, and honestly, more than most people possess. Some kids in the classes are eager to discuss these topics (translation: desperate to share their opinion) and I set this as a reward for doing good work in group. "If you work on your social skills and prove to me your maturity and readiness in the group, I will allow you to discuss the upcoming elections."

Invariably, the question that is posed is, "Why these 3?" Why not other topics, like sex or fast food? In partial response to that question, I pose the next parameter. This topic ban is only active among a certain, specified category of people: Casual Acquaintances. When efficiently categorizing the entire population of the earth into Strangers, Casual Acquaintances, and Close Friends/Family, it is only among the Casual Acquaintance that discussing these topics is devastating. In psychology we call this an interaction-A affects B, but only at certain levels of C.

My additional explanation to the kids is that these 3 topics have been chosen for their volatility. Because of other cultural norms, these topics are like relational powder kegs, and it is the Casual Acquaintance relationship that is the most tenuous and thus susceptible to jostling. Family and close friends can manage disagreement, strangers just move on, but casual relationships cannot withstand the disagreement and offense that is inevitable when discussing money, politics, and religion.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Amendment

Friday, October 10, 2008

Empathy

The topic of empathy reflects what I intend to be the true purpose of this blog. The reason I write this is because this is a topic that gets more complicated the more I talk about it. In fact, the kids and I stalled at the question of "what is empathy?" before I chose to move on to the next topic.

For the record, empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. It is often juxtaposed with sympathy, or feeling bad for someone's misfortune. I use the phrase "having a shared experience" to describe empathy. We also spent class time finding out that "empathetic" and "empathic" are synonymous¹. I normally don't like to spend time on minutia, but the processed seemed to calm their fatigued minds.

An aspect of our discussion I would like to share is the notion of conceptualizing empathy as a value-neutral concept. By "value-neutral", I mean that a concept or idea does not lend itself to value-based categorization such as good or bad, right or wrong. Empathy is often described as a good thing, but what the kids were able to uncover was that empathy has the potential to be a positive or negative force.

What instead adds value to the empathic experience is the response one has to the information gathered while empathizing. For instance, empathy plus compassion can lead to prosocial behaviors (helping someone in need), and empathy plus malice can lead to antisocial behaviors (active deception, cons). Empathy is simply a skill, and one can choose to capitalize on empathy to benefit or cost society.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empathy>

Friday, October 17, 2008

The Act of Empathy

This week I got the “let’s end it already” message (both figuratively and literally) from the kids regarding the discussion on empathy. My rigid response was that we still had two and a half weeks left in this session, so they better get used to it. I am not, however, interested in prolonging agony, so I thought I would put the discussion to bed (for now) with a final thought. I was interested in pursuing the idea of what exactly people are doing when they are empathizing. What activities do people perform in pursuit of empathy?

A knowledgeable expert once suggested that empathy is primarily and paradoxically a self-reflective activity. When we empathize, we are taking a survey of the physical and non-physical context and asking ourselves how we would feel in such a situation. We examine the person’s surroundings, look at events that have transpired, survey our knowledge of the person, and review the messages that their body is sending us. We take in all this information and more and create a model or construct of the situation and ask, “What would I do?” or, “How would I feel?” in such a situation with all these variables as constants.

I find it somewhat disappointing to discover a line of thinking that suggests that our most potentially altruistic activity has “me and my experience” at its core. I have been toying with the notion that our kids, rather than being overly self-focused, are simply more honest and open with their egocentrism than the rest of us neurotypicals¹.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurotypical>

Friday, October 24, 2008

Approach or Avoid

Our kids know anxiety. They experience it, they learn about it, they tackle it on a daily basis. If one inquires of any of our kids about anxiety, they should be able to comment, or at least achieve more than a blank stare in response to most of the following statements about anxiety. Anxiety was in its original context an adaptive trait. Evolutionarily speaking, it is one of the primary traits that has preserved our species to date. Anxiety is value-neutral. It is, in itself, neither positive nor negative, but simply a biological response completely dependent on its context for meaning. Anxiety only achieves the status of mental disorder¹ when it interferes significantly with activities of daily living.

As the readers may be aware, we at this school estimate that our kids struggle with clinical levels of anxiety that generally exceed that of the regular population² by a substantial margin. The reasons for this are complex, but it is related to our kids' difficulties with planning, emotion regulation, and social interactions, among other things. My message to our kids is that they picked a great disorder to have because anxiety is one of the most treatable³ mental disorders there is.

All things considered, individuals have essentially two options for responding to anxiety. We can approach the thing that is making us anxious (stressor), or we can avoid it. These options become more complex only as our interaction with the stressor becomes more complex and convoluted, but the options themselves remain tirelessly simplistic. In addition, the consequences of each response are simplistic as well. Approaching a stressor (or failing to avoid it) decreases the anxiety response to the stressor (through a process called habituation⁴), while avoiding the stressor tends to intensify our anxiety response.

It is from these basic principles that all effective anxiety interventions are wrought. I can think of no exceptions in the professional literature at the time of this writing. Application of these principles is something of an art though and one of the main reasons they keep me around.

¹ <http://allpsych.com/disorders/anxiety/index.html>

² <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-america.shtml#Anxiety>

³ <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/471569>

⁴ <http://gad.about.com/od/faq/g/Habituation.htm>

Friday, October 31, 2008

The Talk

If you're interested in a lively dinner discussion topic with your highschooler, try this one: In 60 seconds, try to name as many reasons as you can for why people have sex¹. You will have substantially more discomfort with this topic than will your child. Our kids achieve levels of frankness and sobriety with difficult topics that makes me (a professional, no less) jealous.

We actually ask this question (without the time limit challenge) in our Health and Transitions class. I was surprised to hear that the Juniors were recently able to generate 17 reasons. I was honestly expecting them to only be able to generate only one reason (procreation) and sight as example Battlestar Galactica², the new series, when the Cylons attacked the 13 Colonies and the existence of Mankind was in jeopardy, President Roslin stated procreation was important to ensure the survival of the human race.

Can you think of 17 reasons? I haven't tested myself, but our students have the advantage of being outside the box thinkers and generally unencumbered by current social convention that states one doesn't talk about sex ever except in private with same-sex peers, and certainly not with their parents.

¹ <http://www.talkingwithkids.org/sex.html>

² <http://www.battlestargalactica.com>

Friday, November 7, 2008

The Community in Assembly Form

Maybe you heard from your kids this week that Wednesday we had a school assembly. When I was in high school, assembly meant getting out of class. Even if I wasn't personally invested in the message (cheering on the JV table-tennis team) or had moral issues with the purpose (selling overpriced chocolate to my parent's friends to pay for new uniforms for the JV table-tennis team), I was happy to have a period or two to let my brain relax. Not so our kids. The most common complaint was that they had to miss class. I am not making this up.

This was a pro-community assembly. As you are all aware, we take a communal approach to everything we do at Orion. Using the concept of community¹, we promote interdependence, teamwork, trust, and relationship-building. If you have ever wondered why we have set any particular expectation or rule (chores, no locks on lockers, uniform desktops on computer screens), more than likely it is for the purpose of promoting or maintaining the community. A pro-community assembly addresses the very existence and being of Orion Academy, so we like to have one every so often.

We asked the kids to respond to a series of about 4 questions. 1. What were you expecting from Orion? 2. Why are you attending Orion? 3. What has been your experience so far at Orion? 4. How can you be a benefit to the Orion community?

The first two questions were designed to get "buy-in" from the kids, or simply to get them in a state of mind where they acknowledge their presence at Orion is purposeful and that they directly benefit from being here. The third question was designed to help the kids collectively identify ways they have benefited from being here as well as threats to the community. Specifically, the faculty wanted to address problems we have been having recently with teasing and gossiping. The purpose of the fourth question was to brainstorm and mobilize the kids to move beyond the thought of "doing no harm" and into the idea of being a positive influence to the community. Again, we look for opportunities to move our kids away from the "what can you do for me" perspective and into a more interdependent attitude where responsibility is shared.

I don't think this assembly was the proverbial Road to Damascus for any of our kids, nor was I expecting it to be. Instead, this was one of hundreds of times that our kids will have a chance to hear about and actively participate in community building.

¹ <http://orionacademy.org/about/missionstatement.html>

Friday, November 14, 2008

The Reflected Self

One of the parents passed along to me a product that is a clear plastic cube that opens up and is filled with about 100 cards with conversation topics suitable for casual teen conversation. I generally highly recommend tools like these to help parents talk to their kids because most parents need help having casual conversation with their teens. If you can believe it, I have been using these conversation cards as rewards for the kids completing their work in social skills class. Kind of says something about the class when structured conversation with me becomes the reward.

One of the questions in particular stuck out to me. It's usually a good sign when the question is able to modify the mood of the group and can move different groups in distinctly different directions. This question was asking the kids what the difference was between their self-perception and how they think others see them. Not only was it asking kids to describe themselves, but it was asking them to guess how others would describe them. If you know our kids you could guess that this was the money question. Smoke rose, hamster wheels squeaked and gears ground under the pressure and strain.

I think this question is significant for our kids because the issue of "what do others think of me" is one they truly struggle with. At the very basic level, our kids struggle to understand that others have independent thoughts, then struggle to find value in the opinions of others, and finally struggle with developing an accurate representation of the thoughts of others (empathy). In some ways, being unencumbered by worries of what others will think of me can seem like a big weight is being lifted. On the other hand, being able to see yourself through the eyes of others is terribly important for building the concept of self. How do you think other people see you? I recommend formulating an answer for yourself before you ask your kids.

Friday, November 21, 2008

Delayed Gratification

When asked, all of our kids admitted that they had heard this phrase. About half were able to offer some kind of definition or example of this concept. Delayed Gratification (DG) is essentially exchanging an immediate reward for a later reward. I also tell the kids that DG is (or should be) an exchange of something immediate and SMALL for something in the future that is LARGER. If it's not a trade up, I don't see the point. Part of my goal in bringing up this topic was to add some meaning to their high school toils. High school is a relatively unrewarding and joyless activity for most teens, and lessons in DG may provide some of the argument for perseverance.

Which is why I was overjoyed that I didn't immediately line the birdcage with my most recent periodical¹ from the American Psychological Association². In it was a synopsis of a talk given by Philip Zimbardo, Ph.D.³, the Elvis of Psychology. At age 134, he is still on the cusp of applied psychology; like a less ridiculous version of Dr. Phil. I watched a houseplant come back to life once when his shadow fell on it.

Zimbardo summarized the findings in a longitudinal study that demonstrated the benefits of Dr. Mischel (another research psychologist) showed that 4-year olds that demonstrated DG also demonstrated more trustworthiness, self-reliance, had higher grades, and higher SAT scores (250 points on average!) at age 18 than children with a more impulsive style of decision-making (Instant Gratification).

As a group, our kids tend to struggle with what Zimbardo calls future-oriented decision-making. It's the same thing that makes it difficult for them to plan and anticipate. Relative to neuro-typicals, our kids tend to live in the moment and have difficulty looking beyond the present when choosing between options. Perhaps this is the reason for rituals, routines, and rigidity-a clunky surrogate for the message "this will eventually pay off; this cannot last forever" that ran through my head every day I sat in statistics class in college. So, is there a neurological component to DG? Can people be organically DG impaired?

¹ <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2008/10/time.html>

² <http://www.apa.org>

³ <http://www.zimbardo.com>

Friday, December 5, 2008

What to Do?

The Sophomores and I are talking about schedules and scheduling this session. Specifically the discussion focuses on making and keeping a schedule and the benefits of doing so. If you haven't already guessed, one of our main goals in the social skills program is to move these kids in the direction of independence. One of the ways we do this is to encourage them to do more things for themselves, such as get themselves up in the morning and be responsible for completing their homework each night. It is clear to me, probably more than even you the parent, that all of our kids are in different places regarding independent living skills. The challenge for me then is to pick directions and activities in discussion that are relevant for all of the kids.

One of the tasks we did the other week is, as a group, list all of the activities the kids do on a daily basis. We included in the list items like sleeping, eating, going to school, recreation, chores, and the like. Interestingly, all of the kids knew the word "chores", but not all of them could describe the purpose of chores. (Is it really to save money on a cleaning service?) We then assigned time allotments (e.g., 8 hours for sleep) for each item. From there I had them prioritize each event (e.g., Would you sacrifice sleep for playing video games?).

For many of our students, the Sophomore year is when the adage "work first, then play" becomes a reality as we expect them to start putting aside an hour, every day, for homework. At the end of Term 1, many of our Sophomores are still coming to terms with the fact that there are seven "everydays" each week.

I am not writing this to criticize these students. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I am writing to insist and implore you to see it from their perspective. For many of our students, this is truly the first time they have been expected to delay gratification (work first, play later) on a daily basis, where the only reward is avoiding criticism and maintaining good grades for another distant reward: getting into college. For many of them this will likely provide the foundation of their work ethic both now and later in life. This is an important lesson and one where you, the parent, will also need to consider the delayed benefit of your tireless support. Hard, diligent workers are more likely to eventually move out of your house.

Friday, December 12, 2008

Emotional Connectivity

Since I arrived at Orion I have been trying to describe a sense I have had while interacting with the students here that would reference to be what I consider one of the more significant differences between Asperger's Disorder¹ (AD) and Autism² (Au), and NLD³ while we're at it. I am calling this concept Emotional Connectivity (EC), and as far as I can tell, I am only stealing the term from the advertising community.

I actually get that question a lot: what is the difference between AD and Au? "I thought they were the same thing." The Juniors and I have been learning about how to describe AD and Au to others, and as is usually the case in these discussions, I was hit by inspiration. One of the primary differences between AD and Au is this concept of Emotional Connectivity.

I describe EC as a sense of trust, mutual appreciation, a bond, and a sense of significance of the behaviors and opinions of another person, among other things. One cares more about the actions of someone with whom they are highly emotionally connected than those they are not. Also, EC can be represented, much like intelligence, as an aptitude⁴. Different people have differing potential, or upward limit for engaging in EC. In the case of Orion students, I think this difference is partially represented by differing levels of EC potential by diagnosis. Specifically, Orion kids with Au seem to have the lowest overall potential while kids with NLD seem to have the highest. AD kids seem to be somewhere in the middle.

Please keep in mind that this is not something I have tested scientifically or systematically, but is merely the summation of my experience here to date. It is also a notion that continues to stand up to the scrutiny to which I subject it.

¹ http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/aspergers_disorder

² http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm

³ <http://www.nlda.org/index.php?submenu=Education&src=gendocs&link=WhatIsNLD>

⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aptitude>

Friday, December 19, 2008

Rehearsing Success

Our last organized class discussion focused on self-evaluation. I asked the kids to talk about one thing they liked about their performance this term, and one area for improvement. Most of the kids chose to list off all their classes and report how they felt they were doing in each class, generally missing the point of the discussion. I am sure you can guess what I was going for though. I think it is important for people to review their work. In fact, research suggests that ruminating (mentally rehearsing) about success (as opposed to negative experiences¹) and pleasurable activities can actually be a protective- (as opposed to risk-) factor for good mental health.

Our kids have problems with reminiscence, and specifically reminiscing about success experiences. I can think of three major reasons why this is the case.

Spectrum kids are stuck in the present.

As mentioned in earlier posts (see Delayed Gratification), our kids tend to be present-oriented. This makes it hard for them to plan, but also hard for them to reminisce.

Spectrum kids struggle with accurately representing the past.

Perhaps it is their present-orientation, perhaps their organizational deficits or something/everything else, but they need a lot of help correctly representing past distant events.

Spectrum kids tend to be pessimistic.

Research shows that depressed people have a more accurate recall of reality than non-depressed people (see article² for example).

The general population is overly optimistic in its assessment of reality (this appears to be a protective factor) and that reality and truth is actually a lot more negative than we think. I'm not saying all spectrum people are depressed, but they do tend to value accuracy and be less invested in exaggeration. We also know that, when evaluating people, it is generally easier to recall criticisms than praise. When is the last time you saw a group of people outside a government building with signs waiting to vigorously thank the next politician that emerged?

You need to help your kids reflect on their successes over Winter Break. All of them have something, lo, many things to be proud of this term. Praise happens to be one of the most effective motivators for behavior change and management, and when kids are doing things you like, they generally have less time to do things you do not like.

¹ <http://www.apa.org/monitor/nov05/cycle.html>

² <http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/gpr72203.pdf>

Friday, January 16, 2008

The Morality of Praise

If you have been following the Blog, a question was recently raised regarding the relative value, morality, or utility of praise in working with kids. The question sighted the opinion of the Montessori¹ educational system regarding the role of praise in training children. I must admit that I do not know enough about Montessori schools to evaluate them, but I do know that a school with their positive reputation is likely doing something right. I have nothing further to say about Montessori.

In the middle part of last century, Humanistic Psychology² was in full swing, and one of the growing trends in therapy was for the therapist to work very hard to never share an opinion with a client. The idea was that therapy clients are capable enough (under the right conditions) of forming their own opinions, and it was self-righteous and egotistical to think that a therapist could ever know what was best for another person. Rather than agree or disagree with client statements, the therapist was trained to say “uh-huh” (in a neutral tone) to statements made by the client. In this way, the therapist could guard the client from their own subjective influence and instead provide a canvas for the client to form their own opinion. Later research demonstrated that even a neutrally-placed “uh-huh” could be effective in communicating approval or disapproval, and therapists were largely ineffective in protecting their clients from personal opinion. Today, many therapists are trained that most clients, and especially children, can benefit from hearing the opinions of the therapist (judiciously applied), and it is the burden of the therapist to be careful about how this influence is applied.

Juxtapose this with an article³ I was just reading in a popular APA⁴ cage-liner⁵ that confirms what you have all heard, I’m sure, about overpraising and rewarding children. Apparently, when children who are used to being praised even for sub-standard or poor work get into college or a job, they are often shocked at the more realistic evaluations of their work they receive. Research is starting to link this shock to mental health problems like depression.

So, we now suspect that the extremes (no praise, too much praise) are either not possible or detrimental. When working with parents, I advocate what I consider to be the reality approach. In short, I make sure my kids know that everyone has strengths and weaknesses as well as a good understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. I also pass along the rhetoric that there will always be things in their life that are difficult for them as well as areas where they will consistently outperform others (I truly believe that this is the case for all people without exception).

Add to this the notion that I believe that I know better than kids do in most situations. In a sense, I believe my opinion is valuable for most kids and I want them

to listen to me and do what I want. In the task of motivating behavior (getting kids to do what I want), praise is usually better than punishment (for a couple reasons I cannot go in to right now). Test yourself: how does the list of the things your child does that irritate you compare to the list of things your child does that you love?

¹ <http://www.amshq.org>

² http://psychology.about.com/od/historyofpsychology/a/hist_humanistic.htm

³ www.apa.org/monitor/2009/01/teens.html

⁴ <http://www.apa.org>

⁵ <http://www.apa.org/monitor>

Friday, January 23, 2009

Stress is Your Friend

This week in social skills class with the Sophomores we are very pleased to host LeAnn, an Occupational Therapist¹ who has been teaching the ALERT program² to Orion students for several years now. The stress balls, seat cushions, and candy in class were all her idea. Actually, we have had huge success with the ALERT program, which is designed to help students regulate their “engines”, or focus and attention levels, in class.

We started by focusing on stress, and I wanted to pass along some of the items we are talking about related to stress. Hopefully you can work some of these concepts and this language into your interactions with your kids at home.

Stress is defined as any stimulus (or force) that encourages change or resistance. In short, stress is an essential component of change and growth. In this way, the value of stress is relative. Stressors (things that cause stress) can be positive or negative, adaptive or maladaptive, and this value is assigned based on the situation and the person’s goals.

Change and adaptation in humans is good³ because our environment is constantly changing around us. Therefore, stress is a necessary component of our survival. In fact, I proposed to the kids that “stress-free” is not actually the same as feeling good or feeling relaxed, but is more likely synonymous with “existence-free”. We would cease to exist if stress were removed completely from our experience.

While stress is that thing that can make us uncomfortably nervous or have difficulty remembering our lines on stage, it is also that thing that gets us out of bed in the morning. If stress can be adaptive, then wouldn’t it be nice if we could manipulate our subjective stress experience to our benefit? This is the long-winded way of describing “coping skills”, or ways to increase or reduce the amount of stress you feel in order to achieve your goals. In class, tired kids need to be woken up, and hyper kids need to be calmed down. Having kids stand or listen to music while they type is an example of utilizing a coping skill for the purpose of manipulating stress levels. Brilliant, yet simple.

The key with kids is to get them to see this as a daily event. How much sleep⁴ one gets has everything to do with the stress they experience the next day, as well as their ability to manipulate it and thus perform. By the way, individuals tend to get much better at coping as they age. I am sure you know just what to do when you have an afternoon meeting and you are feeling a bit drowsy, or how to not explode at your kid after you have had a tough day and they report they were suspended from school.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupational_Therapy

² <http://www.alertprogram.com/index.php>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_selection

⁴ <http://www.webmd.com/parenting/guide/how-much-sleep-do-children-need?page=5>

Friday, January 30, 2009

Switching Costs

These days it seems as if we are focused more than ever on responsible use of energy. Even (and especially) our kids are joining the effort to use less, reuse more, and be smarter about what we do consume. I just feel better when my recycling bin is fuller than my trash bin.

This is why I was attracted to a recent article¹ in a psychology magazine² on multi-tasking. Please read the article; it's short and will give context for this post. The article underlines the concept that we have limited cognitive resources³, and multi-tasking tends to compromise the efficiency of cognitive energy use and performance. Energy is expended in the process of "switching", or moving one's attention from one task (homework) to another (texting a friend) and back in order to do two or more things at once. Turns out, switching consumes much more energy than we estimate and can cause some significant, long-term negative effects.

We already know that our Asperger and NLD kids benefit from an optimal level of stimulation and task complexity. It is essentially what the physical environment of Orion Academy is all about-maximizing attention in order to maximize productivity in learning. Multi-tasking while learning (e.g., studying for a test) tends to reduce the depth of processing⁴ and thus the strength of the memory, and the likelihood the information will be properly recalled later on. Kids need to be very careful about *what else* they are doing while doing homework. I predict that multi-tasking is especially detrimental for spectrum kids based on their executive functioning deficits⁵.

The other interesting part of this article was the suggestion that the more "friends" one has, the greater the potential for superficiality in friendships. The Internet really does allow one to be connected with huge numbers of people (see how many "friends" are listed in your child's Facebook page). We already know that spectrum kids struggle with the process of forming deep relationships with peers, so this is another area I would suggest we pay attention. We want variety in friendships, but not at the level that it compromises quality. Really, who can manage 1000 relationships?

¹ <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/multitaskers.html>

² <http://apa.org/monitor>

³ <http://www.ijoa.org/imta96/paper52.html>

⁴ http://encarta.msn.com/media_461551100_761578303_1_1/depth_of_processing_and_memory.html

⁵ http://eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_amp;_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ747830&_ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ747830

Friday, February 6, 2009

Students with Disabilities

The Juniors are getting a lot of discussion these days on preparing for college. Orion is a college preparatory school and the kids get a lot of the college prep rhetoric, so they accept the college-talk without too much complaining.

The item that seems to stick in their collective craw is the discussion I have with them regarding registering with the students with disabilities services (SDS) department when they go off to college. It is the case that we recommend that all of our students register with the SDS regardless whether or not they feel the need. Most every college has a department like this these days, and the scale and scope of the duties of the SDS has changed enormously in recent years, for lots of reasons. (By the way, we are scheduled to visit St. Mary's SDS¹ in a couple weeks.)

I'm sure you can imagine their hesitation though-kids are worried about the stigma of being identified as someone with a disability. They know enough to realize that Asperger's and NLD is still a part of them that makes them different from others. They worry that they will be treated differently by peers and teachers, and I think some of them worry that their grades will have a different meaning if they receive "accommodations".

As the terms "normal" and "typical" continue to have less and less meaning these days, I have no hesitations about recommending all of our kids register with their college SDS. I see it in the same light as accepting a scholarship or seeing a professor for help during office hours. It is a legitimate advantage that is better to have and not need, than need and not have. The fact also remains that our kids will soon become college-attending adults who will *still* have a disability that could make it harder for them to perform in the typical college environment.

¹ <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/academics/academic-advising-and-achievement/student-disability-services.html>

Friday, February 13, 2009

Addicted to Why

Ask most parents and they will tell you that the word “why” was among their child’s first. Indeed, it is a joke that young children will ask “why” to just about whatever statement you make, regardless the consequences. Asking why is a great skill to train up in children because it is the question that moves beyond mechanics and correct vs. incorrect and into purpose and concept. Ultimately it is the question that moves children into thinking for themselves and becoming independent, autonomous individuals.

With that said, I would like to examine this phenomenon from an evolutionary¹ perspective and suggest that *humans* need to know why. There is a part of us that inherently seeks out and yearns for meaning². This is actually a common theme I work on with many clients: the search for meaning³. We are addicted to why. How this plays out with Aspergers and NLD kids is that our kids are even less likely to accept the “because I said so” response from us than neurotypicals. They need, they yearn for an explanation, and specifically one that is verbally mediated, specific, and one they can recite to their friends.

Two realities make this addiction a problem for our kids. The first is that being able to accept the “because I said so” explanation will be essential to professional success. They will have many bosses who do not have time to explain the nuances of all their expectations, and they will be expected to perform the activity anyway.

The second has to do with personal change. It is the case that much of the meaning in our life will come retrospectively. People often delay life change because they are waiting for the answer to the why question. The fact is, you do not need to know the cause of suffering to be able to take steps toward ending suffering, yet people will stall in this suffering state while waiting for meaning.

It was one of the tenants of my clinical training to encourage parents to never use the “because I said so” response. We were instead told to train parents to explain the purpose of requests to their kids, and this will in turn increase buy-in from the child and move the child toward greater autonomy⁴. The fact is, the search for meaning takes its own time and is often inconvenient, and meaning is not essential for productivity.

¹ www.epjournal.net/index.html

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existential_therapy

³ [http://www.bookrags.com/Man's Search for Meaning](http://www.bookrags.com/Man's_Search_for_Meaning)

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychosocial_development

Friday, February 20, 2009

Your Kid is Smart

Your kid is smart, and I think he or she knows it. Part of the reality of attending Orion is that all of our students can achieve academically at a basic but high level, and most can achieve at a level much higher than basic in at least one other subject. I think most of our kids have legitimately incorporated “smart” into their identity constellation, and would answer “Yes!” to the “Are you smart?” question. Believe me, not all kids think this way.

I have found there are several things our kids do to make themselves look unnecessarily unsmart. The examples below all have to do with how they publicly present information.

Presenting a guess as a fact. Rightly so, your child’s experience and fund of information is limited. It will grow as they age and increase their experiences¹, but for now, they do not know something about everything. A simple preface of “This is my guess...” before embarking on their theory of blood oxygenation² and stress reduction will go a long way toward making them look as smart as they are.

Having an opinion on everything. Even opinionated people learn the boundaries of their expertise. I am teaching your students that it’s okay for them not to comment on everything that people are talking about. It’s perfectly acceptable (and some might add wise) to just listen³ and learn something.

Choosing to guess rather than investigate. We get this a lot: kids wrongly assume that just because it’s in a complete sentence and using sophisticated words that it sounds smart and informed. With the Internet so accessible, there is no excuse (other than cognitive laziness⁴) to guess.

You can help by not entertaining these behaviors. There are people in this world who can hornswoggle and hoodwink and convince others that they are smarter than they actually are. Your kids are not among these people, but actually have the rarer potential to be intellectual powerhouses and experts. Some parents are afraid they will hurt their kid’s feelings or “quench their desire for knowledge” if they are overly critical of these unsmart behaviors. Let me be clear though: spouting nonsense as fact stopped being cute⁵ to others a long time ago and has now become a liability for them.

¹ <http://psychology.about.com/od/cognitivepsychology/a/fluidcrystal.htm>

² <http://health.discovery.com/centers/althealth/deepbreath/deepbreathe.html>

³ <http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

⁴ <http://books.google.com/books?>

[id=hdRzNwSaCFMC&pg=PA238&lpg=PA238&dq=cognitive+laziness
&source=web&ots=lp75EevYcx&sig=qYzks8kCuZWVho2uMxRhCoW
8Qzo&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA238,M1](https://www.google.com/search?id=hdRzNwSaCFMC&pg=PA238&lpg=PA238&dq=cognitive+laziness&source=web&ots=lp75EevYcx&sig=qYzks8kCuZWVho2uMxRhCoW8Qzo&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA238,M1)
⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kids Say the Darndest Things](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kids_Say_the_Darndest_Things)

Friday, February 27, 2009

Moral Development and Asperger's

A situation came up this week at Orion that illustrates beautifully a developmental task of adolescence and early adulthood that I have not yet discussed: moral development¹. Moral development includes skills that allow one to move beyond preferences (what I like more vs. less) and into the area of “what’s best” in any particular situation. “Best” is a loaded term, and Moral Development has its own chapter in most books on lifespan development.

We make moral decisions all the time. Should I have the donut or the fiber bar? Should I hold the door or let it close? Kids in general are in the middle of this process of moral development, and it is the case that not all individuals progress through all the stages in their lifetime. Lawrence Kohlberg² is a famous psychologist who suggested humans can progress through 6 distinct stages of development. Each stage includes different criteria the individual uses to make these moral decisions, and each successive stage indicates movement toward a more “universal law”; one that supersedes any state law or social custom.

Kids with Asperger’s and NLD generally struggle with some of the elements necessary for more advanced levels of moral development, namely perspective taking (see Reflected Self) and seeing the “big picture”. How do we help our kids keep moving? Practice, practice, practice. It is the case that higher-level moral decisions are based on principles rather than rules. Principles³ are generally derived from one’s extensive experience with any particular subject.

The alternative is not a pleasant one. We do see very well-meaning kids making poor decisions because they find themselves in morally ambiguous situations⁴, or having to choose between the lesser of two evils—delaying a decision because the “correct” decision is not an option. This can be an incredible liability for our kids as they are entering a stage of life where the gap between experience (they have very little) and responsibility (they will be given unprecedented levels) is never so great as it is in late adolescence and early adulthood.

¹ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/moraldev.htm>.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development

³ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/principles>

⁴ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas>

Friday, March 6, 2009

A Week of Moral Development

I am happy to report that we had a good week of moral development here at Orion Academy. I brought the topic of moral development to the Sophomores and had them work through the Heinz Dilemma¹. It was so successful and so interesting the result that I inserted this discussion into the Junior schedule as well.

As stated in the last post, the goal of moral development is to achieve something of a “universal principle” approach to reasoning. The process: practice and increased experience. In the group we first defined several key terms that you should review before going on in this reading: morality², ethics³, law⁴, universal⁵, and abstract (links provided).

Two interesting things came up this week. The first is that some of our kids were very much locked into the notion that there is a correct answer to these moral dilemmas. As anyone who has taken an ethics or philosophy class is aware, moral dilemmas are about the process, and not about finding the right answer (which I insisted, to their chagrin, does not exist). The kids struggle with the loss of a “right answer” at the end of the discussion. Some of them cannot move past this.

The second issue involves abstract reasoning. The brain continues to develop into early adulthood, and with it the prefrontal cortex⁶ used for abstract reasoning. Abstract reasoning involves at least two qualities: outside the box thinking (at which our kids excel) and the ability to simultaneously entertain contradictory viewpoints (a skill at which our kids are typically terrible). One of the results of this skill mixture is over-simplifying complex situations and then becoming rigid about the overly simplistic result. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this is how some of our kids more bizarre and offensive viewpoints come about.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz_dilemma

² <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition>

³ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>

⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/law>

⁵ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/universal>

⁶ <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-prefrontal-cortex.htm>

Friday, March 13, 2009

S.O.S.

This week at Orion we had our annual State of the School. Some kids call it Complaining Day, but the intent of the day is to give the kids a chance to build some social skills, such as teamwork, diversity in friendships, and constructive criticism. Our kids know that it is a stereotype of Asperger's people that they love to be negative and complain. This stereotype is a caricature of our kid's tendency to be verbal, blunt, and opinionated.

On Wednesday, our kids were split into groups and took turns participating in about 6 activities. Complaining Day comes from the fact that several of the activities involve having the kids give feedback about things that are going on at school, including academic and social development programs. If you can believe it, a lot of changes have been made at Orion based on the feedback we get from the kids.

One of the things I want to stress is that our kids need to have opportunities to share their opinions. The reasons for this are two-fold. The first is that if we do not provide it, they will take it. In a way, this activates my control mentality in that I want to dictate the timing and form of how and when people criticize me. Not many people like to be criticized, but exercising some control can help me be open to the feedback.

The second is that our kids need a lot of help with the process of sharing opinions and stating criticisms. Some of the best ideas are dismissed because of the packaging, and it is the case that all of these State of the Schools produce useful ideas for programming changes. Teach your kids how to be a positive source of criticism and ideas. Too many of our kids feel powerless to affect positive change. I suspect this frustration can feed other less than positive activities for the truly motivated and opinionated.

Friday, March 20, 2009

Asperger's and Standardized Testing

This week at Orion all of our students took a standardized national academic achievement test¹. For three mornings all of the students were tested in many areas of academics. As you can imagine, students find much of this incredibly boring. Unfortunately for them, this is just the beginning as their immediate futures are chock-full of standardized assessments that claim to be able to gauge their performance potential in any number of areas of functioning.

When discussing this test with the kids, I got a not-unexpected response. Many of them said that since it didn't count toward their grades, they didn't try their best on all the items. I was more than a little disappointed by this because the results of this test are far from insignificant.

I remembered my training though and started to think about why our students report "not trying", or fail to do their best. Many of the students who give up actually do so out of frustration. It could be the case that this test, under the monikers of "standardized" and "national" was harder than they expected. Intelligence² is something in which many of our kids take pride, and this test might have challenged this image. The challenge may have come from the material, or from any number of other activities (concentration, rule following, abiding time limits) that are a part of taking these kinds of test.

It is also a possibility that in true rigid and tunnel vision fashion, when the kids heard or discovered that these tests did not count toward their grades, there was all of a sudden no purpose in doing well on them.

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TerraNova_\(test\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TerraNova_(test))

² <http://www.psychologymatters.org/iqtesting.html>

Thursday, March 26, 2009

The Summer of Asperger's

You may not realize it, but school is almost over for the year. We are down to about 8 weeks and there is so much packed into these 8 weeks that the time will appear to move more quickly than usual. I thought this would be a good time to give my summer recommendations. If I may be permitted, I would like to give the summary first: please do not let your children sleep in and sit around all summer.

My highest possible recommendation is that your child gets a part-time job. There are so many benefits to this, including increased independence and responsibility, and getting them out of the house. I can see no downside to a part-time job at this time.

Take a summer class at the local community college¹. Again, this is multi-purpose, including exposure to college-level work and expectations, but on a small scale. This can also improve the chances of your child getting their first choice in colleges.

Plan a day or weekend trip to visit some colleges². Summer is a great time to see the school minus the crowds. It is also a low-stress time on campus, so you are likely to get better care while you are there.

Try a day or overnight camp. A large percentage of our kids at Orion have made this a tradition and look forward to it each year. Camps can be specialized, like Orion's own Anxiety Management Camp, or more general. Focusing on certain issues, practicing social skills, and making friends are just some of the benefits.

For some of you reading this, the plan is for your child to transfer schools next year. Work needs to begin immediately to make this transition as smooth as possible. Your child should begin saying goodbye to friends and teachers and starting to talk about the process of going to a new school. There are likely a lot of benefits to transferring, but there are also going to be some struggles. Our Asperger teens need a lot of time to work on the change.

Pretty much any choice you make for having the child be active and that includes a schedule is going to be preferable to what Science Daily calls the "sedentary"³ choice, the default of most student's summer vacation plans.

¹ <http://www.dvc.edu/highschool/index.htm>

² <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/admissions-andaid/undergraduate-admissions/visit-saint-marys/index.html>

³ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/02/070205114953.htm>

Friday, April 3, 2009

A Social Skills Training Gem

I have a few activities for social skills class that are gems. My idea of a gem is something that is, first and foremost, useful for training purposes, easy to explain and administer, and interesting to students. The gem of a lesson takes on it's own life and momentum.

Interviewing is one of those lessons. The Juniors are learning a lot these days about interviewing strategies for jobs and college admissions. In social skills group we talk about interviewing etiquette¹, and I go as far as to suggest that there are several interview questions² you are nearly guaranteed to see in every interview. We then role-play: I become the interviewer and the kids the interviewee. From there they take over the interviewer position. All the while, the kids are allowed to comment on the performance of their peers (one of their strengths).

I also assure the kids that there are about 4 questions you are likely to be asked, in one form or another, in nearly every interview you attend. They are: "What interests you about this position?"; "Talk about your strengths and weaknesses."; "What is your relevant experience?"; and "Do you have any questions for me?".

Interviews are opportunities for your kids to look incredibly intelligent and sophisticated, or the exact opposite. The strengths and weaknesses question holds special potential for opportunity or disaster, and there is no reason for any of our kids to go into an interview unprepared for these questions. If you do try this activity with your kids, you will likely be surprised about all the other issues it brings up, such as physical presentation³, self-assessment⁴, and perspective-taking⁵.

¹ <http://www.interviewstuff.com/job-interview-manners.html>

² <http://www.interviewstuff.com/top-10-job-interview-questions.html>

³ http://www.essortment.com/all/howtohaveasu_rqzf.htm

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Introspection>

⁵ <http://www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/teaching/TC104-607.html>

Friday, April 10, 2009

Dysregulated Spectrum Teens

Ask any parent or professional how they know if a child is stressed, anxious, or depressed, and they will invariably reply, "Just look at him." How about kids who have expressive non-verbal language disorders (e.g., grimacing when happy), like most of our kids? I have considerable experience diagnosing mood and anxiety disorders in children, but coming to Orion was another steep learning curve regarding mood identification in our spectrum teens.

So how do you know if a spectrum teen is stressed, anxious, or depressed? I suspect that most of our parents could name how they know their child is dysregulated¹, but would likely struggle with other people's kids. Naturally, I have composed a list of signs.

Our dysregulated spectrum teens demonstrate a couple of the more typical signs of stress, including lowered frustration tolerance (giving up easier, low work stamina, decreased attention span, increased anger response to innocuous situations), agitation, and increased sleep disturbance. (Please note that a lot of our kids experience sleep disturbance² unassociated with stress.) For our kids, mental processing speed⁴ can slow further (time between your question and their response increases), and there can be an increase in rumination⁴-style thinking (problem solving minus the solution), fixations (especially erroneous connections between unassociated events) and fantasy thinking. The latter is sometimes expressed through more time alone, increased daydreaming, or even talking to oneself.

Some stress is to be expected as we get close to the end of the year, and especially this week right before Spring Break. Do not hesitate, however, to talk to a professional if you are concerned with your teen's mood or dysregulation. If you have a spectrum teen, a professional with experience with this population is highly recommended.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_dysregulation

² <http://aut.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/1/83>

³ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/3294857/Aspergers-Sensory-Processing-Interventions>

⁴ http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/index.php?term=pto-2687.html&fromMod=popular_anxiety

Friday, April 24, 2009

No Audience without Me

I am going to be mixing diagnostics, symptomatology, and Existentialism¹ for you today. You, as the parent of the spectrum teen, probably are reminded daily about one key symptom of Asperger's and NLD-namely, this tendency of our kids to fail to recognize your disinterest in what they are saying. Sometimes I get the sense that it could be either me or a houseplant that is going to be on the receiving end of a diatribe on airplane ejection seats.

Here is where the Existentialism comes in. Without me (the listener), there is no purpose² or meaning to the discussion on airplane ejection seats. It might as well remain an unexpressed thought. I have been working with the kids, especially during our group, to "look around and see if anyone appears to be listening to you anymore." Oftentimes these kids will launch into a story about their weekend and fail to notice that everyone is asleep, or looking at the ground, or staring at the wall. I assure you that most neurotypical highschoolers notice when people stop listening and either "wrap it up" or do what it takes to redirect attention. Our kids will not do this without help.

I do want to impress on you, the parent, that conversations require there be at least two interested parties. I highly recommend that you get used to telling your children, when appropriate and honest³, that you are not interested in what they are saying, or are bored with their diatribe, or simply that you do not feel like an integral part of the conversation. Encourage them to look for clues that people are bored or disinterested. The fact is, our kids have a lot of interesting things to say, but if they cannot get people to engage them, it really does not matter.

1 <http://psych.eiu.edu/spencer/Existential.html>

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism#Existence_precedes_essence

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism#Authenticity_and_inauthenticity

Friday, May 1, 2009

Necktie as Teachable Moment

I had one of these the other day, a teachable moment¹. I try as much as possible to avoid the tripe of pop-psychology, but the experience is undeniable and certainly favors the flexible. One of my students asked if we could practice tying a necktie in social skills group. I quickly went through the mental justification of the event, and it seemed to fit under “independent living skills”. I was both intrigued and suspicious though because this same student usually has a list of ideas for getting the group off-task. When he showed up the next day with necktie in hand, it was clear he was serious.

Let me tell you the significance that tying a necktie has to the child with Asperger’s or NLD. Of the seven Sophomores in attendance, none of them could tie a necktie. Other things that were news to many of them: neckties require shirts with collars (unless it’s the 80s); the large end always goes in front (again, unless it’s the 80s²); if the back end is too long, it can be tucked into your shirt; and the tie should generally not extend beyond the belt. They knew when ties were tied improperly and when they looked ridiculous (like the Hamburgler), but could not verbalize rules for appropriateness. Finally, problems with visuo-spatial memory and fine motor control³ led me to the final recommendation that all people with Asperger’s and NLD should have a tied necktie hanging in your closet at all times (except when you are wearing it, of course).

From here we talked about the recent history of the necktie, and especially the way Clinton and Regis⁴ perfected the monochrome power combo. I was really surprised at how relevant was this seemingly menial activity. We spent the whole group on it—everyone got to practice tying and talking about necktie and formalwear etiquette. Just a note to all Orion parents: boys should wear a necktie to graduation at the end of this month.

¹ http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_561539567/teachable_moment.html

² <http://www.liketotally80s.com/80s-knit-ties.html>

³ <http://www.advancedpsy.com/visuoconstruction-page-25.html>

⁴ <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,278123,00.html>

Friday, May 8, 2009

No Imaginary Audience Here

I was riding BART with the drama teacher and he mentioned that recently he has been getting the distinct impression, while watching his students do scenes, that there is no indication that they realize they are performing for an audience. This might be tough for you to contemplate since most people who have had to perform in front of others are overly aware of the feeling of being watched and critiqued. This whole discussion seemed oddly reminiscent, and I recalled a post (see No Audience without Me) from a few weeks ago.

In developmental psychology there is a term called Imaginary Audience¹, an affliction of adolescence. This concept suggests that adolescents perform their lives as if there is an audience observing them with rapt attention, reacting uproariously with every teeth brushing or sharpening of the pencil. Psychologists blame the presence of this imaginary audience on the (developmentally appropriate and) intense ego-centrism² of adolescents and suggest it is something that diminishes for most people as they age.

It appears as if our kids might not “suffer” from this imaginary audience, or might experience it in a different way. As evidence, the drama teacher had to have a talk with the kids that focused on the notion that “people are watching you while you are on stage”, and it helped their performance a little bit.

So how does one explain this to a teen who has little concept that one needs an audience to have a discussion or perform a scene? I asked the kids what happens to a TV show³ that might be brilliant and funny but has no viewers.

¹ <http://social.jrank.org/pages/323/Imaginary-Audience.html>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egocentrism>

³ <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TooGoodToLast>

Friday, May 15, 2009

Why We Cave

My weekly angst focused on making some tough administrative decisions. One of my “administrative” duties here at Orion is that of discipline. As anyone who has ever been around a child can attest, when stress increases (like just before Finals Week), behavior problems can increase. It is not surprising that we have had to do more behavior management this week than in other weeks and dole out some tough consequences.

What can make this process a little more difficult is that these consequences, especially in the case of more behaviorally ambiguous situations (e.g., “we were just play-fighting when I punched him in the face”), can really take our kids by surprise. Our kids repel ambiguity like oil and water¹. In these situations where I can feel the wave of consequence cresting, almost always the same thought pops into my head: Is there any way I can get out of giving this consequence?

I love grace². I love exchanging grace, and sometimes grace is the right answer in these situations. You do not get what you deserve. Grace can inspire change, but is not always effective to this end. Doling out consequences usually creates a huge amount of additional work for me and I get tempted to extend non-productive grace. Other times I am reluctant to be the bad-guy and I really just want the child (and parent) to like me and (because of my gracious decision) possibly even thank me. Sometimes compassion and over-identification (who among us has not playfought someone’s tooth out?) threaten reason and tempt non-productive grace.

The more focused I am, the easier it is to hand down harsh but fair judgment. I hope though that this task never becomes easy for me. Our kids need thoughtful application of consequences. They need grace and justice acting in service of growth. I prefer giving awards because it makes me feel good, but I respect the role of consequences.

¹ <http://www.newton.dep.anl.gov/askasci/chem00/chem00254.htm>

² <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/grace>

Friday, May 22, 2009

Compartmentalization

In past posts (Rehearsing Success) I have talked about the tendency of our Asperger's and NLD kids to be present-focused and existing "in the moment". The relevance of a related concept has come up several times and in several contexts these past few weeks. Compartmentalization¹ is the ability to manage items that have a significant psychic impact independently from one another.

Compartmentalization allows kids to exit a harsh intervention with me in my office (replete with threats of suspension) and immediately join in laughing with a friend not 10 steps from my door. To this student, moving from my office to the hallway represents a sea change² significant enough to allow them to put all the emotion and drama away and fully enter in to what is right in front of them.

Compartmentalization has been described, in some respects, as a liability. Examples of this I can think of are the therapist who remains blank-faced while hearing a particularly tragic story from a client, or the husband who has no trouble falling asleep after a big fight with his wife. These people are depicted as cold and calculating, unfeeling.

Imagine, however, if you could take an Economics final without worrying about the dreaded Math final that follows; or, better yet, worrying about the fight you had with your parents that morning and the inevitable reckoning that evening. I have, unfortunately, been able to observe spectrum kids who have witnessed personal tragedy return to school the next day without missing a beat.

I don't see compartmentalization as the same as sublimation³ or suppression⁴. I see it more as the (potentially adaptive) ability to fully and efficiently capitalize on even minute changes in context. It may, in fact, be an ability our spectrum kids have that can be used to their advantage.

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compartmentalization_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compartmentalization_(psychology))

² <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-sea1.htm>

³ <http://changingminds.org/explanations/behaviors/coping/sublimation.htm>

⁴ http://psychology.about.com/od/theoriesofpersonality/ss/defensemech_3.htm

Wednesday, June 3, 2009

Summer Vacation

As some of the readers may be aware, Orion Academy is a high school in California. As such, it is now officially summer vacation. I want to wish all the kids and families (and professionals) that follow the blog a happy summer. I encourage the kids especially to resist the urge to achieve the lowest common denominator for your summer, but aspire to new, exciting things. Go for a hike, build a wind turbine, write, direct, and star in your own movie (about your life). Adults as well: read a professional book outside your profession, take a couple long weekends, learn how to properly prune that flowering fruit tree in your yard. The key is to rejuvenate, not vegetate. I wish you all the best. It is my intention to return to blogging in the fall, should I maintain the favor of the higher-ups.

-Andrew

Friday, August 14, 2009

The Bright Side of Ritual

Inflexible, ritualistic, and patterned behavior is one of the hallmarks of our kids. It is a diagnostic criteria¹ for spectrum disorders and can sometimes be the focus of behavioral interventions for me because it can get in the way of other activities such as learning or experiencing novel situations. Learning is usually stimulated by experiencing the new and novel, and ritual can be a huge deterrent toward that end.

Ritual is not all bad though-it does serve a purpose. Ritual often signifies priority and sacrament. Ritual also identifies those things that we choose not only to never forget, but to actively bring in to our daily life. I still remember saying the Pledge of Allegiance each morning in school and (somewhat fondly) the marathon 17-hour car ride my family used to take from Ohio to Florida each summer after school let out.

Ritual plays an ever-increasing role here at Orion. All of our returning students (and many of our new ones) are excited at some level for the ritual of the coming year. Seniors begin to talk about graduation and the Senior Challenge, the Literature class goes fishing, and all students love earlier dismissals on Fridays.

Rituals give our kids targets to shoot for in the sometimes vague and overwhelming future. Rituals can be our inheritance and provide us a connection with the past. They can be building blocks and seed money for future endeavors. Help your kids be critical about their rituals. Do they help, or are their rituals holding them back?

¹ http://www.psychnetuk.com/dsm_iv/aspergers_syndrome.htm

Friday, August 21, 2009

Affection, Preference, Bonding

One of my most striking memories from my first few weeks at this job was that our kids do not seem to bond with others in the same way neurotypical kids do. Specifically, I was struck by the difficulty I was having getting any sort of preference or affection from the kids-some response to my overtures of friendship. I had come to Orion from the world of community mental health¹ where the kids can be pretty emotionally beat up and jagged, and even the ones with the toughest façade seemed to be more amenable to bonding than our spectrum kids.

This is not news to the industry and is actually an expression of the spectrum disorder, but it can present a problem for professionals working with spectrum kids. Any competent professional will admit that the vast majority of their success working with kids and families is born of affection and genuine caring. Caring about the individual, and liking them on some level is such a prerequisite for success that we are encouraged to find alternate, appropriate care for those clients we cannot seem to like. (Embarrassing to admit, but it happens.)

I bring this up now because I have been reflecting on my feelings about students graduating last year and others getting older and more advanced in school. My first class upon coming to this school have become seniors and are thus out of my care, and I miss checking in with them daily.

Thankfully for your kids on the spectrum, they are likable. Spectrum kids are peculiar and endearing. They have unlimited observations and opinions and offer a unique perspective² to the neurotypical world. They seem less prone to trends and peer pressure. They are generally better-behaved and less antagonistic, and are great for conversation. For now I am subject to the inevitable separation and moving on. I'm happy to be missing them because it's not something I anticipated feeling when I first came into this job.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_mental_health_service

² http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3766697.stm

Friday, August 28, 2009

Stoop and Shrug

I think we have all been a little anxious to see what would happen when we added an 8th grade. Up until this year, Orion was a just high school, but this year we added the Super 8 program, a class designed for 8th graders who were intellectually gifted. As anyone who has worked with adolescents is aware, there is a big difference between 12 year-olds and 16 year-olds.

It has been two weeks now and I feel competent enough to share some initial observations. There is a difference in naiveté between our 8th graders and our highschoolers. Interactions with our 8th graders feel more lighthearted and simplistic, and problems seem more solvable. The 8th graders are also more optimistic and motivated to please. Who knew that the weight of the world¹ could begin resting on us as early as our mid-teens; but there is a noticeable stoop and shrug to our highschoolers when you look at them next to our 8th graders.

This is more than commentary on the crushing of the human spirit. One must approach an 8th grader in a fundamentally different way than a highschooler. 8th graders respond better to my first round of operant conditioning², and especially when I show them the best ways to make adults happy. They can be “cheered up” and accept affirmation more readily. They are more trusting and I suspect are damaged more by lies, and especially when adults lie to them. They are more open to the “because I said so” (see: Ask Most Parents and They will Tell You) response, but actually believe you when you explain how the world works. Development, maturing and growth are inevitable, so their days of pessimism await and we shall be prepared. I suppose we will be growing along with them.

¹ <http://www.greek-gods-and-goddesses.com/greek-god-atlas.html>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operant_conditioning

Friday, September 4, 2009

Understanding NLD

The better I get at lecturing on NLD and Asperger's, the more dissatisfied I get with my students and their lack of knowledge on the topic. In my wildest dream, our students would leave Orion with a diploma and a thorough understanding of neurological disorders¹ and how it affects their lives.

That's why this year I have been unrelentingly hammering away at this topic with even my Sophomores. I took a little different approach though and started with discussing NLD² and scaffolding from there. All of our kids should be able to recite the section from Kathryn's book³ on the 3 areas affected by NLD: organizational skills/executive functioning, sensory integration/visual-spatial processing, and social competency/pragmatic language. They can certainly define the terms much better (a strength in verbal production), but I'm not sure about their ability to apply them meaningfully to their experience (a weakness in executive functioning).

I recognize though that they are still kids, and a developing brain will lead to a developing awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. One conversation point that made me smile though was when several students dismissed the section on social competency and suggested that since they talked to people and people talked back, they must have mastered this area. We followed this with a discussion on the difference between socializing, and socializing well.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbJqeHgYRIE>

² <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/nld.htm>

³ <http://www.newharbinger.com/contributorinfo.cfm?ContribID=192>

Friday, September 11, 2009

The Well-Guarded Secret

Do not be alarmed. I have shared a well-guarded secret with your kids, but I think they can handle it. Thursdays have been labeled "Success Day" in 8th grade social skills group. This is the day where they generate problems, and then as a group we generate solutions. I bring a couple challenges to group (how to make friends, how to stay out of trouble), but it works so much better when they generate the problem.

One of the students wanted to talk about ways to make the other kids in class be quiet. Spectrum kids talk about this a lot: how do I make someone do what I want, or get them to behave in a way that benefits me? When I ask the kids what one super power they would choose to have (I ask this at least twice a year), from 1/3 to 1/2 of the kids will mention some form of mind control or the ability to force other people to their will. The wish to control or influence is especially important with our kids who I suspect feel a little more out of control than your average teenager and have an elementary understanding of group dynamics. I always choose flying or whatever powers Iggy Pop^{1,2} has.

I try my best in these situations to come back to a certain main point so I can share the carefully guarded secret. I ask the question, "Who do you have control of?" The correct answer is that they have no control over anyone but themselves. The secret I share with them is that this includes everyone. I tell them that the only control that others (including myself) have over them is that which they grant me. I have control of the contingencies (if they want a good grade, they must attend and participate), but ultimately they choose whether or not they are even going to show up to class each day.

If you have not yet thought about the implications of sharing this secret, your mind might now be exploding with the consequences of my actions. In my experience though, this is a concept that will take many years for them to appreciate (if they even get there). How this plays out in social skills group is that very few, if any of them, actually believe me when I share this secret.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iggy_Pop

² http://www.theonion.com/content/from_print/iggy_pop_only_one_allowed_in

Friday, September 18, 2009

The Orion Effect

As my regular reader is likely aware, we have arrived at the 1st anniversary of this blog. Can you believe that it was one year ago that I asked Kathryn if I could do a blog based on my experiences at Orion and she replied, "I don't care, knock yourself out."? It's not hard to conjure the sense of excitement and well-being I felt at that time. Coffee and Fridays help restore the old sense of adventure as well.

This week at Orion reminded me of my training in Family Systems¹ which suggests the family can be considered a closed system where change to any individual member will result in a change to all members of the system. In the case of therapy, even if a child refused to work with me, I could work with the child's sibling or aunt and changes they made in their lives could have an effect on the target child who refused to see me.

This is sort of like a Butterfly Effect² for psychology and applies very closely to work at Orion. If ever there was an example of a school-sized "system", it was Orion. Mood and sentiment is infectious in our system, and there are a lot of factors to be considered when I start to mess with the system. For instance, when I send a smelly child home to put on deodorant 1st period, I can almost guarantee I will have a different child crying or slamming a door in 6th period. If we choose to have Orion Day on a Monday, we should expect a fuller detention on Wednesday. This is not to suggest that tragedy must beget tragedy or hardship. In fact, many of our students will learn the inverse during their stay at Orion-hardship can also produce opportunity. Concrete and rigid brains can struggle with this concept.

I find working at Orion to be a constant balancing act between ignoring and addressing behaviors. The decision criteria become incredibly more complex as I try to guess the effects to system my decisions will have. I know parents often ask themselves the same question: do you want peace or justice, comfort or change? Naturally these choices are not always mutually exclusive, but effectively considering all factors can sometimes be as difficult as living with your choice.

¹ <http://www.genopro.com/genogram/family-systemstheory/>

² <http://www.pha.jhu.edu/%7Eldb/seminar/butterfly.html>

Thursday, September 24, 2009

The Long View Approach

One of the more enjoyable and enviable aspects of my job is that I get to spend a lot of time with the kids who go to school here. Some parents reading this are already rolling their eyes, but I assure you it is not common for a professional like myself to be able to spend so much time with the kids under his care. I think it really is a more ideal treatment approach. This large amount of time is a luxury and amplifies the kind of impact I can have. In some cases, I spend more time with these children during their waking hours than even their parents.

Another great part of my job though is looking back over the years and charting the progress of each student. I remember a short story I read in grade school about how islands¹ are made from a slow, gradual eruption from the sea floor, or peaks and valleys being cut by lumbering icebergs-and I think about our kids gradually and satisfyingly emerging over four years of hard work. I assure you that this progress is only achieved through toil, but the payoff is huge.

This brings me to the purpose of this week's entry. Our spectrum kids really do set their own pace. I am sure all of you have had the experience of trying to "hurry up" your child only to find that it tends to slow things down even further. As a professional, I really try to do as much monitoring, protecting, and directing as possible, and save the demanding and insisting for times that really warrant it (e.g., the child is graduating in a year and needs to finish his college essay) or when the child asks for it (they do ask for help sometimes).

I encourage you to develop a "long-view" approach to these children. Psychologists sometimes refer to this as a developmental or lifespan approach. Focus on the question of what you would like to see for this child in this stage of life. I think it is okay to take your time because really, it is your child that is setting the pace.

¹ <http://www.answers.com/topic/how-are-islands-made>

Friday, October 2, 2009

Asperger's and Sleep

I heard an interview on Fresh Air¹ (show on NPR²) this week about a new book on raising kids. I encourage you to listen to the podcast³. Click on the link to go right there. It's only about 15 minutes and I think it will be worth it.

The reason I'm promoting this is that the second half of the interview (starting at 7min, 15sec) talks about adolescents and sleep. In short, the writer states that adolescents use sleep differently from adults and spend a lot of time in certain sleeps states transferring information into long term memory (LTM⁴) stores. This makes sense because adolescents, compared to adults, have less info in their LTM and so need to spend more time storing it up. The interview also referred to the fact that adolescents need about 9-10 hours of sleep a night and are actually getting about 6.5 hours on average. This is down a full hour from 30 years ago, which was inadequate as well. There's other cool stuff in the interview, and especially the correlation between amount of sleep and grades, but you need to listen to get the full story.

For the record, sleep is a big issue for our spectrum kids, and at any one time I would estimate from 1/3 to 1/2 of our students are experiencing sleep disturbance (usually in the form of primary insomnia⁵). I did a survey in one of my classes and the average amount of sleep the kids had gotten the night before was 7.5 hours. Better than the national average, but less than they needed. In addition, at least half of them experienced primary insomnia where they were awake and staring at the ceiling.

It is relatively well known that kids on the spectrum have a high rate of sleep disturbance. It's why Orion starts at 8:50am instead of 7:30am like the local school districts. But it begs the question as to whether there's some special link between spectrum disorders and sleep disturbance. I have not recently checked the research on this, but I do know that our kids engage in at least three of the major no-no's of primary insomnia.

First, our kids often stay on the computer all day and up until bedtime. Researchers suggest this keeps their brains from relaxing and preparing for sleep, and suggest kids need about 60 minutes computer-free before bedtime where they are reading a book or engaging in an evening routine (like packing lunch for tomorrow and brushing teeth).

Second, adolescents in general are bad at disciplining themselves to follow a daily routine and researchers state that the body has a natural rhythm and can be trained to fall asleep and wake up at a certain time. This is where jetlag comes from, among other things. I tell kids they need to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even weekends, in order to capitalize on this biological benefit.

Finally, one of the biggest enemies of sleep is worry. And we know our kids worry (see Approach or Avoid) a lot. Lots of our kids report runaway thinking (a symptom of anxiety) at bedtime and need instruction on how to control and suppress runaway thinking as well as how to avoid it.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13>

² <http://www.npr.org>

³ <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=113347007&m=113348432>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long-term_memory

⁵ http://www.psychnet-uk.com/dsm_iv/primary_insomnia.htm

Friday, October 9, 2009

The Village Approach

The other psychologist and I are going to be busy for the next few weeks preparing for our annual parent speaker series. One of the topics the speaker committee suggested (but in much nicer terms) was “What do you do all day?” I admit that I have a non-typical job and I am naively going to attempt to explain it in a paragraph or less.

I teach three classes on social skills a day, have three hours a week dedicated for office hours (individual time with kids), and attend two clinical meetings and one staff meeting a week. The rest of my time is spent dealing with crises and writing this blog. I enforce (but do not make) school policy with all students. I am a disciplinarian (handing out detentions and Kleenex), crisis manager (trained in CPR), and consultant to parents, teachers, and other professionals (I have a big book of phone numbers). There are 33 Orion students on my list and at all times I am ready to comment on how they are performing both academically and socially and have a plan ready for increasing or maintaining performance for each one of them. I really like my job, but part of doing it well is knowing my limitations and when other people should be involved.

Considering the needs of most of the kids attending our school, I really do play a rather limited role, and much work is done by other professionals with whom I coordinate. For instance, when considering behavioral-health issues, I make referrals to individual therapists (moderate to long-term weekly or biweekly individual or family therapy), family physician and psychiatrists (evaluation or medication management), behavioral pediatricians¹ (meds plus behavior/family work), neurologists² (complex neurological issues like seizures or tics³), and neuropsychologists⁴ (comprehensive evaluations and treatment recommendations).

There are also a slew of academic specialists I work with, not the least of which are Orion’s own teachers and our transitions counselor. Beyond this, I recommend individual subject tutors (specific subject help after school), educational therapists⁵ (holistic educational specialists), educational consultants (finding programs or schools for your kid), school district representatives (for kids on IEPs⁶) and educational attorneys⁷ (for families needing help working with school districts).

There are a lot of others including the unsung camp counselors, Big Sisters, and people who tell your child to pipe down when they are being obnoxious on the city bus. It really does take a village of professionals to raise a child.

¹ <http://www.dbpeds.org/>

² <http://www.neurologychannel.com/aneurologist.shtml>

³ http://kidshealth.org/teen/diseases_conditions/brain_nervous/tics.html

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuropsychology>

⁵ <http://www.aetonline.org>

⁶ <http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/learning/iep.html>

⁷ <http://education-law.lawyers.com>

Friday, October 16, 2009

Second-gen Social Contact

You may or may not be aware of this, but Orion tends to specialize in working with children on the social periphery. It is my guess that most if not all of our kids have experienced mild to severe teasing and bullying as a result of having NLD or a Spectrum disorder. Some of the symptoms/results of Spectrum disorders (naiveté, problems with reading and producing non-verbals) make our kids a prime target in the Thunderdome¹ that is our American educational system.

Because of that our new students spend a lot of time in the beginning of most school years repairing some of that social damage. Kids in this position often express that they are not making friends fast enough and they need to be reminded that the big success for them so far is the sense of safety and security they feel, and the freedom to be themselves. Friendships will follow in due time.

I witnessed an event in group yesterday that I don't often get to see first-hand. One of our new students this year has made a lot of progress socially due, in large part, to the efforts of some peers to be nice and reach out to him. Yesterday I saw this student extend the olive branch (via a high-5) to another student who has been having trouble fitting in. It felt like Gorillas in the Mist². This is what I have come to call a "second-generation social contact". One student builds upon the efforts of others who were friendly toward him to reach out and make other social contacts; to be a friend to others. This took about 10 weeks to come about I assure you this time-line is not typical. Most of these second-generation contacts like this can take years. Kids can take a long time to repair the social damage and then build up skills and courage to reach out to others.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad_Max_Beyond_Thunderdome

² <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095243>

Friday, October 23, 2009

Trust

New teachers at Orion often need special instruction in an essential classroom management piece. We stress the importance of cracking down on misbehavior and general rule-breaking (as opposed to the sometimes-advised “overlooking it” approach) immediately and decisively for the purpose of reducing overall stress in the classroom. Some might think that this approach would increase classroom stress, but in our spectrum population, the overlooking approach is much more likely to increase stress.

If you know our kids, you may be able to guess that when they witness unaddressed rule-breaking behavior (even for minor events), they can interpret it as the unraveling of reality. Most of our kids operate with the innate knowledge that the universe is orderly and rule-based, and when they see a rule broken and the offense not fixed or repaired, it’s a short walk to the end of life as we know it.

So why do our spectrum kids respond this way? All of my theories come back to the notion of trust. Our kids have a hard time trusting that adults are in control and able to manage a threat like rule breaking (and prevent it from becoming a crisis). Instead of implicit¹ trust (often required in the “overlooking it” approach), our kids need explicit demonstrations of trust (like the “smack-down” approach described above). Trust is very hard for our kids and I think it is the result of problems building relationships, for it is through relationship that trust is established.

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implicit>

Friday, October 30, 2009

In Wedge Formation

An interesting situation came up last week when I was getting on the morning bus¹ to work. I ride the bus with some of our students who made a mad dash in V-formation for the door when the bus pulled up. The other riders apparently knew enough to stay out of their way. They looked on as our students wedged themselves toward the stile. They apparently do this most mornings.

I have been riding that bus as part of my commute (I also drive to work some days) for several years now, but that day's image of the boarding wedge stuck in my craw and I decided to dig up and dust off an old social norm²: give preference to your elders. Kids should stand aside for adults when boarding a bus, entering an elevator or building, or any number of more casual entries and exits we experience throughout the day.

The interesting part of this whole experience was the "feedback" I received when I shared with them my wishes that they stand aside and let others board before them. What if I am closer and it is more efficient for me to board in front of an adult? What if there's a large group of people and I end up not getting a seat? What if (I'm not making this up) Hitler is also boarding the bus-do I stand aside for him?

Truthfully, in addition to dealing with the consternation of the kids, I struggled a bit with answering some of the questions (especially the Hitler question-I recommended the kids wait for the next bus and not board with Hitler). The good news is that I had social convention on my side. It is the case that our society has an implicit set of rules upon which it was founded and (sort-of) recognizes. One of these rules is that you should allow people to board in front of you, especially your elders, because it is a sign of respect. I also told the kids that if they performed this behavior, others would see them as respectful and gracious. They didn't so much care about this last part.

¹ <http://www.cccta.org>

² http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/social_norms.htm

Friday, November 6, 2009

Regard and Acceptance

The older I get, the more distant from my own memories of adolescence I become. Perhaps this is why I am recently noticing a lot more compassionate responding in myself for the trials of adolescence. It is much easier for me to look at adolescent misbehavior or screw-ups with an avuncular eye than a scornful one.

This is an extremely important development for my professional work due to the fact that not only does all of my work with your children hinge on the quality of relationship I have built with them, but kids need to have it demonstrated to them over and over again that there is at least one person (and hopefully more) in the world who will love and accept them regardless their actions. This acceptance usually comes from the parent, but it doesn't hurt if I'm there too. It is my goal, both professionally and personally, to value and accept each one of your children at a basic, human level, and to accept each unconditionally.

It doesn't end with some blanket statement about love and acceptance though. As you may be able to guess, boys look to dads for one type of affirmation, and moms for another. Same with girls. We live in a society where effective fathering is becoming more and more scarce, and are associated with a school serving kids with a neurological disorder that primarily affects boys. The fact is, I do notice that I am a male psychologist in a school populated primarily by boys. I understand that I have the choice to play a unique part in the lives of these kids that extends beyond my skills as a psychologist.

Do you understand that you also have a role? Do you understand that you are being given a choice, and that your choice can have a profound affect on the child assigned to you?

Friday, November 20, 2009

Underestimation of Fatigue

I started one of my groups this week with the question, "Why is it harder for you to get along with your peers now than earlier in the term?" Many great answers were forthcoming, and most centered around the quip "Familiarity Breeds Contempt". We went on from here to talk about how to plan for positive social interactions. It was very much a task of identifying and then solve a problem, a common approach in social skills group.

What was missing in the kids' responses was the role of fatigue or just being tired and how that effects functioning. I find this fascinating because I cannot think of too many other variables that have such a profound effect on my life as my energy level. If I don't get enough sleep, everything is harder for me-including getting along with others, doing my job, watching TV-everything.

Maybe it is a spectrum thing, or maybe just an adolescent thing, but I can't tell you how often kids have been offended when, following a rant on how horrible a teacher or peer is being to them and how I should punish that teacher or peer, I ask them how much sleep they got the night before. Fatigue plays a consistent and profound role in the lives of our students.

There were two points I was trying to make in group with my original question. The first is that school (or work) usually has a net negative effect on energy levels-it usually uses up more energy than we are able to replenish on a daily basis. This is the argument for vacations-to get back in the positive. The second is that I wanted to outline my short-term plan for getting along with peers: do what it takes to survive until 1:40pm Friday. That's the beginning of our Thanksgiving Break.

Note: There was no post last Friday as I was out of town, my routine changed, and I forgot about nearly all of my duties as a result. There will also not likely be a post next week as I will be up at 3:30am heading to the mall with my Mother.

Friday, December 4, 2009

Gossip

I am tempted at this time of year to talk about self-assessment as the other psychologist and I are busy gathering data and thoughts for our term summaries we prepare for students and their parents. On a whim I looked back at the blog this week last year and found I've already essayed (See: Rehearsing Success) that sufficiently.

A topic that might have been overlooked in the blog, and one that came up again recently is gossip¹. You may or may not know this, but Orion maintains a zero tolerance for gossip. Dr. Stewart sums it up best though when she describes gossip as "poison" to the Orion community. All of our students should be able to talk about this topic with you, but students overheard talking negatively about another student behind their back are subject to immediate consequence. Our kids are traditionally bad at hiding their contempt for one another, so we are relatively effective at addressing and managing this behavior.

One particularly adept student brought up this issue again in group and suggested that we (the Administration) spend too much time punishing gossips and not enough time helping the gossip victims. His/her reasoning was that gossip is a part of life and there's no sense in training students to live in a gossip-free environment.

I sensed a trap and asked for a day to think about a response (you can do this too, by the way). I have two responses now. 1. Gossip, while not eradicated in adulthood, is much less tolerated and more deviant than in the adolescent world. 2. Because we cannot eradicate it, does this mean we should ignore it? We certainly cannot ignore its consequences (the "poison" description is accurate), so on that issue this student and I see eye to eye. I refuse to accept gossip as inevitable though. In this area I think it is okay for our students to set a standard in the world.

¹ <http://www.helium.com/items/1420794-teen-advice-the-harmful-effects-of-gossipgossip-gossiping>

Friday, January 15, 2010

Away From Home

As some of you may know, I had the opportunity to chaperon Orion Academy's Winter Abroad 2010 during winter break. This year the group went to Costa Rica and had a fantastic time touring the tropics with a guide and driver, zip-lining and kayaking, and enjoying all the new and exciting experiences of this wonderful country and culture.

What some of you may not know is that I also volunteered to be Orion's ongoing coordinator for the Winter Abroad trip. My goal is to make it more of a program component of Orion Academy and to include more multi-day trips to locations both foreign and domestic with the Winter Abroad trip being the culminating travel experience for the Orion student. Being on this trip proved to me that a week-long trip like this is truly a test of some advanced social skills and independent-living activities. All of the kids who attended did quite well and I thought the trip was a huge success, but it got me thinking.

How should our kids prepare for an experience like this? What should be the prerequisites for a student wanting to attend the Winter Abroad trip?

Fatigue was one of the most influential factors on this trip for the kids. All of the kids were out of shape and all could have benefited from at least a month of cardio work before going. Most of the kids would have also benefited, from a stamina point of view, on how and what to eat. Some ate too little, some too much, some too slow, others too fast; and most ate wrongly. Not surprisingly, fatigue contributed (in my opinion) to problems with attitude and mood and made the difference between an experience being arduous or adventurous; friends and foes.

Our kids also need a basic set of experiences before going. They need to have experienced public transportation where they sat next to someone they did not know. They need to have shared a room (and a bed) with a peer for an overnight. They need to know how to occupy themselves alone (with a book or iPod) or in a group (with cards or conversation). They need to know how ask for help from the right sources. They also need to know how to manage money (pay for things and make change) and use a bankcard to get more money.

Interestingly, on our trip, our kids struggled less with being away from and out of touch with their parents than I anticipated. The parents, on the other hand...

Friday, January 22, 2010

Mom and Dad

This is one of those posts I have been composing for a while and every time the issue comes up I think, "I should blog about that", but then something more interesting happens. Thankfully this week was full of either dull things or interesting things I cannot blog about.

I believe I have discovered another artifact about our kids. I noticed this for the first time several years ago when one of our students was telling a story about his family. He said something like, "Mom said I wasn't allowed but I asked Dad later and he said it was okay." Now, there is a lot wrong with that statement, but the thing that stuck out to me, and it is something I have heard over and over since then is that some of our kids refer to their parents as "Mom" and "Dad", and not "my Mom" or "my Dad" (as if Mom and Dad are their given names). It is a subtle little thing, but when you hear it said it sounds peculiar.

If you are not sure what I am talking about, try telling a story about your parents to a work colleague and leave out the modifier "my" when referencing your mom or dad. Just call them Mom and Dad. It should feel strange, and even though the listener understands what you are saying perfectly, it should sound a bit strange or overly personal to them. Why might our kids do this?

When one says "my parents", they are also saying "I know we do not have the same parents and the term 'mom' means a different person when you say it." It is an exercise where one takes into account the listener while speaking. If our kids will monologue about World War II until the listener is asleep or has walked away, all the while ignoring blatant social cues that the listener is simply not interested, it makes sense that they might ignore a more subtle social cue like this one.

Friday, January 29, 2010

Social Norms

This week in social skills class we have been talking about social norms. The kids are finally starting to complain about the topic, so I'll have to finish it up another time. I told them though that as bored as they are with any particular topic, I have the same discussion four times more than they do, so I would be an unsympathetic ear for boredom. They really didn't seem to care about my struggles.

Social norms are generally described as rules for conducting social exchanges, or situations where two or more people come together. Social exchanges are certainly things like conversations, but they occur anytime someone takes notice of another person. Social norms, at the level of the individual, dictate how to act in order to fit in to society (as well as give suggestions about how one can stand out). At the level of society, however, social norms serve the purpose of preserving culture. This way people can enter and exit the culture, but the culture itself remains relatively intact due to a solid set of social norms.

Many of the kids I surveyed knew that social norms were generally implicit or unspoken for most people. For instance, people are not generally taught the rules for conversations (eye contact, body language, tone of voice, content of speech, etc.). This is, however, one of the major social distinctions for our kids. Most of our kids do not understand social norms implicitly (for various reasons), but must be explicitly taught them. In my experience, our spectrum kids can learn these rules and become virtually indistinguishable in their social behavior from individuals who learn them implicitly (this learning is a combination of observational learning and reflection-a fairly complex process).

This was all lead-up (hence the children's fatigue) for a discussion on the culture of Orion and the social norms we have here for preserving that culture (of which there are plenty). You may be able to see where this is going. I am creating a platform to respond to the "why do we have such a stupid rule?" question every time someone gets a detention for missing a chore or calling someone a name. I also want to train the students that there will be rules you learn here at Orion (or in another setting) which are good only for that particular setting. Outside of Orion you are not likely to get a detention for putting WOW on your computer.

Friday, February 5, 2010

Tipping

The Sophomores and I are getting prepared for our next outing. We are going to a sit-down restaurant and the kids will be expected to order, eat, and pay for their food independently. I have some very specific instructions for the kids about tipping their server and I wanted you to be aware of what I am teaching your kids.

Some of the kids bristled when I told them that I expected them to budget at least a 12%-15% tip regardless the quality of service. "What if the service is really bad?" Here's my rule: It is okay to over-tip for good service, but it is never okay to under-tip for bad service. This is based partly on fact and partly on opinion.

The fact: Servers, despite their skill level, depend on tips for their wages. This is how we do things in the US and not necessarily how other countries handle this. When you walk into a restaurant, paying an additional 12% of the bill to the server should be expected. This is a social norm and bad service should not be a way to save money.

The opinion: Under-tipping makes the patron look petty. I used to under-tip in high school in the same way I did a lot of immature and self-absorbed things. Lots of people wrongly assume that under-tipping sends a message to the server to get their act together. In actuality, under-tipping only reflects negatively on the patron. No server has ever "learned a lesson" from getting a poor tip, but patrons always look petty for under-tipping.

Besides, is it possible that the poor service you received was the result of the server having a bad day (like we are all subject to) or something out of their control? The kids and I generated a list of ways to express dissatisfaction with poor service, including talking to a manager (which sometimes gets you free food) or filling out a customer survey. The best way to express your dissatisfaction with a restaurant: don't go back. Consequently, this will be our third year going to The Great Wall¹ restaurant in Lafayette.

¹ <http://www.yelp.com/biz/the-great-wall-restaurantlafayette#hrid:3ZXPSl3FVwAEr9XgzxFwTg/src:search/query:great%20wall>

Thursday, February 11, 2010

Out of Office

I wanted to pass along a note that I will be out of the office tomorrow and will not have the time to write a full blog posting. This is a shame, as well, because I wanted to tell you about the discussions inspired in social skills group around the rash of overflowing toilets we have had this week. This week's group theme: How to maintain appropriate hygiene without overflowing a toilet. I have actual strategies for this.

Friday, February 19, 2010

The Other Devil

I make and enforce (mostly enforce) a lot of policy here at Orion. Because of this, kids are often angry with me for criticizing the cleanliness of their hair, their offensive behavior, or their smell, among other things. I was very happy then to have nothing to do with poem selection for this week's Poetry Night. Now the Writing Teacher is "the Devil that rejected my poem." Far be it from me not to capitalize on this event though.

We talked in group about why a person's poem might be rejected for Poetry Night. Besides the idea of the Writing Teacher being mean (i.e., the Devil), they were able to come up with reasons such as the poem was submitted too late or may contain offensive content. These are all true, but I wanted to dig in a bit because the poems I read that were consequently not chosen for the night were actually quite good (and submitted on time).

The message I wanted to get across to the students is that it is an over-simplification to interpret the rejection your poem as a statement of the poem's quality. I went on to talk about the Writing Teacher's job of selecting poems for that night as being very similar to a curator's job, or the job of a book editor to choose what work goes well together. The idea is that an event like Poetry Night exists for the benefit and pleasure of the audience—a concept I expect our kids to find troubling. It is likely the last thing they would expect.

The other message I wanted to send them is that my explanation about how poems were chosen or rejected was not meant to make them feel better (I have no reliable methods for this), but to add meaning to their feelings of hurt. We cannot avoid hurt in life, but pointless suffering can be catastrophic. How can you possibly not take it personally when your work (in many ways a self-portrait) is rejected, for any reason?

Friday, February 26, 2009

Your Kid Works Hard

It was parent/teacher/student meetings this week along with Personal Project presentations, so there is not much to report from social skills group. We did social outings to a restaurant and a local college, and all the kids had a chance to present their work to the Orion community. Today was the first day of Session 5 and I must tell you that I had a lot of kids in my office today needing to talk about this or that, or needing to be talked to about this or that.

I took inventory today of all the scrutiny and evaluation your children have undergone this week alone. In addition, several kids brought up today issues that reminded me it is really tough growing up and being an adolescent. You do not have much control as an adolescent, but you are also not allowed to do a lot of the behaviors little kids do to cope. I think my tendency is to look at my own life and compare it to what they are dealing with (you want something to cry about?), and also tell myself that I survived adolescence (if I can do it, you can do it), and I am tempted to give them the "pull it together" speech. I instead chose to do a lot of listening today and avoid giving pep talks or advice.

Your kids worked very hard this week, and even those who seem to make little or no progress in whatever goal you set for them still typically exert a great amount of effort, even if it is only to stand still. Professionally and otherwise I can recommend you give your kid the proverbial pat on the back. I know your life as a parent is challenging, but I encourage you to make your child pancakes tomorrow morning, or rent their favorite movie for the family to watch, or give them a hug and tell them "good job" and that you are proud of their work this week. Find something they did this week that you liked and want to reward. By the way, research supports you in this pursuit. It says that in most cases (actually, the vast majority of situations), rewarding kids for doing things you like is much more effective than punishing the things you do not like.

Friday, March 5, 2010

Others Have It Worse

If social justice can be a hobby, it is mine. I say this with a certain amount of trepidation, however, because social justice works better as a lifestyle or passion than a hobby. I have mentioned in the past that the 8th graders have social skills class with me daily, so in order to manage the task of planning all those classes, I set up theme days. Tuesdays used to be Brain Day (we learned about the brain), but are now Social Justice Day. Last week we learned about communities in Africa who have no access to clean water, and this week we learned about coffee growers who are subsistence-farming even though I pay \$1.80 for a grande.

I think social justice (what the internet describes as “justice on a social scale”) is a great topic for all kids to know about (consequently, none of the 8th graders had heard of Fair Trade), but it is especially good for kids on the spectrum to learn.

Social Justice is a topic that will help our kids cope with the ego-centrism that is so common to spectrum disorders. It is hard for our kids to put anyone else at the center of importance than themselves. Social justice is the activity of putting the needs of others above our own comfort. Social justice also gives our kids, when they respond to need, a sense of and experience with agency, or the ability to have influence or control. Kids who feel very out of control with their own lives (like most of our kids) feel immense satisfaction at being able to positively impact others or groups. Social justice also seems to specialize in impacting the giver’s daily living and lifestyle as opposed to charity (also good), which tends to focus on single-experience activity.

My favorite part of social justice, however, is the reality component. The world really does have injustice and danger in it. Social justice, however, gives kids a chance to confront, survive, and in some cases dominate danger and injustice. One of the sad realities is that social justice gives us myriad examples of people who are worse-off than we are. Sometimes this is sufficient to help us feel better about our own position. For a group adept in seeing the drawbacks and negatives of their own lives, social justice can offer a welcome distraction.

Friday, March 12, 2010

Questionable Alternatives

I have been called in to consult quite a bit this week on why a student might be under-achieving in school. I can think of a handful of examples where it seemed like everything is in place, and things seemed to be going okay before, but the child is now not performing as expected.

In my experience it is easy to become over-focused on one particular aspect of performance and forget other important elements in the process. This is the argument against standardized testing in the schools, by the way. In order to increase test scores, which can determine funding, more and more class content tends to “teach the test” instead of course material. We easily forget, however, that high school is not about test performance, or even grades. I would argue it’s not even about getting into college, getting a good job, or being happy.

Part of my job is to look at the problem of low performance and determine a plan for how to correct this. But when I tell myself that it’s not about the grades (or all those other performance markers), all of a sudden I have infinite avenues for intervention. Confiscating and holding a computer (which might compromise the student’s ability to do work that day), or not allowing a deadline extension (even when the student has a good excuse), or having a student pace around the quad instead of sitting in class (and missing an important lecture) all become viable solutions.

Some parents and teachers get this, and others don’t, or can easily lose sight of it. I think it’s easy to get distracted by all these markers of performance. There are so many of them, and they all have been designed to mask their inherently arbitrary nature, and the people who are administering these assessments seem so knowledgeable and believable; it’s hard, even for me, to not get taken in. But there is a super-ordinate purpose to your child’s attendance in this high school.

Friday, March 19, 2010

Guidance Style Parenting

The good news and the bad news of Terra Nova¹ testing this week with the kids is that I had more unstructured time during the day for several days. I looked at my pile of professional journals on my desk and realized I hadn't had this much free time for several months, it seemed.

I came across an article on the topic of parental control². What they came up with is that there needed to be a differentiation in the literature between references to parental control in terms of guidance, and control in terms of pressure or domination. Letting your child run amok (permissive style) and beating your child's will into submission (dominating style) are two easy-to-identify examples of ineffective parenting. But we cannot advise by simply telling parents what not to do.

The guidance style of parenting offers a lot of potential. Parents are encouraged to make sure their kids know that they have lots of great advice that is based on lots of years of experience, but work to avoid forcing children to do things. Instead, parents should work hard to establish a relationship and reputation with children that suggests things generally go better for them when they take the parent's advice.

I know the next question because I have heard it a lot. When do we let our children fail? I think this question can become a little more significant for kids on the spectrum who are more prone to have deficits in "street smarts", and whose mistakes (rebellious or otherwise) can impose safety issues. For my typical "shrink"³ answer, I will say that I do not envy parents who have to make this decision-usually on a routine basis. There is, of course, no answer to this question. Much of parenting is balancing levels of control over children so that they can grow up to be happy adults. Much of parenting too is the discovery of just how many things in your life are out of your control.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TerraNova_%28test%29

² <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/122687794/abstract>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrink_%28film%29

Friday, March 26, 2010

No Local News is Good News

A local news-crew came to Orion a few weeks back and interviewed some of our kids, took some film. The story was about educational programs geared toward children with Asperger's Disorder. Check out the story here¹.

For those of you who are in the habit of watching local news, the story is what you might expect. I thought it was a mostly-accurate portrayal of some aspects of Asperger's and what we do here at our school. I also thought our kids did a great job in their interviews and sounded very thoughtful and real.

The kids had a different opinion. For those who did not get to shine in the individual interview, the main complaint was that the story seemed to sensationalize the impairment side of Asperger's. They felt that the movie clip example the report used was especially patronizing. Many reported being ashamed of being associated with the school depicted in the newscast.

We talked in social skills group about their reaction to the story, and specifically about the difference between a news story and a commercial. This was all cold comfort to them, and as the day wore on, the negative sentiment seemed to grow. The tough part of the discussion was that, despite some inaccuracies with factual information in the broadcast (we do not have 80 students with Asperger's), the story was largely accurate, and I would assume appropriately geared to the neurotypical audience wanting to learn more about Asperger's and our school.

The Jim Carey scene would not have been my first choice.

¹ http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/assignment_7&id=7349100

Friday, April 9, 2010

The Big 3

I have occasional flashbacks to my community mental health days. In grad school and as a post-doctoral intern I worked in a community mental health center¹ in Cleveland where I developed some clever witticisms and observations about life and mental health. One of those came back to me as I was observing the kids falling asleep in class and snapping at each other just one day after Spring Break.

There are three areas one can target that will solve, I estimated, 75% of all of one's problems. If you lower the curative bar to just making your problems tolerable, my Big 3 focus areas can increase success to about 90%. (I am, of course, making up these statistics.) Sleep, exercise, and eating; in that order. If one will get enough sleep, and follows that with enough exercise, and finally healthy eating habits, 75% of all your problems will be solved and up to 90% of your problems will be deemed "tolerable".

Listening to the kids complain and watching them give each other nasty looks this week reminded me of the Big 3. "If I could just get the kids to get enough sleep," I thought to myself. It was remarkably difficult to get them to believe that when they feel bad and take it out on others, others tend to feel bad too. We meditated for the rest of the class.

Occasionally I get a chance to recommend the Big 3 to a client or school family, and sometimes these people are disappointed that "my answer" is not more mysterious or novel. Applying the Big 3 to one's life is actually much more difficult than we realize. Much of our society is geared toward directing us away from the things that are good for us, and even more-so for kids. Here's my advice: try implementing the Big 3, one at a time, for two weeks. Start today with getting enough sleep each night. In two weeks add to sleep proper exercise. Two weeks after that start eating a better diet. If I'm right, in six weeks and doing all three at once, about 75% of your problems will be gone. At the very least you should make your kid do this.

For reference, adolescents need about 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep (see post: Aspergers and sleep) a night (even on weekends) and 60 minutes of activity daily. Check this link² out for other ideas.

¹ <http://www.applewoodcenters.org/>

² <http://kidshealth.org/teen/index.jsp?tracking=T Home>

Friday, April 16, 2010

Economy of Mental Health

This post may seem a little more self-indulgent than usual, but I think I may have important and relevant points for the reader. Yesterday we took the Sophomore class to a ranch and participated in some team-building and leadership training activities for their social skills outing. In years past, we have visited the zoo for a scavenger hunt and a ropes course for this outing. Yesterday, at TRAILS to Success¹, I was blown away by the afternoon they had planned for the kids.

There are several things I want to accomplish on each of our outings. These outings give our kids a chance to practice some of the skills they have been working on in social skills class. They also intentionally challenge the kids by either introducing new/unused skill areas or uncovering deficits that may not show up in the daily school-life. It's generally my job to notice this process.

My experience at the ranch yesterday nicely illustrated several points I want to make about mental health services. Maria and Chris, the two women that run the program, are not only both doctoral-level psychologists, but they have a lot of experience working with our kids AND are very good at their jobs (and clearly like what they do). In mental health, it really does make a difference for clients to work with a professional who is good at and likes their job. Even if you do not agree with the professional's approach, it is usually possible to decipher whether or not the person knows what they are talking about.

The second point is that the phrase "you get what you pay for" applies in mental health in the same way that it applies in other parts of the goods and services industry. Some mental health professionals are clearly not worth what they charge (I know who you are), but most that I have met are worth every penny. I know many individuals and families who have made that transition to making mental health care more of a time and money priority, and none have expressed any regret.

I may get some flack from my colleagues about this statement, but I generally encourage the public to treat mental health care more like a consumer, and less like you are a sheepish, disoriented child. Know what you are buying, know its limitations; but ultimately the consumer should hold mental health "products" to certain standards.

¹ <http://trailstosuccess.com/index.html>

Friday, April 23, 2010

Loss of Reason and Logic

Our kids are rightfully praised for their sense of justice, balance, and logic. What we don't talk about as often though are the exceptions to this mainly logical existence. All parents of kids on the spectrum will attest to the fact that there are times when logic is thrown out the window with their children. In my experience, stress seems to be the catalyst for this change.

When I was working in community mental health, in cases where kids were failing to comply, the clinical response was firm standards and little negotiation. The clinician could often "make it worthwhile" for the child to comply, and so long as the contingencies were explained in a way the child could understand, the clinician usually got compliance. This lack of compliance on the child's part could be categorized as "rebellion" or oppositional behavior, and "consequences" were the appropriate prescription.

Our kids have a peculiar response to stress. For a time, our spectrum kids will negotiate and reason their way into situations where they can have more control over their own level of stress. There is a point, however, when reason is no longer a tool, and as any professional with experience can tell you, our kids will, in fact make terrible and dangerous decisions. Behavior that looks "rebellious" is actually better described as "overwhelmed and chaotic" and I believe the child begins to desperately seek comfort. In fact, taking a hard-line approach with spectrum kids when they are in this state of mind will always result in more dire consequences. The child will always choose the negative side of the ultimatum you are giving him or her, but not as a rebellious response. I truly believe they are seeking the most immediate path to comfort. But there is always that watershed moment when they move from logic to illogic.

Clinically speaking, I recommend that prior to that watershed moment the professional (and parent) use all of their logic and negotiating skills to help the child achieve their goals (even if their goal, without consciously knowing it, is to comply). I think our spectrum kids are generally peaceful and comfort-oriented, and want there to be justice. I have no problem negotiating with people who want these things. When they have, however, crossed into illogic, the clinician is recommended to help them seek comfort. Some kids need to talk to their parents, but most do really well with a comfortable chair in a dimly lit room. In about 45 minutes, the rule of reason has returned to a degree that you can start negotiating again.

Friday, April 20, 2010

Routine vs. Prom

It is well known that kids of all ages and perspectives respond well to routine. From a clinical perspective, routine is one of those magic elixirs for getting kids healthy and happy. With this said, our kids (kids on the Spectrum) really benefit from routine. Routine is great for them because it helps limit the amount of guesswork and surprise in their daily lives. Our kids report feeling more comfortable and confident if they know what to expect and feel prepared for it.

To that end, we really stress routine around here. Even if we have a different schedule on one day (like short day on Friday), we build this into a weekly routine that happens throughout the year. We plan and make predictable as much as possible.

We also believe that, even though our kids do not attend a big school, they should have some of the benefits of big school attendance such as athletics and Prom. The purpose of this is that, in addition to a great education, we believe memories are an integral part of the high school experience. I want our kids to have great memories. All kids should have the opportunity to do the box-step in a suit or dress to "Don't Dream it's Over" by Crowded House.

I believe Orion has found itself at an impasse. I have been looking at the schedule for April and May and I am impressed at the number of special events and days when the schedule is non-typical. I don't think it started out this way though. In my experience, special events are additive, and at high levels, intrusive. Have we reached critical mass?

Friday, May 7, 2010

Rumor and Justice

Our kids' emphasis on justice is one of my favorite topics. It accounts for a large percentage of the "Conversations I Never Anticipated Having" list I keep. For instance, I have been having a number of discussions with both boys and girls of the "he said something about me that wasn't true" variety. Usually this happens in the form of gossip, and over the Internet. No one gossips on the phone anymore.

My initial response to them is, "So what?" Right here I am demonstrating to them that we have different perspectives. Allow me to explain. My thinking is that, if someone says something about you that is not true, the rumor will either die or the gossip will be exposed as a bad source. Either way, it is okay for the person in my office to "let it play" because neither option really has any lasting negative impact on them. The worst that can happen is that the person spreading the rumor hurts his or her own reputation and becomes less and less believable over time.

This is what the spectrum child may be thinking: the information, once spoken, now exists. True or not, its existence necessitates its response and correction. My so-what response sounds to them like a denial that the rumor was even started and the child sometimes takes it as a personal slight. Sometimes the kids who hear my so-what response feel like they need to convince me that they are not lying and that this rumor actually exists.

There is a real-world analogy that can be used in this case. When the NY Times makes a mistake in its reporting, a retraction is printed. The National Enquirer (I'm assuming) has never printed a retraction. If they ever started this practice, they would have more retractions than actual stories. Both are newspapers that print "news" stories. One is a credible source, and the other is not. The credible source necessitates taking action to make sure they remain credible; no one really looks to the other for truth.

When I am saying "So What?" to the child, I am encouraging them to let this person promoting the gossip make their own decisions about being the NY Times or National Enquirer. Truth is unadulterated by rumor. This is an instance where I, the psychologist, do not need to get involved. In this case, justice will, in fact, play out, but not by the means or in the way our kids suspect. The community will exact justice.

Friday, May 14, 2010

Dual Representation Hypothesis

An article¹ caught my eye the other week where the authors talk about Dual Representation Hypothesis. It states that objects can have both literal and symbolic (dual) meaning, and our brains work to perceive both (in the form of representations) when we experience any given object.

Hopefully you can see what caught my eye. One of the deficits associated with spectrum disorders is this difficulty in looking beyond an object or situation's literal meaning or purpose and in to its more non-literal associations or possibilities. Little kids on the spectrum have a hard time with imaginative play (e.g., role-playing princes and princesses, singing into a hairbrush, etc.). It is surmised that these kids struggle with the concept of, or even lack the neurological capacity to process the notion that one can use objects and situations for other than their literal and designed purpose. The hairbrush is for brushing hair, not for projecting the voice. That's what a microphone is for.

When our kids get older, how does this play out? I think this problem with dual representations happens more in an interpersonal sense than with physical objects. Our kids have trouble reading subtext in communication (e.g., sarcasm) or seeing a smile as anything other than an indication of happiness. This is a problem too as the communication components of relationships, and the function of relationships themselves become more complex as one ages. I would guess that relational complexity actually reaches its height in adolescence, and calms down a bit in adulthood.

The implications of these suggestions could be big and far-reaching. Can direct training in imaginative play as toddlers lead to more relationship success as adolescents? A lot of things I am guessing at would have to be correct for that to be the case. How about my suggestion of the role of representations in relationships (see Attachment Theory² and Object Relations³)?

1 <http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=22185665>

2 <http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/a/attachment01.htm>

3 <http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/objectrelations.html>

Thursday, June 1, 2010

Summer vs. Chaos

This will be the last entry I can guarantee until the start of the new school year in August. Before I forget, I wanted to thank my fan, formally, for sending along comments via email and in person. It does help to know that I have a reader in that I keep my writing focused and concise.

I wanted to end this year with a couple things. First, I wanted to talk more about well-being in general and formally catalog one of my favorite pieces of advice for kids and families. This also applies very easily to adults, but they seem to struggle less with this than kids.

Without even trying very hard, most kids find themselves challenged with the task of growing up. Getting older, and especially in the middle/high school age ranges, is very difficult. I'm sure there are people out there, but I don't know many who would choose to be 13 again. At 13, your body is out of control, your emotions and relationships are out of control, animosity and depression are common and expected, you are forced to go to school like it's a job, but you aren't getting paid.

One of the more consistent factors I see in the kids and families who need my services is middle to high levels of chaos. Chaos in the household in the form of inconsistent schedules, clutter and grime in the home, discord among members (especially parents), financial restrictions, poor health of a person living in the house, or any number of life circumstances and significantly exacerbate the already tumultuous task of getting older for a child. Adolescents tend to respond to these situations in ways that make the chaos worse, like acting out or withdrawing.

Scheduling is the most effective way I have found to reduce chaos, and there are three items I recommend take scheduling priority: Bedtime, Wake-up Time, and Dinner Time. Make a set schedule for these three events and follow that schedule 5-6 days a week and you will find, after a couple weeks, that you have noticeably reduced chaos in your life. Most people do not really understand the level of chaos they were subjected to until they try this plan.

Second, I wanted to send along a couple ideas for kids (and their parents) who find themselves slipping into more than 8 hours of screen time (computer, games, TV) a day this summer. 1. Buy a lawnmower or other lawn equipment at a garage sale and knock on doors offering cleanup services to your neighbors. A \$20 investment (parents) on a mower could yield 10 times the money and a huge reduction in boredom. 2. Help your child learn public transportation. Have them research destinations (library, museum, park, retail store) and then figure out how to get there. 3. Insist your child call a friend and set up a get-together. Help them plan it and go through a dry-run of the conversation before they call. Some parents don't mind unlimited videogame time so long as their child is playing with someone in the

same room. 4. Have them earn screen time by accruing page (reading) time. An hour of reading (a book) earns an hour of videogames, or an hour of videogames for a half hour of exercise. 5. Have your child volunteer at the Oakland Zoo. It's free, there's training, it's social, and our kids actually like it.

There are my ideas. Nowhere does research say that a ton of TV and videogames each summer is good for your child, yet that seems to be the default of a lot of families I talk to. This is an area you must help your child plan, and be ready to be the bad guy. If necessity is the mother of invention, boredom is the mother of discontent. Insist that if your child does not like your ideas, they come up with their own plan. Removing access to TV, videogames, and computers is sometimes necessary, and 30- minutes of pouting and temper tantrum is worth a couple months of industry and productivity.

Friday, August 13, 2010

How I Know Your Kid Likes it Here

This is my fourth year here at Orion Academy and the students that were Freshmen during my first year are now Seniors. I take every opportunity I can to take credit for their success and maturity. They really are a fantastic group of Seniors and I am excited to see how this year plays out for them.

I want to welcome all of our new parents to the blog. I wanted to send this one out to you specifically because you and I don't have a lot of history to draw on. I have talked with a number of you on the subject of "how is my kid doing" and I wanted to pass along a little bit of background on how I come up with the answers that I do. I am not making this stuff up and my primary goal is not to make you feel better or get you off my back, but to pass along legitimate information.

Your kid does several distinct things that tell me they are settling in and actually enjoying being back at school and being here at Orion. Many of our kids have at least one time a day where they look like they are having a good time. I can document this if you are skeptical. Happy students stop talking about summer and their former school generally by the end of the first week. When they talk about social events, they tend to be events that occur at school or with school friends. Content students are compliant with teacher requests and participate in social skills class discussion without much protest. It goes without saying that adjusting to routine, including being able to find and be on time to all classes after the first two weeks is a sign of happiness and positive adjustment.

For our content and happy students - those that will typically get a positive report from me when you ask me how they are doing - "now" becomes pleasant, preferred, and comfortable. It is also a little mentioned, but true statement that many of our students prefer to be at school than anywhere else, even if they would not admit it in questioning. I predict this from the majority of student by the end of the school year.

Friday, August 20, 2010

Sleep

Here we are at the second week of school. Even if you waited until the last minute, your student should be off the summer sleep schedule and on to the school sleep schedule. I assume this to mean earlier bedtimes and wake-up times.

Sleep is a big issue at Orion. See other posts in this blog for a discussion on the relationship between Asperger's and sleep (see: Asperger's and Sleep) and the role of sleep and well-being (see: Big 3). I wanted to share more info that I read in an article¹ over the summer. Researchers have linked poor sleep habits in children to increased internalizing (depression, anxiety) and externalizing (fighting, arguing) symptoms. Not surprising, these symptoms remitted when the child's sleep schedule was fixed.

In my experience, it takes about two weeks to change a sleep schedule and re-set the circadian sleep clock. If your child is still going to bed too late, having trouble falling asleep, difficult to wake up, or lethargic or irritable in the morning, begin today working on the sleep schedule. If two weeks of concerted effort do not suffice, I would highly recommend consulting your child's pediatrician. Many Orion students have physicians who have successfully linked sleep problems to diet, medications, chronic stress, or even night-time habits. It really does make all the difference in the world for a student to get sufficient sleep.

One last note: if your child was going to get their sleep under control themselves, they would have done it by now. Do not fall for the, "I know, I know, get off my back!" response. Set some standards and help your student follow through. Commit to doing this along with them. You probably could benefit from better sleep habits as well.

¹ <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01439.x/abstract>

Friday, August 27, 2010

Pragmatic Language

The issue of pragmatic language has been on my mind these past two weeks. Pragmatic language is what I consider “practical” language for communication. Our kids struggle with pragmatic language issues because the rules for use are incredibly complex, flexible, and dynamic, and most people learn these rules implicitly. Not our kids. Our kids pick up literal language (the “dictionary definition” of words) much better.

Pragmatic language is often nonverbal. It’s not what you say, but how you say it. The “how you say it” is a facet of pragmatic language. Our kids can identify things such as eye-contact, voice inflection, and affect as pragmatic language tools. Sarcasm is a communication type they can identify as relying heavily on pragmatic language skills for correct interpretation.

There are several more subtle pragmatic language issues that many people do not usually consider being in the mix. Last year and this year especially I have worked with students in getting what they wear and their hygiene to be a better representation of who they are. Our kids struggle with linking their outward appearance (including smell) to people’s opinions of them. “Dressing for success” means something completely different to our kids, and they need to know what the rest of the world means by that phrase.

Our kids also struggle with coming off as a know-it-all or as offensive. Many of our kids cannot help responding to questions from their peers that are directed to the teacher. Other students struggle with sharing their opinions (or, in their estimation, factual knowledge) with others despite the offensive nature of the topic or their opinion or both. To them, an opinion (fact) is inherently true and they want to make sure the world knows that they are the experts. You can bring all questions related to their opinions directly to them, thank you very much.

The other issue that I bring up with the kids is that of affect, or the physical display of the emotions (usually on the face). What I have found is that our kids’ affect is quite sophisticated, but almost completely opposite the norm or completely idiosyncratic. In addition to their unique way of expressing emotion to the world, the rules of pragmatic language dictate that it is very important they learn not just how to read it on others, but how to project their emotions to others. Consequently, my years at Orion have made me affectively bi-lingual. I am going to start offering Reading and Understanding Spectrum Affect through workshops soon.

Friday, September 3, 2010

Effective Parenting

I wanted to write this particular entry not because it is timely so much as it is information for you that I don't want to get lost when I clean the whiteboard in my office. The topic is an article¹ I read in professional journal on effective parenting.

None of this should be news to most parents out there, so take this as an exhortation. Effective parents are those who can play multiple roles (e.g., friend, dictator, fearless leader) in the lives of their children. These parents read each situation they are presented and decipher the role they should play. This is referred to as "dynamic parenting", with the dynamic referencing "changing and adjusting" rather than "fabulous!"

The other piece of this is that effective parenting seems to be both a top-down (parents affecting the kids' behavior) and a bottom-up (children affecting parents) process. Wouldn't it be nice if our kids would act more like our subjects, and then we could be the benevolent ruler and peace would reign in the land? The reality is that kids can do things that cause emotional responses in us that can make it more difficult to choose the correct role when we are being dynamic.

Kids on the Spectrum are not unique in their ability to be both the apple of our eye and the thorn in our flesh. Pride and aggravation. The effective parent is the one that strives to honestly assess those emotional responses along with the child's needs when thinking how to respond to a situation calling for a dynamic parenting response. This, by the way, is why I have a job. Consider me the adviser to the effective parent.

¹ <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01426.x/abstract>

Friday, September 10, 2010

Everybody Else is Not Doing It

Readers, today marks a very momentous day in the life of this educator. An independent but companion to this blog, The Orion Experience¹, has been created. I will let the writer introduce herself. She and I had a chance to chat yesterday and it is possible that some of our topics will overlap in the future. She has been clear that she has read my blog and does not always agree with me, so I am overjoyed for you readers to have a counterpoint to my point. I think you will find that she has a unique perspective.

It has been mentioned in previous entries that we here at Orion have an incredible number of rules governing our student's (and parent's) behavior. Although I appreciate it when the kids simply obey me, I also have a fondness for discourse and I love it when kids respectfully ask me to explain the purpose or point behind a rule.

In social skills class yesterday we discussed one of our more controversial rules, the No-Touching Rule. Technically speaking, kids are never allowed to intentionally touch each other here at school. Some accidental touching (like swinging your arms and accidentally cracking someone in the head) have lead to consequences as extreme as suspension.

Our kids were fine with this rule until, a couple years ago, the first serious boy/girl romantic relationship was formed. Then the rule was just another way for the Man to keep the Students down. So let's talk about where this rule came from. In class we were able to decipher a couple of legitimate reasons.

Our students have problems with Sensory Integration (an executive functioning activity where the brain filters and sorts all of the sensory input). Touch is one of the most effective ways to overload this system in our kids. Overload leads to shutdown. This is why some of your children prefer not to wear certain fabrics or have problems washing their hair.

Related to this, our kids struggle with the pragmatic language (communication) associated with touching. Some of our kids touch indiscriminately, some get too close (personal space) and some may learn that they need "permission" to touch others, and will awkwardly ask, "can I give you a hug?" to people who neither want nor need a hug from a sweaty teenager.

Touching someone in the workplace can be, at best, unprofessional, and at worst, harassing. There are, of course, times for professional pragmatic greetings, such as shaking someone's hand, and in these situations, the cues are very clear (someone sticks out their hand); but in general, touching is frowned upon in the workplace, and thus, in school.

Finally, touch is a potent non-verbal. In my experience, touch is very effective at creating a sense of belonging, acceptance, and affection. How about the kids who are not getting hugs? Orion is a school of former outcasts-kids who did not fit in at their former schools, but who fit in here. Why would I allow a behavior which potentially contributes to exclusivity, an “us and them”? I have had to patch up more than one child’s hurt feelings.

One of my students brilliantly suggested that the act of (appropriate, non-awkward) consent between individuals might negate several of my points. I wish we had more time to discuss this in class, but the response I will leave you with is to consider this caveat from my perspective, the administrator looking out of my window at the children who may (or may not have) consented to the hug they are now exchanging.

¹ <http://oastudentthoughts.blogspot.com>

Friday, September 17, 2010

Activism and Idealism

This week I spoke with a student who expressed frustration about behavioral expectations at Orion and we got to talk about possible responses. Not surprisingly, teenagers tend to respond to disagreements with adults in one of two ways: give-in or disobey. More often than not kids choose to disobey, whether that means intentionally breaking the rule or failing to comply with (ignoring) a request.

I love the classic stories of civil disobedience. They seem heroic to me-refusing to comply with the dominant paradigm out of principle. "On principle" seems to me the gutsiest reason for doing anything. But I did encourage this student (who was doing the math to see how long it would take to get suspended) to consider other paths prior to civil disobedience.

A little known fact: Orion is not a democracy. So why would I encourage this student to pursue this issue? It seems like I am setting this student up for further frustration. Adolescents are generally idealistic, but under-motivated. They usually would rather complain than do something about their plight. I think their lack of motivation probably keeps them out of a lot of trouble, but if they can ever scare up enough drive to act on their ideals, they can become a force. They typically skip right to civil disobedience, failing to realize Gandhi and MLK Jr. never skipped right to marches and hunger strikes. Both also sacrificed their lives for their principles and beliefs.

Kids on the Spectrum struggle, possibly more than neurotypical teens, with frustration tolerance. They struggle so much, in fact, that often times I see family systems turned on their head for the purpose of helping the child avoid frustration. Kids get crazy privileges, and parents bend over backward to make sure the child does not get mad. Not so here at school. The fact is, most student requests for rule-changes at Orion are destined for denial.

The other skill I would like my students to learn, and the situation they are more likely to have to deal with than civil disobedience, is not getting their way. Kids must get used to complying with rules with which they do not agree. I consider myself a principled person, but the lives of even the most principled are composed primarily of compromise. Remember, compromise is not the same as apathy. These are subtle distinctions and skills our kids must learn, and we must take the time to teach and demonstrate. I am preparing for the question, "How is it compromise when you're telling me what to do?"

Friday, September 24, 2010

Progress and Change

Orion has reached the end of Session 1, the first of six, six-week sessions in the school year. I am impressed with the number of inquiries I received from parents into the progress of their student. A number of parents expressed confusion about what they should be expecting from their students or how they are able to effectively assess their child's progress.

In my mind, the first session at Orion is primarily an assessment period. This is a time when I can see the child function socially, academically, and organizationally in a working environment. I can make some changes and adjustments and see how that affects the child's performance. By the end of Session 1 I expect to have a fairly solid idea about what needs to be worked on and a good idea of some of the child's strengths and weaknesses.

Two primary issues seem to cause the most frustration for parents. First, parents can get frustrated that change is not happening quickly enough, or they really do not know what they should be expecting from their child in terms of progress. In this case, it really becomes imperative to consult with the professionals working with your child. They should be able to explain to you where your child is in functioning relative to their potential, be this in math or in making friends.

The second area of frustration is one of my favorites. Parents often ask me to comment on whether or not a behavior they are seeing is normal or typical (or even acceptable). A lot of the job of a therapist, and actually one of our most potent treatment tools is that of "normalizing" and explaining to people where the limits of typical actually really are. This is my favorite issue because it requires that I know and juggle many contextual variables to develop an overall assessment of a child's performance.

For those parents who have not yet met with me or would like to have a discussion with me in the future, you should be forewarned. It is rare that I am unable to suggest a way the parent or family can change that would encourage progress in the child.

Friday, October 1, 2010

Your Personal Big Brother

This week marks another in the good work of maintaining a balance between control (micro-management) and leaving kids to their own devices. Creation and enforcement of rules is a huge debate in my mind. How far should we go to monitor our students? To what extent should Orion go to enforce the rules it has established? How strict should we be about consequences? Should a student really get suspended for taking a sandwich from the fridge that wasn't theirs?

Research and experience tells us that overly strict rule-expectations or overly harsh and punitive responses to misbehavior tend to lead to anger and frustration in children, and almost inevitable rebellion. On the other hand, kids who are left too much to their own devices (and, at extremes, kids who parent themselves) are at huge risk for depression, anxiety, and substance abuse problems, among other things.

What we see time and again is that our Spectrum kids do best with explicit expectations and consistent consequences. Our kids can also tolerate the "controlling" end of the spectrum better than neurotypical kids. They tend to do best with a behavior system in which one can be suspended for taking someone else's sandwich.

In parenting and education, the process of establishing rules and administering consequences is not likely to ever become formulaic. Instead, it requires constant vigilance and a principled approach. By principled approach I mean that adults need to have an over-arching principle to guide decision-making. As an adult I am sure you know that the "correct" principle to be guiding your work with kids is to have their best interests in mind-to want what is best for them. Vigilance, by the way, is necessary to correct for "drift" away from correct principles to easier ones (like doing what's more convenient for me).

Orion works very hard to make transparent our over-arching principles behind decision-making about your kids. I understand though when our kids report feeling like Big Brother is watching them. To your children I am not likely to deny this. But to other adults who know and work with our kids, there is no question how I know as much as I know about their lives and their behavior.

Friday, October 8, 2010

Can Our Kids Master Empathy?

Upon coming to work at Orion, I was aware of the professional sentiment that individuals on the Spectrum were supposed to struggle with the activity of empathy. I began wrestling with this two years ago in a posting (see: Empathy). The observation that truly threw me for a loop is something I have come to call an emotional virus. I have mentioned elsewhere that the emotional funk of one student in the morning can become the emotional funk of the campus by lunch. What are these kids doing if not empathizing, or having a shared experience, with the original suffering student?

I have talked in the past about pragmatic language being both an expressive and receptive process. From what I can tell, empathy also applies to this expressive/receptive model. An empathic person must be able to gather the clues (receptive) about another person's experience. It is possible that our kids, without being encumbered by excessive information and opinion on the experience of others (they are somewhat ego-centric) may actually be better at receiving and responding (at an automatic or subconscious level) to the raw emotional and contextual data. They are certainly no worse than the average teen.

It's the expressive side that seems to pose the problem. Again, the expressive side of empathy includes two major pieces. The first is interpretation: what is the meaning of all of this raw data I am sensing? Why is this person crying? Why does someone else look elated? Limited experiences and limited chances to receive feedback on the accuracy of their guesses probably leave our kids novices in the area of interpretation well into high school.

The second expressive element is that of empathic response. For instance, how does one appropriately respond to someone who is crying? Our kids struggle with appropriate pragmatic language expression anyway, and compound that with inaccurate interpretations, and you have children who appear as if they cannot experience empathy.

Both of the expressive activities (interpretation and response) of empathy can be taught. The rules are complex, but our kids can learn them. It's the pedagogy of empathic reception that I am skeptical about. From what I can tell though, our kids may actually be average to above average in their ability to sense the emotions of others-truly unimpaired.

Friday, October 15, 2010

Loss

A look at the blog archives reveals I have not yet talked at great length on the issue of Asperger's and loss. I had an experience here at Orion soon after coming on the job that made me think about loss, comings and goings, and grief. Kübler-Ross¹ has done a lot of work on the process of responding to loss, but watching our kids these past few years makes me very interested in why we respond to loss.

Why do we cry when people leave? Why do we feel down? There are a lot of correct answers to this question, but our kids have provided me a lot of insight into this issue due to their being unencumbered by social convention that dictates a "correct" answer to these questions.

My discussions with the kids over the years have revealed that, as much as I want to be Dr. Schlegelmilch to them, I'm mostly a psychologist. There are no other Dr. Schlegelmilch's out there (yet), but there are other psychologists. Every single conversation I have had with a child about a loss of a family member, teacher, friend, or other personal relationship has revealed that much of their thinking has centered on how this loss impacts their functioning.

I want to believe that our kids feel sad when experiencing interpersonal loss. They certainly have reported to me feeling sad, but rarely, if ever, have I witnessed our children devastated by loss. This is certainly a topic in my mind that warrants further discussion.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model

Friday, October 22, 2010

Contagious Yawning

I found a great article this week called Contagious Yawning in Autistic and Typical Development¹. Contagious yawning², if you are not aware, is what happens when one person in a room yawns and makes everyone else yawn. Among other things, researchers suggest that contagious yawning is evidence of our instinctive connection to others. Contagious yawning is a form of behavioral mimicry³ (like smiling when someone smiles at us) that facilitates emotional contagion. Emotional contagion⁴ is the “tendency of individuals to converge emotionally to those around us” (definition from Contagious Yawning article linked above). It is very similar to the concept I described in a previous blog called the emotional virus (see: Can Our Kids Master Empathy). I do like their term better, so I am going to start using it.

There were a couple items I wanted to bring out here. The first is that much of the research these days on Autism Spectrum Disorders includes kids with diagnoses of Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS⁵) and Asperger’s. The good news is that we really need to know more about the experience of people diagnosed with these disorders, and researchers are actively looking in to it. The bad news is that much of the literature lumps these people all together in one group. Clinically, we here at Orion have served people from all of these groups, but we definitely differentiate between them and believe that individuals qualifying for different diagnostic categories have different clinical needs.

The other interesting piece is that this article (a research article) found contagious yawning (and thus, emotional contagion) to be less prevalent in people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders, including Asperger’s. If you have been keeping up with the blog, this result is contrary to my observations (see again: Can Our Kids Master Empathy). Now, this could be further proof that Autism and Asperger’s are distinct disorders. This could also be evidence that I don’t know what I’m talking about, or need to be more careful describing my observations. Both are possibilities.

¹ <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01495.x/abstract>

² <http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/human-nature/behavior/contagious-yawn.htm>

³ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12807406>

⁴ <http://news.uns.purdue.edu/Clips/2005/dec/051226.Moods.html>

⁵ http://www.autismspeaks.org/navigating/pdd_nos.php

Friday, October 29, 2010

Wigs

As I write, kids are filing on to campus in their costumes. I am half gratified and half mortified that some of the “retro” and obscure costumes are those of characters from my childhood. One student dressed up as “Dead Dr. Schlegelmilch”. I’m honored.

Halloween aside, one of the new trends this year has been kids wearing wigs to school (on non-Halloween days). As a policy enforcer, I have been asked if I am going to start cracking down on the practice. Wig-wearing to school is definitely not normal and could possibly be distracting to other students. In our efforts to promote a professional atmosphere here at Orion, we don’t want children getting the idea that it’s okay to wear wigs to the office.

Let’s face it: our kids can be a bit peculiar. It was the wig-wearing and the weird-dressing drive that got them so much criticism in their former school settings. One of the greatest joys of my job has been creating a community where a child can wear a blue wig to school and not be criticized. I do count it as part of my professional objective to create and maintain a community that promotes the safety of non-offensive self-expression (and especially wig-wearing).

I am sure we will eventually have a group discussion on the advantages and disadvantages to wearing a wig to a job interview. I will let you know if we have any revelations that are blog-worthy.

Friday, November 5, 2010

An Extra Year

The Orion Parent Teacher Organization sponsored a talk this week and invited my colleague and I to be the speakers. We left lots of time at the end of the talk for parents to ask questions because our parents refuse to be silent on the issue of their children. One of the parents asked the question I was hoping to avoid: how are last year's Super 8 kids integrating into this year's freshman class? I was avoiding it because the answer is still an unfolding phenomenon and not one I can quickly summarize or even verbalize.

Last year was the inaugural year for our 8th grade program (Super 8), so there has not been a lot of time to reflect on what we have seen so far this year from the first integrated freshman class. I would like to mention two of the artifacts I have noticed so far in this group. The first is that this particular freshman class appears to have more than the average amount of emotional and social turmoil than past classes. This, in itself, is not good or bad. Emotional and social turmoil is a part of life (especially in high school) and we know how to address it as a school.

The other item I have noticed is that these kids are reporting more boredom in their academic classes than previous groups. Again, not a deal-breaker. We are more than happy (and ready) to add extra, meaningful challenge to academic classes. Interestingly, in a situation where I would have been content to stare at the floor and get the easy A, our kids are requesting more academic rigor.

Both of these artifacts are partially explainable by the selection criteria we used to form the first (and subsequent) Super 8 class. These kids were selected for their intellectual prowess. The larger question that I would like to ask is this: if a little is good, is more better? A two-day vacation is nice, but a 7-day vacation is wonderful. A cup of coffee in the morning is great, but 5 cups is disastrous (for me). I would like to believe that 5 years of Orion is even better for our kids than 4, but time will tell.

I should warn you that we are currently doing program development that is driven primary by the opinion that "more is better". I hope we're right.

Friday, November 12, 2010

Season of Survival

Today's entry is a seasonal one. You may or may not have noticed, but these two weeks prior to Thanksgiving Break are tough for your kids. It has been a long time since the last legitimate vacation, there have been a bunch of extra-curricular activities here at school, and we did a hard shift from Session 2 to Session 3 not too long ago. There are other things that contribute, but both absences and behavior problems tend to increase just before Thanksgiving Break.

Allow me to make a few recommendations. Let your focus as a family, and for your child, be on health and productivity, and away from change and improvement. People are motivated toward positive change when things seem to be going wrong, but you must resist that urge in this case. The reason for this recommendation has to do with the source of frustration. When there are negative behavior patterns causing frustrations, then change is necessary for better well-being. In the case I mentioned in the first paragraph though, frustration is largely a result of fatigue. Making dramatic life changes at a time like this can actually make things worse—the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

For the next couple of days up to Thanksgiving Break, make sure homework continues to get done, your child is eating well and sleeping enough, and is getting enough physical activity. Feel free to take a pass on the idea of starting new eating patterns (diets), starting new hobbies (cliff diving) or lifestyles (joining the circus), and settle into routine and enjoyment whenever you can. Plan time together as a family doing things you know you will enjoy. Our kids are surprisingly bad at looking forward to breaks and thus forgoing frustration. For instance, today is Friday and I don't care what you say about me, it's almost the weekend.

Friday, November 19, 2010

Dating and Relationships, Part 1

It is my intention with this post to start a series on the topic of dating and romantic relationships. One of our astute students inspired me to address this intentionally-ignored topic this past week. I have been avoiding it not because it is unimportant or there has been no interest (neither is true), but because it is really hard to do a good job talking about it in a useful way that doesn't also tarnish my otherwise stellar reputation.

I would like to start with an important disclaimer. It's not just you and your kids who are clueless about how to manage teenage romantic relationships (or even question whether they should exist). Everyone on the face of the planet, and throughout history has struggled or will struggle with this issue. Chances are that if your kid did not have a neurological disorder, we would still be talking about this.

With that said, because our kids interact with the social environment in a peculiar way, it would make sense that they would need specific direction. This is why I still have a job. How I usually like to start this with the kids is to talk about basics, including terminology.

Relationships are usually linear in nature. By this I mean that we go from stranger status, to acquaintance, to friend, to romantic partners (usually heralded by the activity of dating); and then there's a progression through stages of romance culminating, if all goes well, in an exclusive, stable romance marked by both emotional and physical intimacy. Relationships almost never go the other way. Romantic partners who decide to call it quits do not typically go back to "just being friends" (even though we would like to think that is what will happen).

We like to teach our children that they should be friends with everyone, but the aspirational relationship in this culture is exclusive and monogamous. Still, I understand the tactic of keeping one's options open. The kids were very curious about the process of moving from friendship to dating. We talked about the linear nature of relationships, and they immediately discerned the risk of making the overture (official invitation to "take it to the next level"). It's more than the risk that your overture could be rejected. They knew right away that a romantic overture has the potential to send the whole relationship right back to the beginning.

I know you have specific questions about dating and romantic relationships for teens on the Spectrum. Please send me those questions and they may get addressed, in some form or another, in an upcoming post.

Friday, December 3, 2010

Relationships Part 2: Evaluation and Adjustment

Your kids and I have been talking about relationships in group for the past week or so. I want to pass along that the questions they ask are very typical for teens, but their openness in discussion is much greater than that of the average teen, so we have been having some fun classes.

One of the things you may or may not have noticed about your kids is that they struggle with noticing that there are people around them who have opinions about how they should act, and make judgments about them based on their behavior. You and I call it peer pressure, marriage, work colleagues, etc. Our kids seem to have a limited knowledge of concepts like peer pressure, or limited knowledge of how the judgments of others influence their lives.

Limited influence from peer pressure or second-order self-image (what you think others think about you) has a huge influence on how you do relationships, and especially dating relationships in high school. The good news is that, as a result, your kids appear to be much less likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol. The bad news is that they are much less likely to make modifications to their social persona that will make them more successful in friendships and romantic relationships. Successfully relating to others is marked by constant adjustments to the social self in response to the feedback (usually non-verbal) you get from others, and what you think of that feedback (valence). If you neither notice nor care about the feedback, you're less likely to make adjustments.

Am I suggesting your kids clone their teen media counterparts? Perish the thought. But we must acknowledge that successful relationships are defined by the perpetual micro-adjustments that both partners make to accommodate one another, in a changing environment. We were not meant to stand still and be static at any level of our being. Change is more genuine than stubbornness or ignorance.

For some parents, the notion of their child being forever safe from and impervious to the critical influences of the world is ideal. They are perfectly fine with their child living with them (in their basement) forever. For most, they would like to see their children live challenging and interesting lifestyles and eventually get out of the house. Please be clear: it is not that I think our kids cannot engage in the activities of evaluating their social self; they are just not good at it.

Friday, December 10, 2010

Relationships Part 3: Where Are They Getting This?

Do you ever wonder: if our kids are so unaware of what is going on around them in their social environment, how do they have any idea of what to expect in a dating relationship? If you have never had this discussion with your child, ask them to describe their perfect romantic partner. Or ask them to talk about a perfect first date. Most of them can do this, and at great length and detail. But if they have never been on a date or in a dating relationship, do not have many friends who have, and generally do not take interest in the activities of others, how do they form these preferences and opinions? Where do they get their material?

Several years ago, as I was witness to my first Spectrum romances, I noticed something peculiar about the behavioral interactions of the daters and began to form an opinion about the nature of the relationships. The kids seemed to be performing what I termed an “approximation” of a dating relationship. The behaviors were correct, in a sense, but there was little emotion or feeling to it. It was as if they were guessing at how people who are dating usually act, and then acting that way (connect hand A to hand B; lock gaze C with gaze D; walk to next class).

My guess is that kids form their opinions about dating relationships (and other relationships with which they have little actual experience) from media they consume. When they act like someone who is dating, I think they are acting like what they see on TV or Internet. Hopefully you can anticipate the problems with this. TV isn't real-life. In fact, TV is an intentional sensationalization of real-life (that is why we watch it).

I suppose if both parties are basing their actions and opinions/preferences on relationships they see on TV, the complications could be diminished. Let's hope they are both watching the same shows.

Friday, December 17, 2010

Relationships and Sexuality

We cannot really talk about romantic relationships without eventually discussing sexuality. In a previous post (see: *The Talk*) I mentioned that I had a discussion with a health class some time ago on the reasons why people have sex. I sheepishly admit that they were able to come up with about twice as many reasons as I had in preparing the lesson. What I would like to discuss is the role of sex in relationships.

Your kids seem to understand where babies come from. We can thank proper parenting, the Internet, or ABC Family¹ for that one. They were surprised to learn that nation-wide, procreation accounts for only a tiny fraction of all sexual activity. It was a little bit more of a leap to consider the notion that sex with another person can be something an individual can enjoy and look forward to. They even grasped the notion of sex as self-expression or, in some sense, a form of non-verbal communication between people. What they really balked at, however, was the function sex served in a relationship in building and maintaining emotional and physical intimacy.

I really think it is possible that some of our kids do not feel the need to be connected to lots of other people. I think they are content and happy in what I would consider semi-isolation, or with the notion of having “friends” they rarely see. I do believe that it is human to associate and socialize, and I cannot explain the diminished need for social contact except to say that what I consider normal may not, in fact, be normal. What I see as red, you might experience as blue, and we’ll never know otherwise.

It would make sense though that the role of sex in building and maintaining these exclusive, monogamous romantic relationships is lost on your kids. As your children reach sexual maturity (along with other adolescents with whom they spend a lot of time who are also reaching sexual maturity) I would encourage you to have a discussion about the role of sex in relationships. As I have said before, this will be much more uncomfortable for you than them, but the discussion is vital. My advice, as with all-important discussions, is to have a few pieces of wisdom prepared, give lots of time for questions and comments, and be ready to admit that you don’t know the answer and will have to get back to them. If worse comes to worse, send these unanswerable questions to me and I will blog about them.

¹ <http://abcfamily.go.com/shows/greek>

Friday, January 14, 2011

Goal-setting

This week in 8th grade social skills class I decided to herald the new term with a goal-setting activity. I asked the kids in group to set social goals for themselves, and it became clear very quickly that they either saw no value in the activity or didn't understand how to do the activity, or both.

We took a step back and started talking about the purpose of goal-setting. They came up with some excellent reasons as to why someone might want to set a personal goal. Not wanting to leave the whole justification of the activity up to "for the good of all mankind" (which honestly they really don't care about anyway), reason #5 as to why they were setting goals was an accurate "because they are being told to and their grade depends on it."

Ask your student what constitutes a good goal. Your student should be able to report that good goals are both attainable and measurable. They should also be able to go through the process of making an aspiration into a goal by asking clarifying questions to achieve quantifiable data. I swear they were all able to participate in this activity. Good goals also account for human error. We know that humans make mistakes, and mistakes are not a good enough reason to forfeit a goal.

Often-times I find that our kids are just waiting to screw up so they can go back to business as usual and be left alone. In this case, the goal was likely unrealistic, and rather than abandoning the process of goal-setting, the child needs instruction on how to set reasonable, attainable goals. Other times, however, kids set goals but are never truly on board with the goal or even the goal-setting process. A case has not been made as to why change is necessary or how a change might be an improvement. I call this "buy-in," and appropriate buy-in (an activity on which I spend an inordinate amount of time relative to actual setting a goal) can be achieved faster by having the kid set goals for himself or herself.

Now we're back to where we started on Monday. Thursday's class was a breeze. The students asked each other great clarifying questions, we have quantifiable data (baselines), and a bunch of beneficial, measurable goals. Now if I could just figure out a way to keep them from forgetting their goal the instant they leave the classroom...

Friday, January 21, 2011

The First Two Weeks

Last Monday I felt great. It was the first day back after 3 weeks off. I had ideas, I had a spark; I felt like my old self. Last Monday afternoon I was looking forward to summer. I don't know what was more disappointing: that summer was 5 months away, or that it only took a couple hours for my holiday sheen to wear off.

My office faces the quad of our school and I have a bank of windows from which I am able to watch the students walking to and from class. I try not to look too much these days though because I am likely to see a disparaging number of kids looking lost, trailing computer cords, setting stuff down and walking away from it, or kids in general disarray. It is easy to look out of my window and skeptically ask if I have made any progress on the organizational front with these highschoolers.

It has been two weeks since we have been back in school. These kids should be able to get out of holiday mentality and into school mentality and pull themselves together. On the other hand, it has only been two weeks. Some of our kids can switch from holiday schedule to school schedule like flipping a switch, but most take some time, and many can (clearly) take more than two weeks to make this shift. Many are still having sleep schedule problems, are losing their school supplies, messing around on the computer (as if they were at home), and the like.

Orion does block vacationing because of our kids' difficulties with transitions. Three weeks for winter break (instead of the standard two) is made possible by collecting a week's-worth of days off the State sprinkles throughout the school year for the public schools. Our kids are, however, some of the few students in the country who might actually benefit from a 365-day-a-year schedule (as opposed to the standard 180). Our kids don't fatigue in the typical way and actually seem to gain energy from routine. The same is not true, however, for me or many of our teachers. I am not sure any of them would sign on for something like that. Bring on the summer.

Friday, January 28, 2011

Unlimited Access

The President has, I assume, a physician who comes to his House for routine exams or other health issues. I think about this as I drive to the doctor's office, fill out forms, wait in line, and finally try to inform my physician about the last 12 months in Andrew's health in about 12 minutes. I also think about the President's doctor as I see children queue outside my office while I'm trying to eat part of my lunch.

Just as your children are obviously not the President, I am not the President's personal physician, but your children have some unprecedented access to a clinical psychologist. Most of those kids queuing outside my office are there to complain about something you might consider routine (e.g., a person was mean to them, they feel they have too much class work, they think getting a detention for playing World of Warcraft during class is a little harsh, etc.). If my door is shut, or the queue just too long, they have their choice of two other psychologists to talk to. Never any waiting.

The Orion program is designed and staffed this way for a reason. We believe having three full time psychologists for a community of 64 students is necessary and sufficient, but I wonder if it is possible to give someone too much access. Is it possible that having unlimited access to a psychologist (or other professional problem-solver) could actually stunt growth? Growth and innovation, after all, are responses to stress and need.

I wonder how much this happens at home as well. Every good parent has every excuse to come to the aid of their child all the time, but there must be a point at which the aid is too much and actually stunting the emotional growth and skill development of the child.

Is the appropriate response to push our kids out of the proverbial nest? Flip my sign from "In" to "Out" and respond with a "Deal with it" when they catch me coming from or going to the Break Room? Just like you, the parent, I am assessing each situation so I can decide when my intervention is necessary, desirable, or counterproductive.

Friday, February 4, 2011

Mental Health

This is one of those risky topics where the reader might connect with some aspect of the blog and think I am talking about them. Let me send you a message, if this is you, that this is a topic of interest for me this week because of it being such a theme (meaning, lots of separate, but relevant experiences) in the work I am doing.

You might be able to deduce that my background is in mental health and education, and not the other way around (I'm a "slashy", for all you Zoolander fans). The job of a psychologist here at Orion is a unique one, as far as psychology jobs go, but my background informs my day-to-day functioning. One thing I do not talk about much in this blog is that many individuals on the Spectrum struggle with distinct mental health issues. Most prevalent, of course, are Anxiety Disorders (esp. Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Phobia, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). The kids I work with also experience Mood Disorders, clinical levels of family discord, and other neurological problems such as ADHD, seizures, and tics. Consequently, the notion that people on the Spectrum can also have ADHD is a controversial one, so I will just leave that statement in there for now.

What makes my job a little outside of the norm is the prevalence rates (how often a patterned dysfunction occurs) for disorders (our kids beat the highest estimates for Anxiety Disorders compared to the general population) and the disorder's presentation. For instance, Mood Disorders look different between children and adults, and different again for children and adults on the Spectrum.

Mental health issues are not deal-breakers for people on the Spectrum any more than they are for neurotypicals, but parents are likely to get farther seeking help from people whose expertise is not just mental health issues, but also Spectrum Disorders.

Why so many mental health concerns this week? I asked myself that very same question. My white board is full of lists and diagrams, but one of the best ways to turn a lurking mental health issue into a big problem is by adding stress. I would suspect there is something happening school-wide, a common sentiment, that is inspiring some of what I am seeing. It could just as easily be the weather. Bring on the warmth and sun.

Friday, February 11, 2011

How do they do it?

This week's posting is a special edition. I was encouraged to participate in the S-O-S Best of the Best Bloggers¹, so follow the link to see the topics and check out the hosting website.

Some of you may not know this, but my wife is a Special Education teacher in the public school system. Like most Special Ed teachers, she has a couple Spectrum kids in her classroom, and every so often she tells me about a situation or scenario and asks me for ideas in how to address it.

If you have ever done a side by side comparison of neurological and academic reports from a child on a Spectrum, and just about any other cognitively or behaviorally impaired child in a Special Ed program, one thing you might conclude is that the strengths and weaknesses of each child are just about opposites. One should, of course, allow for individual differences, but Spectrum kids are high on the verbal sections, low on the perceptual; good at reading, bad at math; love structure, routine, and rules and dislike change and variety. Change all those "highs" and "loves" with their opposites, and you get the standard profile of just about every other child with cognitive and behavioral impairments in Special Education these days.

Can I think of exceptions to this rule? Of course I can, but I am looking at trends. How does one adequately educate a child on the Spectrum in a classroom and with resources that are designed to educate children with the opposite needs and strengths? It is like a sighted child being handed a multiple-choice test written in Braille. The correct answer is on there, but any success is due or luck (or a kindhearted teacher who can read Braille coming to the rescue). More than likely though, the child will fail.

My response to my wife when she asks me for ideas on addressing the needs of her Spectrum kids in her classroom is that "you can't get there from here". All the material is written in Braille. Thankfully, my wife and some of her colleagues are innovative, compassionate, and hard working, and they make it work for these kids. Sometimes I wish there was an innovation competition for them so they could be more appropriately recognized.

¹ <http://sos-researchblog.com/carnival>

Friday, February 18, 2011

Social Skills Outings

It is the season of outings. At Orion we have a couple different kinds of outings. Some are honest to goodness field trips (which the kids interestingly see as something of a nuisance), and there are outings that we plan for social skills class and transitions preparation. I generally enjoy these outings, and much more so these days compared to when I first started working here. I think in the beginning I was worried that our kids were much more impaired than they are, and I would leave one behind at a restaurant, or they would somehow get tangled up in a street riot on our way to or from the BART station. These fears, I have come to realize, are largely irrational.

Social skills outings are a chance to practice some of the things we talk about in class, and usually include going to a public place and performing some kind of activity. Next week Stephanie (the other psychologist) and I are going to take the kids to a Chinese food restaurant. They have to sit with their peers and make small talk, order from a menu, and pay the bill.

During this season of outings, I have begun to address a dichotomy of thought. The students are encouraged to be on their best behavior while they are off campus and still representing our school. The consequences for doing otherwise are stiff, and the kids know the various penalties. When I ask them why it is important to display good behavior, they know to respond that they “don’t want to embarrass the school and their classmates in public”.

This is, by the way, a correct answer, and they get a nod of approval from me; but there is more to it. I tell them that this is not only a chance to avoid criticism, but also one to display behavior that makes them look good. They can get others to think well of them through displaying certain social behavior.

This is one way Freud’s Pleasure Principle can be applied to social presentation. The kids generally do not believe that their behavior affects (for better or worse) how people treat them. After all, our kids believe they should receive good treatment because they are good people. This is, unfortunately, not how the world works.

Friday, February 25, 2011

Outing Debrief

It was the week of outings (see last post). I am exhausted. I am sure I can blame some of the exhaustion on the children's shenanigans while we were out and about, but the reality is that breaking from routine, while invigorating, can also be tiring.

My initial assessment is that the kids did wonderfully. They split checks and paid tips at the restaurant like pros, made chit-chat and small talk, and asked brilliant and informed questions of the officials at St. Mary's College. I definitely prefer success experiences to failure experiences when we travel, so they were more than ready to be successful on these outings, but our kids generally present and perform well when pointed in the right direction and given a chance to speak.

Several interesting, unexpected events came up, and I would like to make a life lesson out of one of them. Before we talked with officials at St. Mary's College, the Juniors and I went on a tour of the campus. Prior to that, they sat through 2 hours of presentations from their colleagues during Community Meetings. Needless to say, when they sat down in the comfy chairs to watch a slide presentation with the lights low, several of them fell asleep (almost instantly).

During my debriefing (interrogation), they all came back uniformly that they really wanted to stand up and watch from the back, but thought that might be rude, so they tried to tough it out in the comfy chairs. I instantly thought about my social skills class on moral dilemmas when they said this. If you want to stymie a child on the Spectrum, force them to choose between two bad choices, or at least fail to give them a "good" choice.

The fact is, no one likes choosing between two bad choices, or being forced to choose the less-bad option, but this is a big part of what adults do. Add to this the fact that our kids tend to be logical and idealistic/naïve, and you have kids who know better falling asleep during an important presentation from a high-ranking official.

Friday, March 4, 2011

House of Infirmity

It is the time of year when we start counting absences for students. It seems everyone is at least a little bit sick. I remember struggling as a child with the notion of staying home or going to school when I did not feel well. I didn't necessarily like school, but I felt guilty when I was not doing my duty by going to school. Why should I get to stay home when others had to go? This kind of logic I blame on parents. My father would roll over days and weeks of paid time off every year due to a stellar attendance record at work. My mother would say, "Go to school, and if you still feel bad, call me and I'll come pick you up." My mother was a nurse and had little time for petty illnesses like the flu.

Here at Orion Academy, all students who want to go home sick must first speak to a psychologist. The reason for this is that our students have a high level of somaticizing, or converting stress (cognitive or otherwise) into a physical complaint. Any time your anxiety has turned into a stomachache you have somaticized. It is my job as a psychologist to decide whether the child needs to go home (because they are communicable) or stay at school. Sending a child home because they are anxious can actually make the anxiety worse through the process of reinforcing the link between the stressor (e.g., an exam) and the anxiety. It is essentially like saying that I, as a professional, agree that test taking is too stressful and you should be allowed to escape to the comforts of your room (and videogames).

Throwing-up and an elevated temperature (100 F +) is typically a ticket home. These symptoms are obviously not represented in all illnesses that require a child to go home. Just last year a child called my bluff and tested positive for strep throat when I would not let him go home. There were extenuating circumstances, but clearly my criteria (temperature, throwing-up) allow for some false negatives.

Friday, March 11, 2011

Reputation Modification (Part 1)

This week I have been thinking about the process of going from a negative reputation to a positive one, or vice versa. A piece of info from my grad school years that continues to amaze me is the notion that trying to go from a negative to positive reputation is so hard, that most people give up and are thus unsuccessful. You may find that you have few if any examples of a person going from negative to positive. If you are like me though, you have plenty of examples the other way. I think it says a lot about our culture, and probably our humanity that it takes an instant to ruin one's reputation, but repairing one can take so long as to seem impossible.

I like to believe that all students enroll and enter Orion with a blank reputation. In fact, if my observations are correct and generalizable, most students start with a positive reputation. Students at Orion are generally nice to and optimistic about new kids. They are not optimistic to a fault, however, and more than one child has successfully ruined their reputation on a small or grand scale. It seems to take only about a month or two. Less if the child really works at it.

Sometimes I can see it coming and am able to mitigate it briefly. It would be nice, for me, if kids only worked on their reputation while they were here on campus-that way I might be better able to intervene and reduce some damage. But more and more kids are working overtime outside of school and using all the advantages of the Internet to offend each other and make themselves look less socially desirable.

In the next couple posts I am going to talk about two things. First, I will discuss what a person can do to improve his or her reputation. I think this is a problem that lends itself to a state of mind similar to weight-loss. One must look at and exert effort in multiple areas, but ultimately subject themselves to uncontrollable and unobservable forces (e.g., time and other people's opinions). I suspect however that change does occur in a nonlinear, but predictable pattern. The other item I will examine is the psychologist's role in helping a child perform a reputation overhaul. In my experience, parents are often overly optimistic about my skills at making their child do something, and at the same time underestimate their child's own skills to respond appropriately and effectively to frustration. Children really do prefer to be liked, but will accept dislike to being ignored.

Friday, March 18, 2011

Reputation Modification (Part 2)

I make lists: it's how I role. But for you, the reader, I will turn the list on my whiteboard into a narrative. Here is the best I can do in advice for kids wanting to modify their reputation from negative to positive. A child should try more than one strategy to speed up the process of change.

It is unlikely, if not impossible, that the negative reputation was randomly assigned, so the behavior a child is doing that at least contributed to the negative reputation should be stopped immediately. An alternative is for the child to surround himself or herself with people who think this behavior is acceptable. Consequently, I think this is part of the reason our Spectrum kids often have friends who are much younger than they are. Throwing fits looks less out of place if you hang out with little kids. In addition, the child should start doing behaviors that others find intensely acceptable, such as cool or hip behaviors, or intensely prosocial behaviors. In the latter category I would place behaviors like saving the whales or earthquake relief. Do something that most people would agree is humanitarian, and avoid controversial behaviors (e.g., free speech demonstrations).

See if the child can find someone with an intensely positive reputation and credibility (like a celebrity or popular person at school) to vouch for him or her. The "right person" vouching for you depends on the group you are trying to impress, so choose wisely. My last idea should be read with some caution. If a person with a negative reputation is suddenly and unfairly victimized or marginalized, this can set the person on a course to a positive reputation. What happens, I think, is that the person doing the victimization absorbs some of the negative reputation. If the victim then follows with a positive behavior (like a gracious response to the oppressor), the victim is well on the way to a positive reputation. I want to make this clear: do not go looking for marginalization or victimization. That rarely ends well, and the potential for your negative reputation to intensify as a result of seeking out victimization is really high.

Next week I want to give you some insight into how I work behind the scenes for kids who are looking for a reputation overhaul (whether they know it or not).

Friday, March 25, 2011

Reputation Modification (Part 3)

In helping a child modify a negative reputation, I generally have two phases. The first phase involves getting the child to stop whatever behaviors are contributing to the negative reputation. Steve Jobs creates fantastic, world-changing products, but he still has a less than positive reputation due to his the way he interacts with people. The second phase is the process of building a positive reputation. Stable, positive reputations are always earned.

Getting kids to give up the annoying behaviors that earn them negative reputations can sometimes be the hardest part of the process. After all, no behavior occurs randomly or in a vacuum. Kids do annoying things because, at some point, it was functional in getting them what they wanted. Unfortunately, the behavior can sometimes occur at the level of habit (outside conscious awareness or purposeful initiation). This adds another step of convincing the child the behavior exists and figuring out when it happens (this process is called a Functional Analysis of Behavior).

Phase two can be a combination of a lot of strategies. In removing one annoying behavior I am creating a behavioral vacuum, and I need to replace the annoying behavior with something else. If I do not put a new behavior in there, someone else will, and the result is usually something equally or even more annoying. Some of the other strategies I use only work if I have “institutional influence”, meaning I am able to change rules for everyone and have the credibility to influence opinion. A lot of times kids notice me treating one child different than another, and they are actually seeing me patch or modify a reputation. I am trying to get the community to look at this student differently. All of these actions (vouching for a student, allowing certain behaviors and restricting others) are for the purpose of “creating a space” for the student who needs a reputation overhaul. To change directions, one must slow to a stop, turn the vehicle around, and get moving again. All this requires space. In the case of reputations, it requires social space, and that’s what I aim to provide.

To be perfectly honest, I really do not have the power to change someone’s reputation (besides my own). The best I can do is to create conditions that make the change easier, and thus more likely. The child with the reputation on the line has the final word.

Friday, April 1, 2011

April Fools, 2011

April Fools on me. I don't really celebrate the day as it is contrary to my nature. It requires planning and execution, some suspense, and a break in the routine. I hate all those things. Plus, my "pranks" and jokes tend to be more cruel than funny as evidenced by the silence that followed my latest zinger in staff meeting last week.

April Fools has never really been more than a discussion topic for our kids. You would think in a group of kids that are creative and have a good sense of humor that it would be more of a tradition, but our kids also struggle with that cruelty/humorous boundary, and there are rules here that limit the amount of intrusion and explosions that are central to so many April Fools shenanigans. Besides, our kids are generally more talk than action. They seem to love things as much in theory as in reality.

I naively thought I had this year under control, but the joke was on me. The good news is that I have a lot of material for a social skills class. April Fools, and joking and pranks in general, are difficult activities for our kids to do well. One has to have timing, choose the target well, have a good plan that involves appropriate execution, and be sensitive to the collateral damage. Many kids are more than willing to take the consequences I dole out, but they have no idea of the social consequences of a poorly executed prank.

You may have noticed that I outlined activities above that involve organizational skills, social functioning, and sensory integration (intrusive and exploding pranks). These are the three fundamental deficits of kids on the Spectrum. April Fools should probably be a part of our social skills curriculum in the month of March.

Friday, April 8, 2011

Hours to Go

Today is a big day. Government shut-down and the beginning of Spring Break (Orion shut-down). I would like to pose to you, the reader, the scenario I posed to the kids in the afternoon group yesterday. When I was a kid, I would wait patiently but joyously for a vacation of any kind. Even today I see things like coming to work, driving, and sleeping as intrusions to my personal agenda. The point is, when a break or vacation was approaching, I could be described as unflappable. Bad grades, criticism, social conflict: they all rolled off my back because I would be on vacation soon (and back to my personal agenda).

Every year, and multiple times a year, I am blindsided by the spike in behavioral problems right before a break. As next week is Spring Break, this week was no exception. I naively came in to work expecting an "alls-well" message from Peggy for the day. It was quiet for about an hour Thursday morning, and then Stephanie and I were suddenly working over-time. This person is mad at that person; this other person is upset at a low grade. All of the problems are dire and life-changing and need to be addressed immediately.

I understand the risk in admitting I am not all-powerful and all-knowing, and while I do have my theories, I still needed some input from the kids. Thursday's Junior Social Skills Class has been my brain-trust class for a while and they did not disappoint yesterday. They had a lot of good ideas to explain the behavior problem spike right before break. Assuming the behavior problems spike prior to break is a real phenomenon (it is), how would you explain it? Hint: your kids should be able to produce some valid ideas.

Friday, April 22, 2011

Senior Challenge

We have just arrived home from the Senior Challenge, and upon checking my notes I was surprised to see that I have never written specifically about this event. The Senior Challenge is programmatically important to Orion for many reasons.

The Senior Challenge is the final Social Skills Outing for the Senior class. Stephanie and I take the kids to San Jose on Thursday and then loose them upon the city to complete a city-wide scavenger hunt. Teams have four hours to decipher and complete as many clues as they can. This activity is a test of navigation, teamwork, punctuality, money management, and stamina, among other things. It's a competition, so kids usually take it very seriously, but winners and losers are always good sports.

Senior Challenge was one of the items that actually attracted me to this job. It was a topic of my interview with Dr. Stewart, but is was also one of the things that made me most nervous. I remember the first year sleeping poorly and going over scenarios in my head. What if one of them got lost or arrested? What if someone got hurt or victimized? I was a mess.

This year was the exact opposite of that in that this was almost a mini-vacation of sorts. Good food, nice hotel room, time to read (the kids are scavenging for four hours). I think there are a couple differences between this year and the first year I did this. The outing is much better run and organized now than it ever has been. The kids are also well-prepared, and we are certain now that each one of them has demonstrated all the skills at least once that they will need during the challenge. Winter Abroad, enhanced social skills classes and transitions classes are partly to thank for all of this. Personality also played a heavy role. Not only to I think the Clinical and Transitions team is stronger now than it ever has been, but this batch of kids is very strongly bonded.

The Senior Challenge this year was a big pay-off event for a lot of people, both students and adults. It is really starting to become the celebration of graduation and completion I have been anticipating it to be.

Friday, April 29, 2011

Camping with Asperger's

I will be honest and say that there is a good reason I did not blog about the 8th grade camping overnight last year. For several reasons, that was a busy time for me, and I wanted some time (about a year) to process the event. Needless to say, I was nervous to attend this year's 8th grade camping overnight. Imagine taking eight 13-year-olds with Asperger's and related neurocognitive disorders into the wilderness, with no flushing toilets and sleeping on the ground (where no one can hear you scream).

The children are actually arriving back at campus right now (Friday afternoon), pretty much all smiles. The teachers are smiling too. They left campus Wednesday morning. How many of you would sign up for chaperoning an event like that? These teachers were happy to chaperone, and in some cases eager to attend. Amazing. I learned something important last year and have been judiciously applying it for about 12 months in various situations, and I think I am on to something. My strategy started with the thought of, "What if just getting here is the hard part?"

The message I want to tell teachers is that often times, the hardest part of the day for our kids is getting out the door. Breaking routine, anticipating potential struggles, doing the prep-work; all of these activities can be incredibly challenging for our kids. Thinking that the "getting here" is a significant accomplishment in itself frees up the teachers to take on a supportive (rather than drill sergeant) role and create a fun (rather than demanding) environment for the kids. It's so much easier to make them laugh and play than make them learn their lesson when you are out in the wilderness.

Preparation, fun, compassion, and then tough love - in that order. Those are the guiding principles for running a successful 8th grade camping overnight. I think life is hard enough for our kids, and they do not usually benefit from me making the day even more difficult for them. I also recommend packing more sanitizing wipes than you think you will need.

Friday, May 6, 2011

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

It is worth repeating that I really like this time of the year. It may not, however, be for reasons you may guess. Think of me, but caring, and you can probably get close. This is the time of year when we review in social skills class student progress, and it is always a positive experience for me.

The Orion program is designed to be challenging for kids of all social levels, and there are a bunch of incentives (like making friends and enjoying your high school experience) built in, so our kids usually produce a lot of sustained effort throughout the school year. The result is that every child (even the curmudgeon) has something to brag about this time of year. Some kids dramatically increase the number of people they talk to throughout the day, some have dramatically decreased their computer violations, but everyone has something.

This week I had most of the kids make lists in three categories: strengths (everyone's good at something), accomplishments (inevitable for the Orion student), and goals for next year. I also ask that their goals for next year be based on their listed accomplishments. In my experience, one can produce better goals based on successes rather than failures. Accomplishments have built-in momentum that makes future success more likely.

Go ahead and ask your child about this activity that we did in class. Do not accept "nothing" when you ask them about strengths and accomplishments. Perpetual pessimism is neither a sign of humility, nor is it realistic, so do not indulge it. If they are really struggling with responding to that question, set up a meeting with me and I will embarrass them with praise right in front of you.

Friday, May 13, 2011

The Friendship Goal

One of the areas I like to assess with the kids at the end of the year is progress in making friends. I think everyone who wants friends should be able to make friends, but not all realize how much work it can be. Often I get a variety of excuses or reasons why kids are less successful than they set out to be in the area of friendship, and I thought the reader would enjoy a list of themes I hear from the kids as well as my interpretation. In no particular order, the most common responses to the question, "Why do you think you didn't meet your friendship goal?"

No one has been nice to me.

It is true that kids can be mean-even at Orion. More than once however I have heard kids state that they really expect other kids to make all the overtures, be the nice one, and cater to them socially. It reminds me of the My Buddy¹ doll from my childhood². Kids benefit from learning that relationships are mutual-you must approach others as much as you expect them to approach you (i.e., the Golden Rule of Friend-making).

No one has the same interests as me.

Our kids sometimes think that there must be an exact personality and interest match for people to be friends. This is actually a caricature of a legitimate friendship. I blame TV. In reality, friendships are about growth and expansion of one's interests. Our friends should be those that make us better people, and more rounded in our interests.

I don't want to be friends with anyone at this school.

There are lots of reasons a child will tell me this. Often, it is because they are anxious and lack confidence in their social skills. Sometimes they see Orion as a "special school" and think associating with Orion students proves that they have a disability. I can only think of a handful of situations where a student said this to me and I truly believed that they had no desire for friendships. Where do you think hermits come from?

Kids are mean to me.

The vast majority of students who say this to me are the exact ones I would pick out as struggling with expressive language, especially in the area of being overly critical and harsh in their vocal tone. They also tend to struggle with sarcasm and verbal joking (a receptive language issue). One thing most of our kids struggle with is that they do not understand the relationship with how they treat others, and how they

are then treated. This is related to the “people should be nice to me no matter what I do to them” sentiment discussed above. A parent should be on the lookout for and avoid the chicken and egg argument (e.g., “They were mean first...”).

In my experience, once kids get a taste of good, healthy peer socialization, they usually want more, and will then start to ease up on some of their rules and excuses. It is perfectly fine, in my opinion, for the parent to look for a peer they think would be a “good match” for their kid and set something up (through the other parent). The first time two peers get together to hang out, the parent should feel comfortable helping to plan something fun, easy, and high-impact. Movies and videogames are great for initial gatherings; funerals and museums are usually not. Leave them both wanting more, and you may see that socializing begins to take on some momentum.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Buddy_%28doll%29

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuinqB9z3II>

Friday, May 20, 2011

Goodbye

I am not leaving, but some of our students are. This week I have been encouraging our students who are going to other schools next year to talk with their class about their departure. For our graduating Seniors, the process is easy—they have a whole ceremony to commemorate their moving on. For the others leaving but not graduating, the process has to be a little more deliberate.

My preference is for this “goodbye” to happen in social skills class. I tell kids that they should announce, formally, that they will be attending a different school next year. I also tell them they need to be ready for questions from the group. Kids often inaccurately suspect that because they are not friends with a peer, that peer will not care if they are leaving. The fact is that it is hard not to become bonded even with people you do not like when you spend so much time together.

Kids need to be ready for the standard questions. Peers will want to know where they are going next year and why. Specifically, they ask why they are going to a new school, and why they are leaving Orion. Some kids can feel uncomfortable answering the last question, but I encourage them to do so anyway. I tell them no school is perfect, and finding the right school is about fit.

The question I often get asked is, “Why can’t I just leave? Why do I have to tell people?” This question makes sense considering our kids have a hard time guessing what other people are thinking and feeling, and understanding that other people have separate experiences (Theory of Mind). Our kids often underestimate their individual contribution to the community, and thus underestimate the sense of loss their peers are going to feel when they leave. “Because you are part of the community, and the community is going to miss you,” is what I answer.

Tuesday, May 31, 2011

High and Stable

Graduation and Awards Ceremony was Friday. I was partying instead of writing the blog. I am usually reminded at this event of the research that finds that there are a lot of people in prison with high self-esteem (see Baumeister's 1996 paper, for example). The take-away message of the findings is not to make your kids feel bad about themselves to keep them out of prison, but to consider another factor in self-assessment: stability. The people surveyed in prison had high but unstable self-esteem.

Not everyone gets an award at the Award's Ceremony at Orion. Some kids do get more awards than others. Orion actively makes sure not to have a few kids get all the awards, but we also make a conscious effort not to give awards to kids for things they do not deserve. I see every year that this can be distressing to kids, but I have also seen the results of kids consistently complimented or rewarded for illegitimate or unearned reasons.

Kids should have, at every age, a good idea of things they are good at and things they are not good at. Adolescents especially should always have a list of areas of improvement. High self-esteem does not mean I just forget about all my shortcomings and "focus on the positive". High and stable self-esteem comes from children who know who they are, who they want to be, and how to get there.

In conclusion, if you want to build the better inmate, avoid criticism (or, make your criticizing overblown and ridiculous so your child would be foolish to take you seriously), focus exclusively on strengths, and consider making up things for your child to be good at that they really are not good at. Make sure they get complimented or rewarded in all their efforts. If you want a better student, however, see the previous paragraph. It is great to succeed; but it is also okay to be bad at stuff, to fail, and to fall short. There is something very grounding and humanizing in the spectrum of success and failure...something stabilizing in the full experience.

Tuesday, May 31, 2011

Bookend

I wanted to formally conclude the blogging season for this year. My contract has been renewed, so I plan to be back at your disposal in the fall. Please send along comments and suggestions for future blogs if you have them. I want to again thank my reader-I wouldn't be doing this if not for you. Have a great summer.

Friday, August 12, 2011

Prewarning

The title of this post is one of my favorite Orionisms. It comes from Dr. Stewart's book and it bears consideration just in terms of its place in the English lexicon. The term at Orion refers to the explicit verbalization of an experience the student is about to have. For instance, a teacher might say, "I'm about to ask you to open your computer, but first I want to tell you about the document you will retrieve."

Prewarning is part of just about everything we do here. For those of you feeling put out by having to attend Registration Day last Friday, that was a prewarning event for your kids. The explicit message is that the school year is about to start and summer is over. Homeroom is a prewarning for the rest of the school day. High school is a prewarning for life. Prewarnings do not ensure success, but they stack the deck in the student's favor.

It is the presence of executive functioning deficits that make prewarning necessary and useful for our students. Problems with executive functioning cause several functional deficits you and I might take for granted. Specifically, it is difficult for our students to effectively problem-solve and to forecast.

You likely know what problem-solving entails. Given a set of resources and constraints, one must work out a way to achieve a goal, usually in the moment. Problem-solving involves a lot of mental inventory taking, assessment, and cognitive manipulation. Forecasting is the anticipation of an event and considering specifically what one's experience is likely to be. It's a way to reduce the chance of uncomfortable surprises. If problem-solving is hard, forecasting is harder because it involves the cognitive manipulation of unknowns, and usually multiple unknowns. Our kids really do not like working with abstract information; they balk at unknowns.

Enter: prewarning. It ideally decreases the number of unknowns, highlights goals, illuminates resources. It is entirely possible that, as we get older, the number of unknowns and novel situations decreases. Scientists refer to this as the cognitive shift from fluid intelligence to crystallized intelligence. Another post for another day. For now, practice prewarning with your kid and see where it gets you.

Friday, August 19, 2011

Satire

Go ahead and look up the term satire¹. It is a social criticism tool. "Using wit as a weapon," says Wikipedia. Consider the level of thinking and processing it takes to appreciate and produce satire. Satire is also used for the purpose of helping people and people groups (constructive criticism), so contemplate the respect and appreciation for the item of ridicule individuals who produce satire must have.

Do these character qualities and executive functioning skills sound anything like your kids? Not to me either, yet your kids consume (with vigor) satire all the time. Shows like South Park and Family Guy are two of the satires I know your kids watch. Many characters in the sci-fi genre serve the purpose of being a satirical tool (e.g., Jar-Jar Binks?).

So what happens when concern for society and higher level reasoning is subtracted from a satirical TV show (like South Park)? You get characters being mean to people groups, and the audience thinking it's funny. Have your children ever blurted out mean, racist, or sexist phrases in public? Has it looked like they expected others to laugh?

Our older students understand satire better than our younger students, but some students never get it. I highly recommend, for the sake of your own reputation, you make sure your child understands satire. If they do not, you need to be monitoring their consumption and use opportunities to talk about satire, and especially *why* something is funny. It may be the case that your child is not old enough for South Park.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire>

Friday, August 26, 2011

Teasing

This week's topic was teasing, the art and science of. I started the discussion with a trick question (I warn them it is a trick question), "Is teasing good or bad?" Some still fall for the trick and this opens up a nice discussion on the relative value of concepts and how we use language, which is one of these kids' strengths.

With gentle guidance, the kids are able to identify that teasing can be both positive and negative. All of them are able to speak from personal experience about negative teasing. We talk about how they felt when teased and what the result was. Ultimately, teasing like this tends to lead to marginalization, or being pushed outside the group or excluded. We then go on to talk about finite social resources (Why do some people feel others should be excluded?).

The flip-side, of course is the playful teasing between friends. Discussion about marginalization leads the kids nicely to the notion that friends can use teasing for the purpose of bonding. There are certain relational prerequisites we discuss (caring, closeness, etc.) for teasing to be an effective bonding agent. Our kids can be bad at using teasing as a bonding tool, so we discuss some cautionary tales, usually from my high school experience.

At the end of such a discussion, I am typically left with a moral dilemma. Knowing how bad our kids are at using such social tools, do I ban their use (no teasing at all) or spend the time to teach them the skill? The risk of spending the time is that some kids will never understand a concept at the level of being able to use it effectively. For many it will remain a concept, and never become a tool.

Friday, September 2, 2011

Dostoevsky

The Sophomores and Juniors were accosted with the following Dostoevsky¹ quote in social skills class this week, "We are all responsible for all and all men before all, and I more than all the others. I could write a lengthy essay simply on the kids' processing of this quote, but I want to focus on two specific issues.

The first is that, despite (or because of) the fact that the phrase was quoted by a 19th Century Russian novelist in the Existentialist tradition, the sentiment matches precisely that which I want to impress on Orion students. I want Orion students to see other members of the Orion community as their responsibility (to be invested in, share success and failure, etc.), avoid favoritism, and to feel compelled to do this regardless the contribution they feel others are making. What the kids discovered is that, although this is an idealized notion of social responsibility, it is generally contrary to the life they experience.

The second point is that the kids really struggled with this quote at the level of language and comprehension (and less-so philosophically). This quote really was too hard for most of them to decipher, but I made them try anyway, for two classes. This is an example of a caliber of discussion they are likely to have in college, and we are a college-prep high school. It was important to me as an educator that they struggle with the process, even if they did not come away with changed lives.

Be prewarned: your kids now know about Existentialism.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoyevsky

Friday, September 9, 2011

Language of the Eyes

The Sophomores and I took an online test in social skills class this week. Check out this link¹ for the test. As far as I can tell, the test references one's ability to tell mood or internal experience from looking exclusively at a person's eyes.

I got this idea from a book I read by Simon Baron-Cohen (see the book list in this blog). Baron-Cohen describes the Language of the Eyes as the communication that occurs between people through producing and interpreting facial movements in the eye region.

Why is this important? I did an informal survey, and all of the students surveyed indicated that eye-contact was something they intentionally worked on at some point in their lives (most by elementary school). What may have been news is that eye contact is not usually something neurotypical children have to be taught. Most people seem to learn eye contact (or, eye communication) before they can even speak or walk, and they have certainly mastered it by the time the "formative years" for socialization are upon them.

Maybe you see where this is going. I asked the students how this might relate to their socializing, and specifically their ability to decipher and produce non-verbal communication. One student boldly reported that they lacked the amount of practice neurotypicals have with this skill. I like this explanation for several reasons, but the main reason is that it provides a clear, constructive path for people on the Spectrum who want to get better at communicating with others. In my experience, Spectrum individuals who practice reading facial expressions and looking people in the eye when they are talking tend to get better at it. I suspect, however, that learning non-verbal communication in this way is similar to learning French in high school (as opposed to toddlerhood). It's a much longer path to fluency.

¹ <http://glennrowe.net/BaronCohen/Faces/EyesTest.aspx>

Friday, September 16, 2011

Why Students Won't Listen to Me

It is Community Meeting season again. This means student presentations, and the Parent/teacher/student Meetings. As stated elsewhere, I actually like these meetings. They tend to be high impact and useful. With some exceptions, parents are pleasant and productive. I also find the shift in dynamic between the student and myself when the parent is present useful. I feel like I better understand what parents are reporting to me as “home behavior”, which we do not see here at school all the time.

More often than I would like (but not more than I expect), I experience resistance from students when I start talking about changes they need to make. I expect this because it is the adolescent’s job to resist advice. They will not discover how brilliant I am until they are well in to adulthood. I thought I would come up with some of my favorite excuses or strategies the students use for not listening to me.

One of my favorites (because I find it so aggravating) is profuse apologizing. Often, before I can even finish my criticism, the student is looking downcast and apologizing. At this point they will agree to anything I say (acquiesce). They will never follow through because they are no longer listening.

Some students get combative and argumentative. This usually happens when I am about to discuss their resistance and combative approach to problem solving. The irony, of course, is that even as they are denying profusely my criticisms, they are supporting my argument. Some go so far as to get disrespectful with me or their parent, not realizing they are making things worse for themselves. This is aggravating because they have, again, stopped listening and I will have to wait (about a day) until they are calm to resume the discussion.

Some students use a more sophisticated approach (I have seen this in adults as well). They choose to believe that I am motivated in my criticism out of self-interest. I know this because they tell me outright (they are on the Spectrum after all) that they believe I am lazy, incompetent or have a personal vendetta. The best argument can usually be made for incompetence, but the other two (laziness, vendetta) just do not make sense when you think about it.

A paradox is created. I am suggesting ways students can improve their lives, and they fight me nearly every step. I think it was Aristotle (please email me if this isn’t true) who suggested we really do not know what is good for us. The truth is that change is hard, and if most individuals could change on their own, I would be out of a job. For now I persevere (along with you, the parent) because, ultimately, someone persevered with me.

Friday, September 23, 2011

What's the Plural of Nemesis?

One thing I really appreciate about our students is their willingness to partner with me. In fact, I suspect they might see all other people as falling into two categories: allies and nemeses. With me or against me. Helping or thwarting. What they really do not see is that most people (like 99.99%) they meet really do not care either way.

Our students (like all other humans) are motivated out of self-interest. What I appreciate though is that they are honest about their intent and do not seem to have the incentive to display pretense of any other motive. This works well for me because it is really my job to do what is best for them. I am motivated out of their self-interest as well, so at least we can agree on that.

The downside, of course, is that they are young and inexperienced, and often do not have an accurate idea of what is best for them. Sometimes I feel like a master apologist convincing them that it is good to eat their vegetables. If I can get to this level, though, of making rational sense of seemingly irrational expectations, buy-in is the reward. Many neurotypical adolescents will fight with me out of principle (as an adult I represent The Man), but our students seem to have no sense of the universal expectation to Fight the Power.

I have been warning our teachers recently about setting up situations where they encourage their students to see them as the Nemesis. Once you are cast in that light, no reasonable request will be followed. In fact, you are inviting disobedience at the level of principle. "You are my nemesis, so whatever you request must be an attempt to thwart me." Today is another really hot day, and several students in PE class are still wearing sweatshirts. My hope is that the PE teacher has allied himself with his students.

Friday, September 30, 2011

Mind Games

We know that Spectrum disorders include problems in executive functioning skills. Our students can struggle with information processing at the level of perception, processing (what happens once info's in the brain) and production (e.g., recalling information). The number of specific skills associated with Information Processing (the three P's in the last sentence) is substantial, but the role that time awareness (like placing a time stamp on a memory) has come up a couple times this week.

I asked a student about an argument he had with another student. My hypothesis was that he was already irritable (these two students have a long-standing feud), and this contributed to an escalation in the intensity of the argument. I asked about the role of irritability in the argument ("Were you upset even before the argument started?"), and his response was, "No, we talked it over and worked it out."

I did a double-take and had him confirm his assessment. It was clear that he felt okay about the other student now because they had worked it out, and therefore irritability did not contribute to the argument in the first place. I mistakenly write the wrong dates on checks all the time. This student incorrectly time-stamped a memory, and would have passed a lie detector test to confirm his recollection.

Second, I overheard two students making fun of a third student. Just as they were both pulling their computers out of their locker, I chimed in with, "Your behavior is totally unacceptable and you both have detentions." They were both surprised and one said, "But we need our computers for class." They stamped my criticism to the behavior they were performing right at the moment, and had no idea what I was actually referring to.

We all laughed about the misunderstanding (and they served their detentions), but these types of time miss-stamps can set our students up for major confusion. Additionally, we have known for years (see work by Elizabeth Loftus¹) that false memories are quite simple to create, and can be very convincing. The goal here is to get the student to agree that their recollection could be flawed and to engage in the process of reconstruction of the memory. If they refuse, the moment is typically lost forever, and confusion the remainder.

¹ <http://faculty.washington.edu/eloftus/Articles/sciam.htm>

Friday, October 7, 2011

Understanding vs. Excusing

Science has known for a long time that it is the primary job of children to discover and experience. Call it what you may, but children are primed for pushing limits, testing boundaries, and rebellion. It seems to be their best tool for learning about the world, and especially about rules and expectations. No child I know learns exclusively (if at all) from cautionary tales or warnings. In fact, I believe parents should encourage in their children a healthy skepticism for rules and respectful methods of pushing limits.

It is not uncommon for students at Orion to come from a school setting where they were labeled as a back-talker, rude, or "difficult" by their teachers. Parts of the NLD profile in particular (curious, verbal, underdeveloped pragmatic language skills) set our students up for this type of categorization. Our students are also less likely to give the adult a satisfying, "I'm really sorry for my behavior Ma'am" that many teachers might be looking for following the scolding. The truth is, our students usually are not sorry, so why would they say they are

Is it reasonable that adults realize that this is the way these children are and leave it at that? Of course not. Even though I know what is going on when a child seems unmoved at my condemnation of their behavior, I still tell them, "This is the point where you apologize to me for your behavior." When they ask me why they should apologize when they are not sorry (they know, because I have told them, that pushing limits is part of their programming), I tell them that everyone outside my office will be expecting an apology, so they need to practice ("Now do it with feeling.").

There is a difference between making sense of behavior and excusing it. Our students are desperate for someone to understand them and why they do what they do. They are equally desperate to learn the standards to which others will hold them.

Friday, October 14, 2011

The Power Struggle

Children on the Spectrum have uncanny powers of self-denial. This is what makes them natural negotiators. The same children who cannot tolerate blended fabrics or foods that are not white can easily live without a computer, dessert, or contact with the outside world. They can spend hours “grounded” in their room staring at the wall without breaking a sweat. In addition, when they ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. They can be some of the most obnoxious children I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

It is for this reason that I am rarely surprised at some of the predicaments into which parents and teachers have gotten themselves in service of seeking compliance from one of our students. Parents cook two meals a night (one for the family, one for the Spectrum child), siblings reluctantly do double chores, teachers tolerate classroom chaos. I can see exactly how it all started.

One of my pieces of advice for parents and teachers is to avoid ultimatums as much as possible. Children on the Spectrum are drawn to the dark side of ultimatums. It is as if you are commanding them to challenge your authority, and they must comply. It becomes a situation where organizational and pragmatic language deficits really shine. We know these children struggle with planning, forecasting, and perspective taking. These are all skills one employs to avoid trouble, and these children rarely see it coming.

There are times, however, when a line must be drawn. As an adult, one of your advantages is that you have the ability to plan. You hold most of the cards and the child underestimates the strength of your hand. It is like a game of poker where you not only have a full house, but they are playing their cards face-up on the table. It’s really not fair.

There are some power struggles not worth having, and some that are. The good news is that we all seem to have an Aspergery side to us we can access when preparing to dig in for the long, dark night that can be the power struggle with children on the Spectrum.

Friday, October 21, 2011

The (Blatantly) False Memory

A couple weeks ago I mentioned false memory. It turns out that humans are proficient at creating false memories that are so convincing, they can fool a polygraph (and a jury). In fact, Loftus (see her articles in the mid-90s) thoroughly debunked the role of eyewitness testimony in court proceedings by demonstrating time and again that she could easily create false memories in her human test subjects.

Orion students are also skilled at creating false memories. In fact, when I first started working at Orion, I was surprised at the passion with which the children delivered recollections of events that were obviously false (they were so ridiculous). I was very familiar with the work of Loftus and I began theorizing about how our students are able to create these blatantly false memories that would pass a lie detector test.

It can start at the level of perception. I think it is possible that, due to perceptual irregularities, our students could be supplying their brain with a skewed image of what is happening in the physical environment, especially if they are involved. We know our kids struggle to manage multiple inputs from the same info source (sensory-integration), so perception seems to be the first possible stage in creating a false memory.

Once info is in the brain, our students store it haphazardly, and recall of information could very well be piecemeal or selective. Our kids also tend to perseverate, and rehearsing false information actually creates a physical memory trace just like true information. What if someone is recalling an event while being distracted by a Dr. Who episode? Could these info streams be mixed?

The potential for creating, recalling, and solidifying false memories seems to be huge. Our students have an additional liability in that they often balk at the notion that they could be wrong. With most kids who disagree with me, one of the greatest strategies I have in making my point is the introduction of doubt. You and I both know Spectrum children resist doubt in their recall abilities as a rule. I have had the best luck with getting them to admit that it is possible (mathematically speaking) that there could be another scenario or explanation.

Friday, October 28, 2011

October Malaise

Some of you readers might know that I used to work in a community mental health setting doing therapy and assessment. Referrals for services would nearly flat line in the summer, but they would always spike in October and early November. I remember asking my supervisor why that was. "Because that's when the first report cards go out."

October brings a convergence of several events that I think contribute to the parental malaise I sense around this time. The end of both the first quarter or first trimester is usually in October (grading season). The hope that this year is going to magically be different usually dies around now. Everything that isn't scheduled in September (because it's the first full month of school and therefore too busy) is scheduled for October. Days get noticeably shorter this month, and mood starts to sag.

For the children, the honeymoon is definitely over. Schoolwork gets both harder and the work load more demanding. Interactions with parents and teachers are more contentious. Stamina becomes a major issue, and kids without good study habits can spend hours avoiding work that was intended to take minutes. October reveals many of the organizational flaws the student will work on for the rest of the school year.

If you are a parent, my goal with this post was to normalize your experience somewhat. You can take my word for it that your current state of wondering "if it's going to all work out" is shared by most of the other parents you see around you. Things will get noticeably better in the early spring if you get to work on a plan right now.

Friday, November 4, 2011

Exceptions to Rules

Most readers of the column know or can suspect that individuals on the Spectrum are identified as such because they fit a cognitive, perceptual, and social profile. The profile usually includes strengths and weaknesses and some symptomatology. As a psychologist, I examine items like academic performance, intelligence, memory, and perceptual functioning to make my determination about a child's diagnosis, and thus his or her needs.

I was struck, yet again, by another student this week who is the exception to the rule. Even though this is an Orion student, he demonstrated unique perceptual strengths and some advanced skills in perspective-taking that appear to contradict the "Spectrum profile". The question is often raised with me if these unexpected strengths mean the child does not belong at Orion.

Exceptions to rules used to make me nervous. The fact is that despite an individual's genetic profile (genotype¹), a life-form begins at conception interacting with their environment (contributing to the eventual phenotype). Considering this, it makes sense that so few (if any) individuals are an exact profile match for whatever category they are supposed to represent. We should be vigilant for exceptions and apparent contradictions.

Besides being pleasant surprises, exceptions like the example above can serve an additional purpose. Like the case above, exceptions are often simple to turn in to possible career paths or college majors.

¹ <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/ahp/BioInfo/SD.Geno.HP.html>

Friday, November 11, 2011

My Best Advice to Students

A relatively universal complaint from teenagers is nagging parents or other adults. It is the case that some parents seem to nag out of habit. Fewer still seem to get some pleasure from pestering their children. In my experience though, the vast majority of what teens report to me as nagging behavior of parents is actually frustrated parents who are tired of their child's dependence on their reminders to perform routine duties.

To students I offer Dr. Schlegelmilch's Magic Cure of Parental Nagging. I draw them in with a web of words and gestures and tell them that doing what you are supposed to do before your parents get a chance to nag/remind you about it will not only stop the nagging completely, but will likely leave the parent dumbfounded.

Most reject my advice multiple times until, usually out of frustration or chance, it happens that they beat their parents to the punch. Sometimes they come back and report their success to me, and I often take the opportunity to suggest I have the Wisdom of Solomon, and they should listen to me more often.

I also wanted to mention in this post that, every so often, a student in my care has an epiphany or an awakening. They discover a unifying theme to the next stage of their life, which dictates their next moves, and they become self-directed. I discovered one of these students this week, and I am again struck by how fast and thorough is the change that is self-directed. My advice to parents and professionals is that, while it is easier and faster to give advice to children and entice them to do what you want, pausing in your "bail-out" and allowing a child to become self-directed is preferable.

Friday, November 18, 2011

The Break Routine

The students really called my hand on this one. My initial intention was to make a simple recommendation that they make plans to maintain a reasonable sleep and schoolwork schedule over Thanksgiving Break. The public outcry against this concept was so intense, however, that I am inspired to formalize and expand on my recommendation.

More than other teenagers, students on the Spectrum really do not do well with changes in routine. Not only does it mess them up when there is a change, but they tend to worry about it if they know it is coming. I think it partially explains why behavior seems to get worse right before a holiday break. For this reason, I am recommending students do at least 15-30 minutes of school work each day of break and wake up and go to bed no more than an hour past their sleep times when school is in session.

Our students get the entire week of Thanksgiving off. While this might seem luxurious to others, it is really not enough time for them to adjust to “break schedule” and then adjust back to “school schedule” again. In fact, they will adjust to break schedule by the end of the break, and then spend the first two to three days back tired, irritable, and obnoxious. They will be solidly back in the school schedule after about a week.

The notion of break being “not school” or the opposite of school is fairly entrenched in the psyche of our (and most) students. If you want to go toe to toe with your child on this issue, you will have my full support. The other lesson here for our students is that the appropriate response when adults are telling you to do something they cannot enforce and you disagree with is to smile and nod.

Friday, December 2, 2011

The Changing Social Role of the Parent

My partner in psychology and I gave an invited talk several weeks ago, and a parent in the audience referred to the changing role of the parent as children with Asperger's and NLD age. The comment/question has stuck with me since then and I have seen several other professional references on this topic, so I thought I would take the next three paragraphs and see if I could present this issue.

In childhood, professionals actually encourage parents to be a "best friend" to their children on the Spectrum. This is, by the way, different from the advice professionals usually offer parents about socializing their children. Children on the Spectrum need socializing, but the nuances of socializing with peers are simply too complex, so Mom and Dad become the social target. Parents also find it necessary to helicopter because marginalization seems to be the natural course for many of these children, especially in school.

As these children reach adolescence, they can tolerate much more peer socializing, and can engage in more self-advocacy. Some parents are more than happy to back off, but others are clearly in the habit of helicoptering, or get some sort of satisfaction out of it. In my experience, I have to tell about a third of the parents I meet to back off, a third to avoid complete disengagement, and another third seem to be able to achieve a semi effective and flexible distance with their children on their own.

Social growth is not necessarily linear though. When these students (now adults) graduate high school, any social equilibrium they have achieved with their environment is challenged, and parents find it necessary to step back in as the friend and advocate. The path to independence is forged again, but the process can be faster this time. Adulthood (as opposed to adolescence) offers more stability, and I would assume parents and their adult children on the Spectrum are more free to find out what works best for them (getting the needs of both parties met).

I will break my four-paragraph rule to say that not even Erikson¹ was able to summarize social growth over the lifespan in four paragraphs, and clearly I was not able to either. This is a huge issue, and one I am certainly interested in pursuing. Please send questions or comments on this issue along.

¹ <http://www.muskingum.edu/%7Epsych/psycweb/history/erikson.htm>

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Enemies

As far as I can tell, this is the first time I have unintentionally posted late to this blog. This last week we talked about relationships in social skills class. Interestingly, our students seem to be able to identify a large number of enemies in their lives. It was a feature of my discussions with Orion students that I can remember from my early days on the job, and it is one to which I have put a lot of thought.

Our students tend to over-simplify a lot of complex social interactions. For instance, I believe that they often categorize relationships as falling into friend or foe categories, when in actuality there are numerous categories for relationships. I also believe our students tend to incorrectly assign intentionality to the unintentional actions of others, and can personalize the impersonal.

Nearly all of the students I surveyed reported they could identify at least one person in their lives who was an enemy. They were skeptical when I reported that not only did I not have even one person in my life I ever considered an enemy, but it was highly improbable they did either.

Mutual malicious intent: that was the definition of an enemy that the students derived. People do bad things to other people all the time, but rarely do these bad actions meet the definition of enemy. Making and maintaining an enemy requires a vast amount of time and energy. Our students, like most people, are simply too self-absorbed to maintain an enemy relationship. In many ways, enemy relationships can be much harder to maintain than friendships.

Friday, January 13, 2011

Etiquette

If you are looking for a good read, try Emily Post's Etiquette. They are currently on the 18th edition of this 1922 classic. The social skills class is going to take a crack at studying etiquette this session. The Juniors and I are studying dating etiquette, and the Sophomores (at Dr. Stewart's request) are studying semi-formal dining etiquette. The goal for the Sophomores is to be ready to demonstrate their appropriate manners at Graduation Dinner in May.

We started talking today about the purpose of etiquette, and it was interesting what sorts of ideas were floated. There was widespread belief that etiquette was outdated and archaic. Some were not clear on the purpose, or how etiquette differed from law or morality. Despite this general misunderstanding, a student forwarded me this article¹ following a discussion on cell phone etiquette.

I introduced etiquette to the students as the engine of a sophisticated and efficient society. It was not necessarily what builds a society, but what can maintain it and keep it from entropy. Etiquette is a way to show respect and honor to others, but not so they will show it back. One should never assume control over the behavior of another. We practice etiquette to do our part to maintain society. An added benefit, I told them, is that people who demonstrate good etiquette tend to be treated better, and can expect a certain amount of reciprocated respect and honor.

Like pearls to swine, I expect to drag them through this lesson. I would like to encourage all parents out there to take a moment to evaluate how your child shows respect and honor to people around him or her, and especially to you. My general rule for adolescents is that they do not have to do it with feeling, they just have to do it. Also, having a Spectrum disorder is not a sufficient excuse for rude behavior.

¹ <http://usnews.msnbc.msn.com/news/2012/01/12/10141114-mans-marimba-iphone-ring-stops-mahler-symphonydead>

Friday, January 20, 2012

Parenthood

Orion students are aware that I watch a fair amount of TV. Recently I have been watching the show *Parenthood*¹. There are a lot of good reasons to watch this show, but the item that helped me keep it at arm's length for a number of years was the character Max, a young boy diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder. Not only has popular media done a fantastic job creating an Asperger's caricature² that I find annoying and hyperbolic, but I am entertained by children with Asperger's all day and need a change of pace when coming home.

This show, both fortunately and unfortunately, does not disappoint. While the character of Max³ is a good reason to change channels, the writers are spot on with the depiction of Max's parents. Each episode, it seems, the parents wrestle with both the disappointments and pride of raising a child with Asperger's.

I have recently been doing a fair amount of consultation, and I have talked with a number of parents of Spectrum children that do not attend Orion. Raising children who do not "fit the mold" is hard for everyone, but the credible resources available to parents of children on the Spectrum (esp., reliable information) seem to be sparse compared to other disorders.

There are two points I am trying to make here. The first is that the difficulty and stress you are experiencing raising your Spectrum child is probably not because you are a bad parent, unskilled, unintelligent or doomed to fail; it is because raising these children is especially hard compared to raising the average child (in my humble opinion). The second is that the writers of *Parenthood* are welcome fly me in as a consultant. My fee will be watching a couple episodes of *Happy Days* with Ron Howard. Tell him he can choose the episodes.

¹ <http://www.nbc.com/parenthood>

² http://www.cbs.com/shows/big_bang_theory/cast

³ <http://www.disabilitycoop.com/2010/11/09/parenthood/11084/>

Friday, January 27, 2012

Doubt

I have doubts. It is not my intention to startle my reader, but there are times when I am unsure about which direction to go. One issue that I have been wrestling with recently is that of cure vs. management. We all like to approach problems with the sense that they will be solved and go away, but there are hardships that stay with us. We learn to live with them and manage them rather than eliminating them.

For example, we had an open house this past week, and one of the statements that we share with prospective families is that our goal is not to cure Asperger's Disorder. We follow this by saying that we do not believe Asperger's is something that needs to be cured, but perhaps this ideology is the result of acceptance more than conviction.

I have been working with a couple families these past few weeks and months who have children with some fairly extensive disabilities and limitations. I feel like we balance on the edge of a knife for a long time while we are trying to decide if these limitations are going to be fixed, or are going to have to adopt a new life plan that includes these maladies. When do you stop expecting your child to move out of the house and accept that he will live with you long term? When do you stop pushing your child to get grades that will get him in to a four-year college and start planning for taking some classes a community college?

Parents are sometimes anxious for me to tell them what to do, or tell them that their dream for their child is possible or impossible. While my experience in this field makes me a much more educated guesser than most, I too have doubts. The good news is that our children are not defined exclusively by their disabilities, and all are endowed with a unique contribution and life purpose. Until I can predict the future, I will share with you in your uncertainty.

Friday, February 3, 2012

Traveling Mercies

Each year we take students on Winter Abroad, an international, weeklong trip. It is, in my humble opinion, the most exciting and challenging event we do here at Orion, and this year we are traveling to The Galapagos Islands. Several parents have offered me money to be able to go along on this trip. This is a dream trip for me as well, but a surprising number of children have expressed disinterest and resistance to going. My jaw drops each time I hear their disinterest, but it is understandable. Below are some reasons I have divined as to why an Orion student might not want to attend one of the most amazing trips of their lives.

Some students might truly be disinterested. When they imagine traveling to the Galapagos Islands, and compare this image to staying at home playing video games, there might really be no competition. Video games will win every time. Some students are also (not so secretly) concerned with money. Nearly every time I have heard this excuse, the student is parroting a concern they have heard from their parent. It is unlikely that our students really understand how the cost of this trip compares to the family budget.

The most common reservation has to do with anxiety. Sometimes it takes me days of questioning, but often students will report being worried about very fixable things, like roommates or having proper footwear. Other times it is revealed that they are worried about things they actually should be worried about, like coping with being away from home for the first time (independent living), being in close quarters (sensory integration), managing money (executive functioning) or any number of tasks that will challenge previously identified weaknesses.

It is my belief that all of these reservations can be resolved. I will spend the next 10 months (we leave in December) proving this to a new generation of travelers.

Friday, February 10, 2012

Profanity and Vulgarities

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue.” “Profanity is a sign of a weak mind.” I am sure you can add your own saying regarding the influence of words that supports appropriate or moral language use. Even our American free speech rights have parameters. This week I have been talking with the students about their language, and specifically their use of profanity and vulgarities on campus.

This is a big issue for our students, and always has been. Using proper language often requires some level of discipline and care, a struggle for all. It also seems like Orion students can use profanity as a way to fit in to the larger teen culture, even though they do not intend the disrespect or unsophistication inherent in use of most vulgar language.

Orion students struggle with the pragmatics associated with profanity. I get the sense that students often underestimate how truly offensive some of their language is. They can also be indiscriminant in their use of profanity, and swear or use vulgar language in front of parents or teachers. I only ever mistakenly swore once in front of my father when I was a child. Once.

I think it is okay to have high standards for language use for Orion students. First, Orion students demonstrate time and again that use of profanity is a big liability for them (i.e., getting-fired kind of liability). Second, language and vocabulary is actually a strength of most of our students. If anyone can find a sophisticated and proper way to express themselves, it should be our students.

Friday, February 17, 2012

Weird vs. Gross

Students at Orion Academy are in a constant state of annoyance with the faculty. Part of the reason is that the faculty criticizes the behavior of the students quite a bit. Added to that is the fact that faculty cannot always articulate why they are criticizing a particular behavior. To the neurotypical (the average Orion Faculty member), some behavior inexplicitly crosses that line from weird or strange (borderline acceptable) to gross or offensive (definitely unacceptable). They make the distinction at a gut level.

Weird is exclusively wearing sweatpants, or arguing with a friend about videogame physics or cryptozoology. Strange is talking to friends as if you are the professor and they are the student, or reporting that the entirety of your social experience outside school is online. Gross, on the other hand, is wearing the same sweatpants for days without washing them, nose-picking, and poor hygiene. Offensive is talking to teachers or other adults as if you are the professor and they are the student.

When our students grow up, it is my experience that weird and strange behaviors can become “quirky” or “eccentric” behaviors. For example, the “nutty professor” is odd, but brilliant. In adulthood, however, gross and offensive remain just that. For men, especially, these behaviors can morph into “creepy” and “disgusting”.

In general, our students will not differentiate between weird and gross when it comes to their own behavior. They also tend to downplay the value of the feedback from others. If it sounds like faculty is constantly criticizing the behavior of the students, it is quite possible that is an accurate assessment. We do it because the consequence for failing to modify gross and offensive behavior is relatively high.

Friday, February 24, 2012

Who Pays for a Free Education?

It just so happens that this is the time of year I get to plan both the Winter Abroad Trip and Summer Programming. This is also the time of year where next year's tuition costs are estimated. It seems to be the season of finance in the clinical and special education arena. The numbers bandied about to estimate costs of such services are (to me) truly staggering. I am surprised how something so fundamental (education and well-being) became so expensive¹. So how is this all financed? I have seen three routes.

Individuals can pay for it "out of pocket". While this is certainly not the majority of individuals, some can pay for such services without it making a large negative impact on family finances. Others choose to make heavy cuts to the budget or savings for several years (or longer) to make it happen. This group seems to be the smallest of the three.

Some individuals seek taxpayer support. It is, after all, one of our rights as American citizens to receive a free and adequate education. For those with special educational needs who choose this route, the thing to remember is that there appears to be a shortage of resources for upholding this right. I know this because every single parent I have talked to who feels like they are getting an "adequate education" for their child has described it as a "fight". It makes sense too since education is a popular sector for lawmakers looking to reduce government spending.

What if you do not have a lot of money and either do not want to fight or know how to fight for your child's educational rights? In my experience, the largest group of children needing special education services is those not receiving such services. As satisfied as I am about all of the children who benefit from Orion's programming, I still cannot help but think about those who will not be able to access such services. What is my role in this?

¹ <http://febp.newamerica.net/background-analysis/individuals-disabilities-educationact-cost-impact-local-school-districts>

Friday, March 2, 2012

The Behavior Program

Next week we have a teacher training day, and I have been asked to speak to the teachers about the Orion Behavior Program. For much of our faculty, the philosophy behind our behavior program is not what they learned in teacher school. To that end, we do trainings several times a year to make sure everyone is still thinking the same thing.

In preparing my notes for this talk, I am reminded about one of the more interesting and unexpected aspects of our program. Contrary to most adolescents I have worked with in other school settings, our students actually want to behave, get along with others, make friends, or at least be at peace with others. This is an artifact of the Spectrum disorder. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, but by and large, Orion students are honest and are rule followers. This is what makes our behavior program unique, because teacher school can focus largely on how rebellious and spiteful adolescents can be.

Hopefully you can see where this is going. It is my experience that the primary reason kids misbehave at Orion is that they do not know how to properly behave. At a very fundamental level, this means that I, as an administrator, can focus almost exclusively on education (how to comply) and have to spend very little of my time on punishment. Much of my “chastising” of students involves making a case for prosocial behavior.

I do “yell” at students (not very loudly though). They need to know what it sounds like; and they need to know that they can misbehave, get in trouble and get yelled at, and still be productive citizens and good people. All students at Orion will always be given a chance to make amends. I am powerless, however, at making them choose that option.

Friday, March 9, 2012

Transitioning

Today I am actually writing this from JFK University¹ in Pleasant Hill. I will be here for two days. Today I am lecturing on the topic of working with adolescents on the Spectrum to a continuing education class. Tomorrow I will be attending and speaking at Orion's annual Transitions Seminar². I am happy to report that registration is nearly full and there seems to be a high level of interest in this year's seminar.

If you missed registration or cannot attend, it is an annual event, so mark it for next year. But I was thinking, as I was preparing my talk, that transitions are difficult. They are difficult because they require change, and humans tend to resist change. In fact, stress is defined as "response to change". Perhaps in addition to being naturally static creatures, humans are also masochistic because as a culture we place a high premium on change.

The cosmos is telling you to remain the same, and culture is telling you to change. I admit that I am unwilling to tell you what to do. If, however, you choose to change (grow up, mature, get to work, go to college) my advice to you is to just do the very next thing. An activity like going to college is incredibly complex, and for most people takes years of planning. You do not have to go to college right now, just do the next step. Maybe that step is talking with your parents about it, or buying a college sweatshirt, or studying for your high school physics exam. You will achieve far more of your dreams if you break them in to small, manageable pieces.

The final thought I have is that even though culture says you should change, be careful about giving too much heed to how culture recommends you change. As an individual on the Spectrum, your life has been non-traditional up to this point. I see no reason why it cannot continue to be non-traditional in the future.

¹ <http://www.jfku.edu/Locations/Campuses/Pleasant-Hill-Campus.html>

² <http://www.jfku.edu/Events/Autism-Spectrum-Disorders-Transitions-Seminar.html>

Friday, March 16, 2012

Benchmarking 8th grade

This past weekend's Transition Seminar was a lot of fun for me. Some of the feedback I received was that parents enjoyed or appreciated my discussion on "benchmarks" for our students. It makes sense to me that, because individuals on the Spectrum are developmentally delayed, there might be a dearth of information out there on developmental milestones and age-appropriate skills for this population. Below are my benchmarks for 8th graders, and I want to stress that, even though there is some room for individualization, these benchmarks are based on my experience and have been thoughtfully composed.

By the end of 8th grade, children on the Spectrum should be able to accept help from an adult. They should be skilled at taking correction from a teacher, a parent, a psychologist, or any other competent, knowledgeable adult who is tasked with helping them. It might go without saying that it is another skill altogether to differentiate between adult strangers tasked with helping them (police) and just adult strangers. Our students tend to continue to refine this differentiation skill in high school.

8th graders should graduate to more subtle self-regulation strategies. Hand flapping and trampoline jumping at lunchtime should become a thing of the past. It is, in my opinion, okay if these children still do these activities, but they should not do them in public. Hand flappers graduate to stress-balls; trampolines become evening activities.

Finally, if a child has a significant mental health concern (like suspected anxiety or depression), treatment should commence by the end of 8th grade. In my experience it can take up to 6 months for our students to show signs of progress after commencing a treatment program. Mental health problems are good to have under control by the start of high school. Next week it is my plan to publish my benchmarks for Sophomores, so stay tuned.

Tuesday, March 27, 2012

Benchmarking 10th Grade

This week we are pleased to welcome the WASC committee (an accrediting body) to our campus. Needless to say, last week when I normally write my blog, I was making last minute preparations for the visit. This morning I thought it would be better late than never to publish last week's blog, so here it is. These are my benchmarks for individuals on the Spectrum finishing their Sophomore year of high school.

Your child should have regular, daily chores that go beyond cleaning up after themselves (which they should already be doing, by the way). For instance, they should be emptying the dishwasher or taking out trash. Your student should have a regular homework routine, and need no more than one reminder to start working on homework. Remembering to do homework and complying with the homework request are two different skills. You should be done nagging them to do their homework.

Your child should be able to find out what their grades are, and if there is a low grade, what to do about it. "Having my mom call the teacher" is no longer appropriate for students this age. Finally, if a child works hard in a class and improves a skill like studying for tests, but still gets a low grade in the class, they should be able to feel good about the progress they did make (e.g., improving study skills).

In my experience, most individuals on the Spectrum who are in a stable and nurturing academic and social environment experience a growth spurt in overall emotional maturity the summer between the Sophomore and Junior year. This new level of maturity usually becomes apparent to teachers in the first couple months of Junior year. These benchmarks are in anticipation of this new perspective and the trek toward high school graduation. Senior benchmarks next post.

Friday, March 30, 2012

Benchmarking 12th Grade

The temptation for adults evaluating high school Seniors on the Spectrum is to ask if they are ready to go off to college. We picture brick buildings, small dorm rooms, cafeterias, and late-night study sessions. With the end in sight, we start setting standards for these students that they not only struggle to meet, but may even be a bad use of their time and energy. The “typical college experience” is becoming a thing of the past for all young adults, and especially our students. With the assumption that all of our students deserve a chance to follow their own path, I have come up with just two skills I believe are necessary for Seniors to master by the time they graduate high school.

Students should be completely independent of their parents when it comes to transportation, and getting from Point A to Point B. Not all of our students will drive. Anxiety and other sensory and neurocognitive issues can get in the way of that, but all students should be and can be adept at public transportation. You will know if they can do this by insisting they plan trips to the grocery store, library, and movie theater completely on their own.

In addition, Seniors should independently manage their daily schedule. This includes making and keeping routine appointments (e.g., showing up to school on time every day) and non-routine appointments (e.g., making and keeping a dentist’s appointment). If they take meds, they should be able to do this all on their own. I think it is okay to expect that they will not only arrive at an appointment on time, but also with everything they need.

If these benchmarks seem lofty, I have two comments for you. First, I have seen children with a range of Spectrum presentations meet and exceed these expectations. Second, start where the child is. Your child is already likely off schedule developmentally, so there is less urgency to meet some arbitrary age standard. Spend some time finding your child’s Point A, picking a reasonable Point B, and start today covering some ground.

Friday, April 6, 2012

Discussing Change

Change is a constant theme in our lives, but it becomes the center of conversation here at Orion this time of year. Students plan their classes for next year, take SAT prep classes on weekends, and will be visiting colleges over the Spring Break. Job and school applications are on our minds for summer and next fall.

Everybody feels some level of stress at change (stress is sometimes defined as “response to change”), but it is true that most people get some sort of pleasure or sense of excitement when they think about a planned change. Our students, however, usually do not. We have been doing this long enough to know that dread and worry typically parallel thoughts of change for our students.

I received a thoughtful question this week. If our students are so reactive (negatively) to change, and even talking about change, why would we make planning for the future a part of our curriculum? Orion has a Transitions Program, an annual Transitions Conference, and much of the Social Skills curriculum in the upper grades is dedicated to planning for the future. Participating in planning for the future is, in many respects, a graduation requirement.

The truth is that even well intentioned and smart plans rarely play out as we anticipate. This message tends to help our students cope better with the notion that they cannot predict the future (often a source of anxiety). The point is to have some goal in mind. I will leave the question open though because I thought it was a good one: why is it essential to plan for the future?

Friday, April 20, 2012

Letting Go vs. Lowering Expectations

In my experience in helping to engineer behavior change, deadlines can be one of the hardest variables to manage. For instance, four years of high school may seem like enough time to be ready for college, but for most of our students, the notion that there is a deadline (graduation) for preparation for college can be enough to stall progress.

Sometimes the answer to this is to remove the deadline, but how does one do away with a deadline without artificially “lowering the bar” for their child? For instance, some parents (wisely) choose to tell their child that they will not be attending a 4-year college the fall after graduating high school, but they are worried that will send a signal to the child that they can coast academically. In working with students and families, one of the lines we often walk together is the line between letting go and lowering expectations.

So how does one choose to remove or maintain a deadline? The first step is to take your opinion and your own experience out of the process. “What worked for me...” is often a deceptive criteria for what works for your child. One should also ask if the deadline is truly necessary. Is there another, legitimate timeline you can envision? Finally, is the threat of a deadline impeding progress as much as or more than the skills required to complete the task? If so, the deadline could be a liability.

I think goals and deadlines are good, so I would recommend that if you remove one deadline for your child, it be replaced with a more manageable one. One parent I talked to recently indicated that she talked about changes in “strategies” rather than changes in “goals” or deadlines to further distance their child from the stress of deadlines. I think this is a creative and adaptive modification that will be helpful for the child.

Friday, April 27, 2012

Propriety

By this time in the school year, I am typically very connected to the students at Orion. After all, I have spent the last 160 weekdays (and some weekends) with them. I can sense changes in mood and behavior patterns, I know the ins and outs of the social gossip. There is very little that escapes our attention when it happens on campus, and the students often fill me in on their off-campus activities.

Familiarity can breed contempt, but it can also breed a sense of propriety. A recent conversation with a student about growing up in his family reminded me very well that when these students leave campus, they go home; and when they graduate from Orion, that bond and sense of responsibility they have with their family will persist, even if it changes.

Even though I am tasked with maintaining and representing basic societal values to Orion students, it is not my personal values that I want to impose on these students. They already have a reliable source for some of those more personal values in their family and their parents.

I think that upholding this boundary (directing children to adopt the values of their family instead of mine) can be part of the art of the profession. It helps to remind myself that the parent's job of parenting will persist long after my teaching job ends.

Friday, May 4, 2012

Visual Perception

This is one of those posts which will start out modestly and likely blossom in to something more. I have been wanting to put forth my two cents on the visual sense and how it interacts with Asperger's for a while now. As you may know, we at Orion take pains to manage the "visual environment" of our school. We limit clutter in classrooms, paint walls all the same mute color, and moderate how much stuff teachers put on bulletin boards. The reason is that our students do not usually manage visual information as well as other students. For many of our students, a busy visual environment can reduce attention and promote distraction.

This is not to say that our students would be better off blindfolded in the classroom. Our students still learn from visual stimuli, it is just not their dominant sense. It just so happens, however, that the educational system in America believes that the majority of students are visual learners. As a result, when the average person looks at one of our classrooms, they probably think it looks boring.

You might ask yourself, didn't Temple Grandin write a book¹ about vision being her dominant sense? I have two points to make about this. Dr. Grandin has been clear that she has Autism (not Asperger's), and this seems to be one of the differences between the two diagnoses. Vision and visualization seem to be a strength for some individuals with Autism (and a weakness for Asperger's), whereas auditory and verbalization seem to be a strength for individuals with Asperger's (and a weakness for Autism). This suggests that "light autism" and High Functioning Autism might not be appropriate synonyms for Asperger's.

The second is that there is a definite difference between visual sensory input (receiving information through the eyes) and visualization. Visualization involves representing or manipulating information in your mind in pictures (stills or moving). Many of our students have eyes that work fine, might struggle with deciphering visual information and prepping it for storage or manipulation (especially when the information is complex), and definitely do not visualize well at all. In my experience, our Asperger's students tend to create a narrative of information they want to recall. Recalled information appears to be word-based and often in the form of a story (that does not always make sense to the listener).

¹ <http://www.grandin.com/inc/visual.thinking.html>

Friday, May 11, 2012

Auditory Processing

Last week I wrote about Asperger's and visual processing. From what I can tell, our students tend to be primarily auditory processors. This means that if teachers want to give their students the best chance of completing a homework assignment, they must speak it. Simply writing an assignment on the board is typically insufficient.

Like I said, much of the typical academic environment is designed for the visual learner. If you do not believe me, go look at an elementary school classroom. In addition to spending much of their time trying to get kids to be quiet, teachers seem to spend a lot of time putting stuff on the walls. Make the auditory less chaotic, and the visual more chaotic.

Our students clearly need something of the opposite, and providing that unique sensory opportunity has led me to some interesting discoveries. There are some incredible assets one can derive from being an auditory learner. First, as long as an individual is articulate (which most of our students are), public speaking and discourse tends to be second nature. Our students can make fantastic orators. Our students also have excellent auditory memories and can remember whole conversations, word for word. Not so long ago, a student repeated to me a previous conversation we had (which contradicted what I was currently telling her to do). I did not recall the conversation, but the words were clearly mine.

Interestingly, our students are excellent at learning lines for plays and productions. It is not uncommon for many of our students to learn all the lines for all the parts. We typically have multiple understudies for all the parts in a play. Additional benefits are numerous, but our students tend to underestimate this sensory asset. Please talk about this with them and help them build an accurate self-image that reflects their sensory preferences.

Friday, May 18, 2012

The Last Day

The last day of school is usually stressful at Orion. In the final days of both Term 1 and Term 2, behavior problems spike and the number of children sitting out of class, taking Voluntary Time Outs, pacing or crying increases dramatically. Invariably, the last day of school brings all sorts of social disaster, and is typically one of the busiest days for the clinical staff at Orion.

For the first couple years I worked here, my message to students near the end of the year was to finish well, "You're almost there", "You can do it". I even once taught a class on the process of "phoning it in" (i.e., being present in body but not necessarily mind). Dissociation is preferable to disruption. For many students, sitting on the ground under a desk or tree all day would be better than the route they choose, and for many students it really comes down to the decisions they make in the very last hour.

The end of the year freak-out seems inevitable and relatively unavoidable. My guess is that fatigue and anxiety play a big role. If you have not yet, try to convince a child with Asperger's that they feel more anxious because they are tired. During the crisis is too late to have this conversation.

As a professional who is way more comfortable with prevention than crisis management, dealing with these situations can be a challenge. My guess is that the best approach is a combination of both anticipating the crisis and managing it when it happens. Who knew that working with these students would be such an education?

Wednesday, June 6, 2012

Summer Plans

Summer means project time at Orion. Much of the administrative staff is here on campus or working from home for much of the summer, and we relish this time because our workdays are no longer segmented into 45-minute periods, with 50 minutes at lunch. You may have guessed that I love to write, but the writing process can be frustrating when limited to bits and pieces.

One of my projects this summer (in my free time, of course), is to make progress on some longer writing projects. One of them that I have been contributing to for about a year now is a parenting book. Working with parents is actually one of the highlights of my job here at Orion. I have worked with hundreds of families over the years, but nowhere else have I found such a concentration of dedicated and creative parents then right here in the Bay Area.

The book is loosely based on this blog, but imagine these three paragraphs stretched into three pages and you can start to get the feel for the book. To that end, I am going to try different types of media this summer as well. I have started a Twitter account, and the link is to the right (@DocSchleg). I also do a lot of reading in the summer, so I have already started to post some article and book links there. Please feel free to follow my posts, as I plan to be tweeting more than posting this summer. Thank you again for another fantastic, inspiring school year. See you in the Fall.

Wednesday, June 27, 2012

Thinking About Vocation

Some of you may be aware that I am running the Orion Summer Program this summer. One of our biggest events this year is our Junior Internship Program. We offered students completing their Junior year at Orion a opportunity to have a month-long, fully supported internship in the month of June. Seven of our students took us up on our offer, and I just received a report from the internship coordinator that the experience was a huge success for all of our students. At least one of our students is being pursued by his internship site for additional paid work in the fall as well. I cannot tell you how gratifying this is for me to hear.

There is a lot of buzz and a growing amount of research out there about what happens to people on the Spectrum when they become adults. What do they do for a living? Where do they live? Do they get married and have families? It is my experience that these individuals are both trainable and employable and have an incredible set of skills to bring to the table, but the world really has no idea what to do with them. Professionals and parents are clamoring to get information from me and Orion about how to prepare their clients/children for the life of an employed, happy adult.

I was just forwarded information about Exceptional Minds¹ and this article² about this vocational training institution's first year in business. I find all of this information especially timely considering our national discussion about employment and education. My message to parents who might be despondent about the future of their child on the Spectrum is that opportunities for your child seem to be increasing exponentially. Professionals: now is the time to start thinking more creatively in your practice; do your homework.

¹ <http://www.exceptionalmindsstudio.org>

² http://www.execdigital.com/press_releases/exceptional-minds-marks-first-year-as-vocational-school-and-working-studio-for-young-adults-on-autism

Friday, August 10, 2012

On Stamina

It's a brand new year. A warm welcome-back to my reader. Last week the Boss said someone should write about stamina in the ASD population. This told me A: she has not read my blog, or B: it is time to write about stamina again. I choose to believe that she eagerly awaits all my posts.

Stamina is loosely defined as the ability to sustain effort over time. The stamina concept is really easy to apply to athletics. It takes stamina to run ultra marathons¹, for instance. Stamina in the academic setting can be a little more challenging to pinpoint. For our students, stamina can have a large impact on things like class participation, homework completion, being friendly and following rules, managing alertness, social interactions, and of course performance on class assessments and assignments.

When a student is experiencing difficulty in any way, shape, or form at Orion, one of my first stops is addressing issues related to stamina. This brings me to the point of this particular post. How can you address stamina unless you have a good understanding of the limits of that stamina? Step one in helping our students overcome stamina issues is getting a baseline. Interest and motivation can inspire students to push themselves more, but there does seem to be an underlying dualistic "energy" that affects performance across all levels and activities. To what extent can this student push himself or herself comfortably in this particular task?

Step two is to look for potential energy drains. I will talk more about this in the future, but one of my first stops is chronic anxiety. If you have a child with low stamina, consider the anxiety-drain. Chronic anxiety is like leaving the fridge door open. The motor is constantly running to keep the food only somewhat cool. More on this later. For now, I want to remind you that you can now follow me on Twitter. See the link in the top right corner of the blog page. I am finding Twitter to be a useful tool, especially in discovering what others have to say about Spectrum Disorders.

¹ <http://fox8.com/2012/07/31/running-the-burning-river-100-mile-ultra-marathon>

Friday, August 17, 2012

Acting Normal

Today is Picture Day, and all the questions about "Why can't I wear my gas mask?" and "Is this sombrero too much?" remind me of the old therapeutic intervention of "acting normal". Acting normal is a behavioral intervention used for individuals diagnosed with psychosis and experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations. Therapists would train clients to differentiate between hallucinations and reality, and then "act normal" by not overtly responding to the hallucinations. The movie *A Beautiful Mind*¹ about John Nash provides the perfect example of this intervention. Professionals suggest that clients who master acting normal seem to get better treatment in the general society and have higher quality of life.

Asperger's is certainly not the same as psychosis, but "outside the box" thinkers (as individuals on the Spectrum are often described) seem to set themselves up for a similar level of discrimination in general society as individuals who respond to and converse with their hallucinations. If you have not experienced this (people interacting with their hallucinations), by the way, it can seem odd and feel uncomfortable. City buses seem to be a laboratory for this behavior.

I would assume that a parent might be less likely to prominently display a class photo of their child if the child was wearing a gas mask than a button-down shirt and tie (even though I think we can all agree that at least one gas-mask school picture in high school would have been awesome). That wallet-sized is staying in the junk drawer.

Our Transitions Counselor recently renamed the acting normal training we do with our students to "Strategic Conformity". I am not a big fan of the word "normal" to begin with, so I am going to start using this term from now on. I really do not want our students to change who they are to meet my expectations, and I certainly do not want to dull their outside the box thinking, but I do want them to be treated well by others and have skills to get what they want and need. I want them to be able to turn it (whatever "it" is) on and off, as the situation demands. Picture day is not about doing something cool or crazy, it is about making sure Dad and Mom have photos of their kids they can show off to their friends. It is about making sure in 20 years that your yearbook photo is embarrassing because of how your look reflected popular culture (polo collars up or down?), and not how weird you looked.

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0268978>

Friday, August 24, 2012

Stamina and Pain

I wanted to continue the stamina discussion (see *On Stamina*). Stamina is not a stable trait¹. By stable trait I mean aspects of the person that remain generally the same over the lifespan, like a person's IQ or optimistic disposition (all things being equal, of course). Stamina is better described as a "state", or something that can fluctuate in response to changes in the internal or external environment, and over time. This is why students who were effortlessly completing 2 hours of homework last year can only do about 15 minutes of it after coming back from the summer break.

Stamina can change over time, but there must be some sort of agent applied in order for it to change. You and I know these agents to be effort, hard work, and determination. We have also come to accept the axiom "no pain, no gain" as true. Pain and discomfort (both physical and mental) are an expected product of the stamina building process.

It was not until I came to work at Orion that I had ever considered the subjectivity of the "no pain, no gain" rule. It was not until I came to work here that I met individuals that completely rejected the notion that pain and discomfort were indelibly linked to progress. How do you motivate someone who does not agree that discomfort is a necessary part of the process of building stamina (or even that discomfort can signal a positive process)? Many of our students quit progressing because the process becomes uncomfortable or painful. But it is not because they are lazy or lack fortitude. They just disagree that discomfort is a necessary part of the process.

There is also the question of how much one should struggle and endure before it is reasonable to give up or stop. This is always the hardest question for me, because I cannot know, and will never know another person's experience. I am limited to what they tell me. The best I can hope for is to indoctrinate them, in the way I must have been indoctrinated, into believing that discomfort does not always mean damage. Sometimes it can mean you are doing it right.

¹ <http://allpsych.com/personalitysynopsis/intro.html>

Friday, August 31, 2012

Regressive Responding

A rough week at the 'ol Academy this week. This week was the fourth week of classes for us, and it seems as if fatigue and panic are (understandably) setting in. Personally, this week was the third and final after-school parent meeting for me. Parent work and public speaking are an enjoyable aspect of my job, but I am satisfied to be done with those meetings for now.

I commented at the Senior Class Meeting a week ago that a common trend with Seniors is to revert (or regress) to old behaviors. In fact, it is standard practice to dig up reports from the student's Freshman year to inform us on what interventions worked at the time, and what we should apply now. Like clockwork I dug into my treatment archives this week to inform my decision-making for student care.

Why do we see this regressive trend? The catalyst is obviously stress. By why now, and why the response in the form of regression? I think it is a possible response to Orion doing what we say we will do-pull away the invisible supports (Supports that become so comfortable and routine, they seem to disappear to the student. Students can falsely believe that they are "cured" due to failing to notice the support.). We believe that the systematic pulling away of supports, which begins in the Junior year and intensifies in the Senior year, is essential for promoting independence. I think students do find solace in the school's routine and benefit from and depend upon our infinite structure and control. Suggesting that the sense of security is temporary and coming to an end might be enough to catapult students behaviorally back to their Freshman year, before they knew they could depend on the Orion Routine.

The good news is that the process of dominating that stress and managing those behaviors is much faster the second time around, and I do believe participating in the process gives students a greater sense of agency and independence. It is a process though, and the belligerence has been pretty intense. We all welcome the long Labor Day weekend.

Friday, September 7, 2012

The Gong Show in Social Skills Class

My job includes a lot of program development. For that reason I spend a fair amount of my day thinking "what next?" for our students. These past couple weeks have been grounding for me, though, as I have been regularly reminded that students are still practicing and perfecting the basics. One of those basics is Pragmatic Language use. Pragmatic language is language used for communication. It is the "how" in, "It's not what you say, but how you say it." Some examples follow.

A student told a story where his father got upset with him, stopped the car in the street, told him to get out of the car, and made him walk the remaining 3 blocks home from school. I commented that chuckling and smiling while he retold the story suggested he thought his father was overreacting, and it was funny that his father lost his temper. I chuckled (but internally) because I have often wanted to drive this student 3 blocks away from campus and make him walk back.

Several of our students suffer from "Full Body Stretch Syndrome" (not a real thing). They seem to be unable to stop themselves from performing several full body stretches throughout class. The message this sends, of course, is "I find everything about you boring right now, so here's a shot of my gut (when my ill-fitting shirt pulls up)." This week in Social Skills Class, I explained The Gong Show¹ to the students and said if they receive the gut-shot while talking, it means they have been gonged. Become more interesting, or stop talking.

We are a dog friendly school with a compulsory Dog Class for 8, 9, and 10th graders. While holding a cat in his arms, a student recently told me that he had been given permission to bring his cat to Dog Class. Here is what I want to believe about the conversation: Student: "Can I bring Tiger to class (no mention that Tiger is a cat)?" Teacher: "Sure, sometime." Student: "[To himself] I will bring my cat to Dog Class next week." This is now my new favorite conversation.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gong_Show

Friday, September 14, 2012

Lazy Person's Explanation

The other day someone suggested that the reason I was not being successful at a particular task was because I was being lazy. They stopped short of calling me lazy. We often say this as child-care professionals, "You're not lazy, you just have lazy behavior." I thought to myself that I really needed to "try harder" if I wanted to be successful. And then I realized that laziness was an absurd explanation of my lack of success. I am not a lazy person, and the only lazy behavior I manifest is functional (i.e., relaxing).

I work hard, and our students work hard (that is part of the reason they are tired all the time), so I feel I need to generate some other explanations for Spectrum student's "lack of work production" than they "are just lazy" and need to try harder. Absurd. These are just off the top of my head.

There is a very high level of clinical anxiety in our population. Those of you without clinical levels of anxiety may not aware (but let me assure you) of the amount of energy it takes, both physically and mentally, to manage an anxiety disorder. Think about having the worst day of your life every day. That takes a lot of energy. Our students also have chronic sleep disturbance (seems to be part of the Spectrum diagnosis), which amplifies the anxiety and increases the potency of the worst day of your life.

Executive functioning deficits can manifest in ways that look like laziness to the untrained observer. Kids who cannot initiate work, do not know where to start their work, cannot record things in a way they will understand later (or think to record them at all), struggle with synthesizing information, and are poor in interpreting pragmatic language of teachers all respond with staring at their blank Word document during their entire homework time, or until someone intervenes to help. In this case it is not laziness, it is an executive functioning deficit.

Laziness is the lazy teacher's go-to excuse for why their student is not producing. As parents, do not get caught in the morass of the laziness argument, and do not accept it as an excuse from your child's teacher. If you do hear this from a teacher, your spouse, or another professional, say this: "Be that as it may, what are you doing to help my child?"

Saturday, September 22, 2012

The ASD Cure

There is a whole lot of talk these days about a cure for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). I read as many of the publications as I can with my scientist eye because I am often asked to comment as a professional on these treatments. Let me summarize my findings to date, in four paragraphs or less.

There is probably a genetic component at the root of most ASDs. This seems especially to be the case with more severe disorders (see Rett's Disorder). There is not likely an ASD gene, but instead a series of genes being expressed both in space and time. At the time of this post, scientists are pretty excited about being able to switch on (or off) certain specific genes in mice that act like they have ASD, and get their symptoms to decrease or change. I cannot imagine how one can diagnosed a mouse with ASD. Seems outside my field of expertise.

Mounting evidence supports an environmental component to ASD. The evidence debunking the theory that environment causes ASD continues to role in. The evidence seems to support the notion that environment can exacerbate symptoms and compound the delay in development. Environmental items that have been implicated in intensifying ASD: food (usually allergies), air and water (environmental toxins), relationships, the public school system, religion and politics. It is the same list of factors, by the way, that research is suggesting can decrease and mitigate symptomatology.

You may have heard recently about a stem cell therapy for ASD. There is currently no credible research to support its effectiveness, or even its use for this purpose. Its claims pose a question: if you could cure ASD, would you? How much of life should be a struggle? As a psychologist, I would like to take a different approach to "the cure" debate. If you are affected by ASD, are you able to accept and own your circumstance? Are you able to let your experience enrich your life? Are you limited by thinking about how life could have/should have been?

Friday, September 28, 2012

Why Therapists Struggle to Treat Asperger's

Just for the record, I am a therapist. Doing therapy is a pretty easy job, I have to say. All you have to do is listen, nod, and say, "and how does that make you feel?" This "method" is not an effective way to actually help clients, but you can get them to pay you for a while as they are realizing you are a bad therapist. Doing therapy well, however, is very difficult.

Working with individuals on the Spectrum in therapy presents an additional challenge. The reason for this is related to the developmental disability part of the disorder. Most traditional psychotherapies rely heavily on insight in the course of treatment (e.g., CBT). Insight in therapy is the process of seeing connections between different aspects of the self (mind, body) and the environment (physical, social, etc.), noticing patterns in these connections, and testing your conclusions. For instance, every time I sit down to take a test, I feel sick to my stomach. Could it be that I am stressed about taking tests, and this is causing a sympathetic nervous system response, and the response is what is making me sick? If so, then I should probably start working on reducing my test anxiety and I will feel less sick. This is insight. (It is also a testable hypothesis, by the way.)

Does this sound anything like the process your children/clients on the Spectrum go through? Of course not. It is not that your children cannot do insight, it is that they generally do not go there first. "I feel sick, so I must have the flu. Testing has nothing to do with it." I have the flu because Occam's Razor says so. This is a more likely conclusion of any insight novice, but it is the individual with Asperger's that often struggles with seeing another perspective, suspending belief, or believing they could be wrong in their initial assessment. These are problem solving and theory of mind activities.

In my experience, individuals on the Spectrum tend to do better with a therapist who is more directive (dictates the course of therapy and the individual sessions), does active and continuous assessment, takes a Behaviorist approach (heavy focus on learning), and will actually give advice. The advice part is especially difficult for the trained therapist. We are taught that the client should arrive at the answer on their own time and terms. Developmental delay, however, is often a primary concern for a family, so the therapist needs to give advice. Please ask your child's therapist if they have success working with individuals on the Spectrum. This therapist will tell you that it is truly a specialty set of skills.

Saturday, October 6, 2012

The Outing

I thought I would get back to some old-school blogging and talk about a social skills class activity. This week was the Target Outing for the Seniors. This is my first year working with the Seniors, so it was my pleasure to prep the kids for and plan this outing. In addition, this group of students is especially laid back so it is a lot of fun leaving campus with them and going on outings.

The Seniors, the Transitions Counselor and I traveled to the local Target on BART and had a competition. I gave the students a fictional budget, and they had to find items to furnish their apartment while staying in the budget. The student who produced the best list of items won a gift card (to Target, of course). It was a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon for everyone.

For those of us who have already left home at least once and struck out on our own, I think it is easy to forget how difficult it is to do this task for the first time. The prep work for this particular outing can be as much as 6 classes (3 weeks), and the debriefing and reflection (an essential part) will take at least a full week of class. Students practice money management, planning, navigation, visualization, time management, and some advanced reasoning ("Do I really need a 50" TV?"). We also talked a lot about "can" vs. "should" moments in the decision-making process of an adult.

These types of outings, while taking a lot of planning to get just right, are helpful for teaching skills and identifying strengths and weaknesses. You might also be surprised to know that in the three hours our group was in Target, the only Target employee to question our presence was the gentleman who was collecting carts from the parking lot, and he was complimentary and enthusiastic. Clearly we were not being a nuisance. Based on this success, I think the next outing is to a clothing store where the kids will pick out and try on outfits for a job interview. I think I will need to talk about wearing clean underwear for the first time in social skill class.

Friday, October 12, 2012

Me, My Disability

In social skills class this week we are talking about occupational self-advocacy. In the context of transitions planning at Orion, the big question that we tackle is to disclose or not to disclose your disability to your future boss or professor. And then, why or why not?

This is one of my favorite discussions, because it activates many of the ambiguities of the adult world, and requires adult-level thinking (of which our students are increasingly capable). I do give them a hint that, "Yes, every time," and, "No, never," are wrong answers. They are wrong because they are simple responses to a complex issue. We go through as a class many of the costs and benefits of disclosing the disability.

This discussion also sets the stage for me to give the students some important information. I am fairly sure I am one of the only people who will tell them this in a constructive and caring way. I tell them that their disability is likely something they will struggle with all their lives (there is no easy life awaiting them). I tell them that others who do not know them will be able to tell that something is different or "off" about them (the non-verbal expressions of Asperger's like articulation, posture, conversational skills, etc. make them stand out). Interpretations of their behavior will range from "quirky" to "weird". Finally, I tell them that when they leave Orion they will likely encounter people who are out to get them.

Quite possibly one of the worst messages I could give these students is that life will be easy for them. Life is not easy for anyone. Second to that is the message that their disability is an excuse for failing to contribute in a meaningful way to society, or an exclusion from happiness. This is why we talk about what we talk about. I want them to be able to be comforted by reality (their old friend), not scared of it. How they feel about me, the messenger, is another thing all together.

Friday, October 19, 2012

Theft

We had two incidents of theft recently. This is significant for several reasons. Theft is uncommon at Orion. Our students are more trustworthy and respectful of other people's stuff than the average teenager. Typically when we are dealing with a theft it is more of a problem with compulsion, and the theft involves food more than money or any other item (this population has a complicated relationship with food). Theft of money is a truly rare event at Orion. We are so confident about our student's trustworthiness that we do not allow locks on lockers, and there are certainly no video cameras or hall monitors like are done in many American schools these days.

The no-locks expectation is not just naive belief in the goodness of Mankind though. Orion is a community that requires active maintenance by all students, faculty, and staff. "Security" is not the responsibility of any one person or group, but of the whole community (parents included, by the way). In the same way that I expect a student to pick up a piece of trash they did not generate, I expect students to have some sort of response when they see rule-bending or breaking by their peers (or teachers, I suppose). Students should take personally a theft as a threat to the integrity of the community.

Parents have told me that this sounds like a dream: getting the children to take responsibility for and care about misfortune that befalls someone else. Is this not, after all, the root of justice? So, how does Orion do this? Our solution to this is one that students immediately reject as unfair and pointless. If the student who committed the transgression is not found (hopefully by coming forward), the whole community will have a consequence. In this most recent event, the student body lost their Out to Lunch privilege for a week because the culprit(s) did not come forward.

This loss of privilege is not, however, a sacrifice to the totalitarian State of Orion. It is a concrete loss that students can experience in the same way you and I might feel a sense of loss of safety and trust when someone around us is victimized. Recently there was a mugging¹ in my neighborhood, and I am now motivated to find the perpetrator and restore the sense of safety I enjoyed while walking my dog (in addition to the fact that an injustice occurred). Our students struggle with personalizing such an event, and loss of privilege does, in fact, help them to "share" in the event.

¹ <http://sfappeal.com/news/2012/10/woman-choked-and-robbednear-city-college.php>

Saturday, October 27, 2012

Reasoning with the Unreasonable

Have you ever tried to reason with an adolescent? Now, have you ever tried to reason with an adolescent on the Spectrum? When having a "battle of whits" with one of our students, it sometimes feels like I am on a Spanish language game show. Since I do not speak much Spanish, I would be at a serious disadvantage, especially in the lightning round. So why do I find it so difficult to reason with adolescents on the Spectrum?

Much of our student's bad ideas (e.g., sometimes they ask me to fire a teacher) are based on fundamentally false assumptions. One of the most common assumptions I encounter day-to-day is "I am the center of the universe". This is a common belief for most adolescents, but for our students, perspective taking (Theory of Mind) is challenging, and convincing them that they are not the center of the universe is not usually a good use of your time.

Adolescents on the Spectrum are articulate and verbose, with excellent verbal memories. For the Battle of Whits, the adult needs to keep their facts straight and message consistent. Often times students point out contradictory information or expectations I have provided (sometimes recalling conversations from previous years), and this often leaves me tongue-tied. My "mistake" then becomes the focus of our discussion (an activity our Transitions Coordinator called "loopholing") rather than the original false assumption or bad idea.

Activities like compromising, seeing someone else's perspective, forecasting and planning, and stamina (sticking with something when it is hard), and a host pragmatic language skills make "being reasonable" difficult, at times, for our students. I would recommend for parents and professionals to choose the hill to die on very carefully because one of the activities our students seem to be able to devote a lot of time to is convincing people to agree with their fundamentally false assumptions.

Friday, November 2, 2012

Loopholing

It is not often that someone comes along and successfully explains your experience in a statement. For years now I have been frustrated by a conversational "tactic" our students use extensively to make their point and eventually derail discussions. I was telling a story about this experience to our Transitions Counselor and she said, "I call that 'loopholing'. My husband does it all the time."

Loopholing is the act of focusing and commenting on aspects of what someone says and missing the overall point the person is trying to make. For instance, yesterday we had parent meetings and we were discussing the rationale for taking SAT prep classes. The Dad stated to his son that getting an A in Algebra is just as important for getting into college as getting an A on the SAT. Everyone knows the SAT is not graded, so despite the technical error, the meaning of the statement was clear and the point salient. This student jumped all over that error and successfully looped (for a moment) out of SAT prep: "Oh my gosh, Dad! Performance on the SAT is denoted on a numeric scale!" The student had completely focused on the technical error and missed the overall point of the discussion. I have countless examples of loopholing.

If you listen to conversations between friends on the Spectrum, you will hear loopholing woven seamlessly throughout the conversation. I am sure neurotypicals loophole a fair amount as well. If you have a point to make, as an adult, and are not keen to the loopholing "skill" (and, in fact, have had to wade through a boggy conversational swamp of loopholing from a group of teenagers every day for the last 6 years), it can be obnoxious and even offensive. A person might even be justified at raising his voice in frustration when you see a student start to breathe before (probably) making a snarky, loopholing comment.

Please, parents, address this issue with your children if they loophole with you. As stated in a previous post (see Reasoning with the Unreasonable), loopholing can also be an effective way to avoid reality. Not only is it obnoxious and potentially offensive (I believe this is often where individuals on the Spectrum tell people in authority how wrong they are about things), but it can be used as a crutch for avoiding responsibility, and an excuse for being unreasonable.

Friday, November 9, 2012

Anonymity

I got my first email address in 1994. At that time we referred to it as "electronic mail", and this was before you could Google things. In the summer of 1995 I participated in my first chat room discussion. It was a benign, monochrome conversation between myself (sitting in a computer lab at Northern Michigan University) and a college student from UC Irvine. I have no idea what we talked about. I remember she was very much into vampires as these were the early days of Goth culture. Maybe we talked about The Cure (a likely compromise between Goth and Alternative).

In those days, anonymity, security, and internet safety were all the rage. No one used their real name, and asking someone personal information meant you were likely a criminal. An article I read in Slate¹ suggested that the mood of the internet has taken a dramatic turn since everyone who was anyone had an AOL account. Today's Internet seems to be very much about self-promotion and transparency. I Googled some of our students the other day and was able to find not only their real name and some pseudonyms, but pictures, videos, blogs, and addresses. Internet culture has changed in the last 20 years from a mysterious and potentially dangerous place, to a forum for commerce, socializing, and entertainment. It is the new mall.

I am getting ready this week for a presentation to the Orion Parent Teacher Organization on internet and computer use, and what struck me was that the question about internet use for our students is no longer about whether or not they should have a Facebook account. Everyone has an online identity now. A friend just told me that it was not even an option to submit a paper application for a job she wanted. The Internet is established as a fundamental part of our lives and identity. The Internet has become real.

It seems to be more than just Orion students who are struggling with maintaining a positive, productive online identity. I suppose that one solution to the problem of posting pictures of yourself at drunken college party online for future employers to see is that so has all the other people competing for the job you want. The focus for this talk to the PTO is going to be less about safety (still an important thing) but more about prosocial behavior. If the Internet is a real thing, a real community, how can you be an asset to this community?

1

http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/10/15/reddit_troll_violentacrez_outed_by_gawker_when_will_law_enforcement_catch.html

Friday, November 16, 2012

A Real Boy

Last night was the presentation to the PTO on managing one's Internet identity. More than one parent told me "my student doesn't really have an online identity," or, "my child doesn't really care about the Internet." The message that I endeavored to get across is that the Internet has become a necessary thing in today's modern world. Agree or disagree, like it or not, the Internet is here, and it is our job (the adults) to help our students manage it. The Internet is real.

I did not want to pass up the opportunity to send along a couple of the fantastic stories and articles that were unearthed while doing the research for this talk. I mentioned it in the last post, but Gawker's Adrian Chen outed one of the most notorious trolls on the Internet with this article¹. The first part of the article (that describes the troll's activities) is a tough read, but skip to the middle third for a fantastic oration on costs of "anonymous" Internet behavior. One take away message for our students: the more obnoxious and offensive you are, the more people will be motivated to find out who you are and make you answer for your behavior.

This article² was just sent to me. The language is rough and harsh, so I cannot vouch for the delivery, but the message is encouraging. The famous hacker group Anonymous³ took on middle school vigilant justice. Say what you will about Anonymous, but in this case they clearly used their hacker powers for good and stood up for a young girl in need.

Finally, I talked a lot last night about expecting our students to move away from passive, voyeuristic Internet use and move toward making an active and pro-social contribution to the Internet community. This blog⁴ is written by an individual with Asperger's who is doing just that. There are countless other articles, blogs, YouTube channels and forums out there where people are generating high quality and meaningful content. The Internet can be scary, risky and dangerous, but it is also full of humor, information, and beauty. Like it or not, the Internet is free and plentiful, and I encourage parents who have the sense that the Internet is like the Cantina⁵ from Star Wars to take another look and see what the Internet really has to offer their children.

¹ <http://gawker.com/5950981/unmasking-reddits-violentacrez-the-biggest-troll-on-the-web>

² <http://jezebel.com/5960767/anonymous-exposes-bullies-who-encouraged-teen-girlto-commit-suicide>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anonymous_%28group%29

⁴ <http://empowerautismnow.com>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mos_Eisley_Cantina

Friday, November 30, 2012

Don't Look Like an Aspie

This week I tweeted about my Monday (#schlegsmoMonday, if you missed it). It definitely achieved its original purpose in making my day more dynamic. One of the things that made the experience interesting was a response I got to a request for advice. I asked my 48 followers to send along dating advice for the teenagers I am working with. Dating Etiquette was the topic this week for Juniors, and we usually talk about things like how to ask someone on a date and where to go on a first date.

One colorful piece of advice that came from one of my Twitter followers (hello, Sarah) was do not "look like an Aspie". Rather than trying to decide if this statement was offensive, I retweeted it and then asked the students what they thought Sarah meant by this statement. I assure you that this statement was not written in a mean-spirited way, although I certainly understand if someone takes offense to it.

To their credit, it was a line of discussion my students devoured. We talked about "stimming" behaviors, turn taking in conversations, being other-focused, hygiene, internal preoccupation, and a host of other issues that are relevant for building relationships. As expected, the students were able to generate some accurate examples of "Aspie" behavior, but missed others (especially what they look like when they are internally preoccupied).

One take away from my Monday experience is that inviting others into my daily experience, especially in a public format, can make things more messy, less contrived and controlled. The good news is that this serves very nicely the Social Skills Class format, because my goal is to train these students not to do well in Social Skills Class, but the rest of world.

Friday, December 7, 2012

Aspie Dating Advice

Discussion on dating was the most interesting (and least aggravating) aspect of my week. I asked the question to my students, "What are you worried about?" in terms of dating, and a couple interesting things came up. It was not surprising that the vast majority of the beliefs and information our students have about dating comes from TV, movies, and the Internet. One student mentioned the famous "yawn technique" at the movies, another mentioned Players (pronounced "play-ahs"), or guys who intentionally date more than one person at a time. Below is some advice I will offer individuals on the Spectrum who are interested in dating.

Do not expect to or try to kiss your partner on the first date. The kiss is an intimate act, disarming, traditional, and something most people have been looking forward to ever since they started thinking about romance. The First Kiss is a thrilling event for most people, and certainly not a guaranteed exchange on a first date. Trying to decide if your partner is sending you the "go-ahead" (i.e., please kiss me goodnight) for the kiss at the end of the date is more art than science, and a risky activity in 99% of instances. Neurotypicals struggle to read this situation correctly (and are guided mostly by gut or guesswork), so people on the Spectrum will struggle all the more because it is largely an accumulation and synthesis of a huge amount of non-verbal data. Very few, if any of the people you date will fault you for not attempting to kiss them on the first date.

The "having sex on the 3rd date" rule is not a legitimate rule, and not one you should follow. In fact, you should be wary of any timeline being placed on intimate activities. As a culture we tend to move toward physical intimacy much faster than we should. You should know that there are gender differences in the balance between desires for physical intimacy and emotional intimacy, although individual differences within genders do exist. With that said, there is usually a correlation between emotional intimacy and physical intimacy. This balance is very hotly debated by politicians, theologians and clergy, educators, scientists, and average individuals. There is no formula to describe the perfect balance between physical and emotional intimacy. My advice is to find someone who appears to be in a healthy, long-term romantic relationship and ask them how they did it. Sometimes that person will be your parent.

People on the Spectrum need to always be aware that most individuals they choose to date, or would like to date, have "agendas" that they will not tell you about directly. In the Neurotypical world, we call these "games", and the activity is "playing games" when your behavior reflects an agenda you have not explicitly told your partner. Neurotypicals generally accept game playing as normal and acceptable, even though sometimes they will say they dislike it and wish it would end. Your misunderstanding of the games people play in romantic relationships and your general unwillingness or inability to participate in effective game-play can be

both a liability and extremely attractive to your partner. I would not advise you to spend too much time trying to decipher people's agendas, but be aware they exist.

Friday, December 14, 2012

Message to My Students

This week has been a tough one to be a Psychologist at the 'ol Orion Academy. This has mainly been because our students, as a result of approaching finals and the end of the semester, have been steadily and thoroughly freaking out. If people did not experience stress or anxiety from time to time, I would be out of a job, so I do not resent the freaking out. I am actually quite good at managing it, but there are several things that make the management tricky.

I do not know (I'm speaking to my students now) when you are truly overwhelmed or just being over-dramatic, and I know you experience both. Your sensory experience seems to be different enough from mine that I cannot apply my personal experience to your experience. This is important because when you are completely overwhelmed, you need help calming and quieting down. I let you sit quietly in my office, pace around behind a building, go get a coffee from Starbucks, or we listen to music together. When you are being overly-dramatic though, I tell you to pull yourself together, get back in there and fight, or call your parents and suggest they remove the X-Box from your room. If I incorrectly apply one of those interventions (e.g., tell you to get back in there and fight when you really need to climb under a desk and meditate), disaster can occur.

Normally I am quite good at reading a person's non-verbal signals, so I can tell when they say, "A" and really mean, "B (and definitely not A)". People on the Spectrum have a totally different set of non-verbal signals, and a unique and almost idiosyncratic non-verbal language. It usually takes me 6-12 months to learn a Spectrum individual's idiosyncratic non-verbal language. The process gets slowed way down when the individual will not interact with me or socially engage me. It slows down again when the individual is not able to verbally articulate how they are feeling, so I can then connect the language I understand (words) with the one I am learning (your non-verbal language). Parents can often guide me, but sometimes they are at a loss as well.

The main thing I am struggling with, however, is how you interpret my intentions. It is clear to me that you often interpret my misunderstanding of your needs, misreading of your non-verbal cues, or just my disagreement with what you think you need as me opposing you or working against you. This has everything to do with trust, and I know it is hard to earn your trust (based on your diagnosis and past experiences). My main purpose is not to tell you what to do or even help you feel better, it is to acquire your trust, build an alliance with you, and become part of your support structure. None of these are natural activities for many of you, but no one achieves anything useful or meaningful without the help of others.

My plan is to keep forging ahead, despite my moderate progress. I will get better at my job, and better at working with you specifically. If you could cut me some slack,

from time to time, and express appreciation in a way that is easy for me to understand (e.g., say, "thank you"; and it does not even have to be genuine-I probably will not be able to tell), that would go a long way. It really does motivate me to try harder. Say "thanks" to your parents, too, because they have to live with you.

Friday, January 18, 2012

My New Favorite Article

I just wrote an article on the role of money in educating ASD children. You can link to the article here¹. It is published in Special Education Advisor², an online journal to which I subscribe. The title of the publication hopefully explains the content sufficiently. The article has a 2/5 star rating, but that is based on one vote. I still think it is worth a glance.

Lighting Fireworks Inside a Moving Car

One of the (thoughtful, amazing, hilarious) questions I often get when I tell people I am a Psychologist is, "Can you read my mind?" or, more commonly, "Are you analyzing me right now?" I admit that these are great ways to start a conversation and kick off a relationship, but they reference an important concept in working therapeutically with people, and especially ASD adolescents. That issue is one of control, or how much control do I really have over these students.

Often times I can see a pathway for our students that is so clear to me and avoids some of the major, grueling pitfalls of life, that gets immediately rejected by the student for various reasons. My favorites: 1. I (the student) don't like you (me), 2. It wasn't my idea, 3. I'm always right and I disagree with you, so you must be wrong, 4. I can only imagine one possible course, and that ain't it, 5. adolescents intentionally reject good advice so they can gain "real-world experience" for their resume. I get a lot of questions from parents around the issue of how to force their child to stop making questionable decisions, so I know you experience it as well.

Spending seven straight days with 10 ASD students last week on the Winter Trip to Southern California reminded me of the incredible volume of bad decisions these kids make every day. It really is a wonder that they (or any of us) make it out of adolescence and into adulthood at all. Life is tough, and when you stubbornly reject good advice like it is your job, life can seem near-impossible.

Society is designed to tolerate and absorb the vast majority of adolescent decision-making. Being "tried as a juvenile" is a good example of the fail-safes we have in place to account for the questionable decision-making of adolescents. As adults mentoring these adolescents, however, we must adopt a variety of self-help strategies to tolerate the adolescent mind. The most effective technique I use to Zen my way out of madness is to remember how dim-witted I was as an adolescent. Despite my questionable decision-making (e.g., lighting fireworks inside a moving car) I am generally happy with how my life has turned out, and my mother calls me every Sunday to tell me she loves me.

¹ <http://www.specialeducationadvisor.com/why-money-matters>

² <http://www.specialeducationadvisor.com>

Friday, January 25, 2012

Snake-filled Glass Booth

I have been thinking about technology and the Internet a lot recently as it has been a source of conversation quite a bit here at Orion. You may or may not be aware of the fact that Psychologists have a natural fear of the Internet and technology that supports communication (like cell phones). It is very similar to a fear of snakes or heights in level of intensity and absurdity. Psychologists seem to become afraid when they feel like they are losing control of the communication stream. A brilliant technology apologist named Ofer Zur¹ (also a Psychologist) has some interesting things to say about Psychologists and the Internet that inspired my introspections on and claims about the topic. Mostly I realized that the Psychologist part of me had very little to do with the Internet, and this was a problem.

When Psychologists feel like they are losing control over the conversation, they imagine things like being sued for malpractice, losing their license, or being disgraced in the professional community. The Internet becomes like a haunted house to these professionals who expect their years of training and practice to get flushed down the drain with one angry opinion or stray word published on the Internet.

I bring this up because, in the last 10 years, the world has become a snakefilled glass booth at the top of the Empire State Building. My old school and "classic" approach to Psychology is limiting me more and more in the work I do with this adolescent generation. I can no longer justify the abstinence-only approach to online communication.

We, the pre-Internet generation are again forced to reinvent ourselves. The good news is that there are a lot of resources out there (on the Internet) for such a reinvention. For instance, I was sent this website² that promotes gaming as a source of learning for children with learning disabilities. Old Dr. Schlegelmilch would have demanded peer-reviewed proof that these are effective resources. Reinvented Dr. Schlegelmilch is going to personally try out the games to see if he gets smarter. My intern is creating a spreadsheet to track my progress.

¹ <http://www.zurinstitute.com>

² <http://learningworksforkids.com>

Friday, February 1, 2013

Stay Classy

I am a big fan of public speaking. I really like to do public speaking, and I really like listening to people who are good public speakers. Some people build whole careers on their speaking skills. They change minds and hearts with the way they assemble and deliver their words. Good speeches make events, poor speeches break events.

This week we started talking about Graduation Speeches in the Senior Social Skills Class. Every year at Graduation, instead of having a Graduation speaker, the graduating Seniors themselves each have an opportunity to deliver a speech. Most years all students choose to deliver an introspective, meaningful, and highly personal and formal speech to the Orion Community, and every year these speeches are the highlight of the evening. I cannot deny that I find the speeches themselves nerve-racking (I imagine the impulse to flash a double thumbs-up and cartwheel off the stage is intense for these graduates), but each year delivers another batch of show-stoppers.

This is my first year overseeing the speech-writing process though, so I need to be careful about how many disaster-free assurances I make. On Wednesday the class started the discussion about what goes in to a good Graduation speech. Thankfully, the students were able to quickly identify that their speeches should demonstrate gratitude for the efforts made by their parents and teachers. We talked about the purpose of expressing gratitude, and like good adolescents the students were able to identify that gratitude helps people feel good about their work. Teaching and parenting are often described as "thankless professions", and we talked about how saying "thank you" in this speech is very important for inspiring the adults in your life to do good work and keep making efforts to help you.

The other side of expressing gratitude that our students struggle to comprehend is how it makes the speaker look. Students every year ask (facetiously?) if they can swear or point out people who wronged them. I chuckle because I think about the "airing of grievance" time in Frank Costanza's Festivus¹ celebration. People who use the public stage to criticize others and complain often end up hurting their own reputation more than the reputation of those they are criticizing. The same is true for gratitude. Expressing gratitude not only makes people feel good, but it's classy. Stay classy, Seniors.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8g4Ztf7hIM>

Friday, February 8, 2013

That Journey Song about the Circle of Life

I visited The Specialists Guild¹ (TSG) this week. As far as I can tell, (I did not extensively research this next statement) this company is based on an entirely unique concept. Individuals on the Spectrum are recruited to perform computer-based tasks for which they are uniquely skilled. Check out their website for more info. I was invited to speak to their workers during one of their staff meetings, so I decided to have my 11th graders generate a bunch of questions for these workers to ponder and respond to. Then, I would share the answers with the 11th graders who would thank me profusely because they are about to sign up for an Internship this summer, and this will help them feel less anxious about the stresses of the workplace.

My students asked questions such as where the workers ate lunch, how they dressed for work, and how they got along with their co-workers and boss. Standard questions. In addition to getting answers to pressing questions about lunchroom rules, I was hoping the questions would let the TSG workers reflect on their experience. What I have discovered in my time working with the ASD population is that reflection is not an automatic process, like it is for most people. ASD individuals benefit from cued reflection, or being told to think about their experience.

Reflection is an important step in the life process. Reflection allows us to find meaning and purpose and learn from successes and mistakes. I have worked with several ASD teenagers who refuse to talk about a mistake or stressful situation saying, "It's over, it's in the past, there's no point in talking about it." These students unfortunately miss out on one of the greatest learning tools available to humans.

I do not know if the process of reflecting on their experience in order to answer questions for 11th graders was any benefit to the TSG workers, but I had a really fun time talking with them. The 11th graders also now have the chance to benefit from the experience of the ASD counterparts 10 years their senior. I have the Journey song Wheel in the Sky² stuck in my head now. I was told it is about the circle of life. Or, it is a reference to UFOs. Both seem to work in this situation.

¹ <http://specialistsguild.org>

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFC8sDTXlng>

Friday, February 15, 2013

Plagiarism Month

February is plagiarism month at Orion Academy. Writing is a major struggle for most of our students (complex interaction between the Executive Functioning deficits and anxiety), and February is when the biggest paper of the year is due. Interestingly, it was also the month when a famous writer¹ was exposed and sort of apologized for plagiarism. My guess is that the pressures of writing this huge paper make the act of plagiarism more likely for our students, but not necessarily for the reasons you might think.

I like to believe that people who plagiarize are bad people. If given a chance they would also rob banks, steal cars, and give mortgages to people who could not afford them. That may be true for some people who plagiarize, but it certainly is not true for our students (who tend to be the most law abiding group of people you are likely to meet). One reason I think our students plagiarize is they get freaked out about how many pages they have to fill and reason goes out the window. They start cutting and pasting, and soon they have enough words to call a paper. I am sure carelessness also plays a part. In this case, they may plagiarize with as much thought and regret as using bad grammar.

The main reason our students plagiarize is that plagiarism is a complex and hard to understand concept. I gave this prompt in class: "This is a trick question. How many words of a quote must you change before it is no longer plagiarism?" Even with the setup, several of the students ventured a guess. 50% of the words? 75%? One student replied, "Six words per sentence." This last response was my favorite because it illustrates the level of reasoning many of these students are using.

The truth is that it really has nothing to do with the words themselves. Words have no meaning outside what they represent. Words are symbols for ideas. It is the passing off of others' ideas as your own that constitutes plagiarism. Words as symbols was a concept I did not truly understand until college. I fondly remember when it hit me about the role of words in communicating ideas. This is to say that our students could still benefit from continued discussions on plagiarism that go beyond discussions of consequences. There is room yet for understanding.

My new favorite plagiarism story is of a student who would take quotes, put them into a translator (like Google Translate²) and translate the quote into another language like Chinese or Hebrew. He would then take the translated text and put it back in to the translator and translate it back to English. Because of the slight variations each translation would cause in voice, specific words, and even grammar, the final product in English would look almost nothing like the original. It would also not trip any alarms on the websites dedicated to searching for plagiarized content. The student was found out though because in all the translation iterations

the original quote had lost both coherence and meaningfulness. We thought the student had a different, major learning disability.

¹http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/02/jonah_lehrer_apology_standard_operating_procedures_cant_fix_arrogance_and.html

² <http://translate.google.com>

Friday, February 22, 2013

The Screen Blankly

We have more than one student at Orion who spends much of the school day staring at their computer screen, inactive, immobile, completely dependent on the teacher to rouse them or get them to do work. My guess is that more than half of our students, if left alone with no entertainment options (no internet, games, TV, etc.) would stare at a wall and be relatively content to do so, for long periods of time. It is clearly a Spectrum thing and not a lazy thing; but I can only stare at the wall for about a minute before I get antsy. I need something to happen, I need to be productive, I need to do something. Most of us I am sure feel the same way. What is going on in their brain? The truth is, we can never know, but here is some of my guesses.

Students staring at the ground and smiling to themselves report (when asked) that they are replaying a TV show in their head. You might have seen the character Abed¹ on Community. He's supposed to have Asperger's, and this is what he often reports doing. Abed says he prefers the show in his mind to reality. In this scenario there are at least two plausible options. First, like Abed claims, my students could be replaying a show in real-time, in a linear pattern (beginning to end), using their mind's eye as the screen. And why not? We know our students have fantastic memories. This seems plausible, but what I think is more likely is they choose bits of a "program" to replay. I suspect these "bits" are not very long (1-5 seconds) and they play in a loop, hypnotically. This "skipping record" recitation is similar to a problem solving strategy this population often uses called serial processing where the needle skips back to the beginning when it encounters the dilemma (scratch). This skipping record can show up in speech too. A type of hypnosis is a possible result (like staring at the white lines on a straight section of highway).

An item about people with Asperger's that can freak out the unsuspecting therapist is the existence of an extensive and highly developed internal fantasy world. Some of my students talk about vivid planets, characters, and stories associated with their fantasies. They draw pictures about them, talk about them, and in other ways manifest the fantasy world in their minds that they have been developing since they were little children. This freaks out therapists because the detail these individuals express about their fantasy worlds resembles hallucinations, which means something else all together. They are not hallucinations though, they are fantasies, and extensively developed fantasy worlds are not uncommon in this population. I think our students go there sometimes when they are stressed or bored, or simply out of habit. It can look like they are staring at a screen blankly, but really it becomes a physical backdrop of their fantasy world. Consequently, in cases like these, kids need to be trained out of the habit of switching in to this world.

I am sure there are also cases when students are worried or angry about something and rehearse an excuse or accusation, think something someone said to them, or go

over lists of people who have wronged them, or any number of cognitions or thoughts. I have found that they benefit from the help of an adult to refocus on the physical, external world and get to work. Eventually they can develop strategies to make that shift on their own.

¹ http://community-sitcom.wikia.com/wiki/Abed_Nadir

Friday, March 1, 2013

Internet Use for Asperger's

This may be a short post. I am teaching a Continuing Education class at JFK University today, and someone in the class brought up the issues of the Internet and Asperger's Syndrome. The question was about how to manage the dangers of the Internet and how to do social skills training around Internet management. The risks for this population are clear: victimization, compulsive behaviors, trolling behaviors, etc. There are plenty of things I think parents can do to help their kids stay safe on the Internet (e.g., have all of their passwords and check their posting regularly, etc.), but I wanted to mention some of the benefits of the Internet for this population.

Our kids have special interests. Some of them are so special they are oddly specific and non-typical. Where better to find a group of like-minded individuals than the Internet? One of my students the other day did a brilliant presentation on Fandom¹, or the idea of building a community around the notion of being a fan of something. In this way our students find lots of people (Spectrum and NTs) who are interested in the thing they are interested in, and they interact with these people in a strange but appropriate way.

Another benefit of the Internet is that the way communication is managed fits our children's needs much better than a face to face encounter. Much of the non-verbals associated with communication are eliminated for everyone (NT and AS both), and speed of the conversation is more easily controlled and managed. The Internet can give our students a sense of agency and control in discussions they cannot have in face-to-face interactions.

I have said this before, but the Internet is here, like it or not. The effective therapists and parents seem to be those who are moving away from the "Internet is a dangerous place" mentality and toward the "Let's manage this wonderful thing" thinking. I disclosed to the class that I no longer advocate for keeping our students away from the Internet. Yes to limited access. No to restricted access.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fandom>

Monday, March 18, 2013

Where has the Doctor Been?

I have been on paternity leave for the past couple weeks. This is our first baby, so it is back to the drawing board for everything I thought I knew about kids. Things are going well though and I will be back to work (and back to blogging) next week. Stay tuned.

Friday, March 29, 2013

The Movie Version

I am back at work this week, and I was just in time to participate in a brainstorming session focused on getting our students to be more consistent about reading their literature books at home (i.e., doing homework). This is a surprisingly complicated problem that involves issues like reading comprehension, fluency, organizational skills, empathy and identification with the main character, motivation, etc., etc. One of the (possibly frustrated) teachers said, "They [the students] don't even try to hide the fact that they don't read the text. When I [the teacher] didn't read in high school, I would at least read the Cliff's Notes¹ version so I could hide the fact I didn't read."

This got me thinking. It is not the case that all NT high schoolers read their literature books, and our ASD students do not. Nobody does their work perfectly and completes it on time all the time. The difference between NT high schoolers and our students in this regard is not always one of differential productivity, it is sometimes one of effective use of shortcuts, covering one's tracks, and hiding the reality of your shortcomings. As a group, ASD students are generally bad at taking effective shortcuts and covering their tracks when they screw up.

Even though honesty is the best policy, this inability or unwillingness to mitigate failure is a problem. Even though no one is perfect in their work, and we can all say, "Nobody's perfect," when we screw up, we tend to apply a different, more strict standard when it is not us. Most people (especially bosses and teachers) have expectations for others that they do not apply to themselves. This is human nature. We instead learn to soften the blow of our failures. We learn to quickly look up the SparkNotes² of the Scarlet Letter while the teacher is searching in her bag for the quiz you are about to take on Chapter 1 (that you did not read).

My contribution to the brainstorming session might have been better left unsaid, but I suggested we teach a class in common shortcuts in literature class (i.e., picking the "right" teacher, watching the movie³, etc.). We are, after all, a college prep high school.

¹ <http://www.cliffsnotes.com>

² <http://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/the-scarlet-letter/chapter-1>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5BzDVDotzI>

Friday, April 12, 2013

Shrinkage

Shrinkage¹ is a statistical term I learned (and promptly stopped understanding) in college, but it applies (in a very nerdy way) to what Orion is experiencing currently. Most programs I am intimately or peripherally involved with seem to be shrinking. The Bridge to College program got postponed for a year and the 8th Grade Program is put on hold for several years. I continue to experience difficulty getting students interested in and signed up for Winter Abroad, our academic scholarship, and the Summer Program offerings that are designed specifically for Orion students (the other offerings are doing great, by the way). The initial interest that prompted the creation of these programs (the original dataset; see the link above) seems to have experienced shrinkage when the programs are up and running and there for the taking (the new dataset).

Examining the ebb and flow of programming is just one way to evaluate the health of an institution. The fact is, Orion remains healthy. For example, even with putting our 8th Grade Program on hold, our census remains high. Applications for our high school more than made up for the loss of a whole class.

Our students also struggle with the mechanics of self-assessment. Many of my students judge their performance at Orion exclusively by their grades. Minor percentage changes in any particular class can be the sole source of pride or despair when thinking about progress. It has been my sometimes Sisyphean² goal to get students to look at other correlates of progress. I encourage them to listen to the feedback they get from teachers in class, judge their current percentage by their previous percentage in the same class, look at how long their homework is now taking them vs. how long it used to take them. There are many sources of information about progress and I want my students to engage all of them.

This is, however, part of the disability. Gathering data from multiple sources and then integrating the data into a summary (we call this process "synthesis") is an ongoing issue. Problems with synthesis are expressed not just in self-assessment, but in reading comprehension, social skills, planning and other organizational tasks, and beyond. The first step, however, is getting the students to believe that reality could be anything other than what they think it is based on their simple (and often inadequate) assessment. Parents out there will know that getting an ASD student to admit that they might be wrong or could possibly be wrong can be a Sisyphean task all its own.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrinkage_%28statistics%29

² <http://sisyphean>

Friday, May 3, 2013

Bullying in the Age of Sophistication

The "Bullying Card". If you want to take an argument or conflict to the next level, drop the Bullying Card. Suggest that you are being bullied or accuse someone of bullying you and you will see an immediate change in the social atmosphere of that conversation. The reason for this change is that bullying is an intensely serious activity that is linked to several negative mental health and physical health outcomes. I am happy to report that it the general public now sees bullying as the intensely negative and destructive activity that the mental health and educational worlds have been claiming it is for a long time now. The message seems to be getting through.

There appears, however, to be some confusion around what bullying is, and when to use the term. Like a baby learning a new word, I see the word bullying being thrown about a fair amount and misapplied. I am certain other experts have a more thorough explanation, but I explain to our students that bullying exists when there is a significant power differential (one person is noticeably more powerful [physically, socially, technologically, etc.] than the other). Bullying behavior is intentional (it may or may not be methodical). And bullying is uni-directional (negative behavior is always directed from the aggressor to the target; this is why standing up to bullies can sometimes stop the bullying).

Why do I care that you know this? False Negatives (saying someone is not being bullied when they actually are) used to be the main problem. Bullied children went unidentified, and serious consequences of this were often the result (and the clue that they were being bullied). Thankfully, more bullying seems to be correctly identified and shut down compared to the past (I do not have data on this, this is my observation). False Positives (saying someone is being bullied when they are not), however, is becoming a new problem. Because of our increased focus on bullies and shutting them down, falsely labeling someone a bully is like setting off a mini social explosion. In many of these cases, the behavior parents are describing is not bullying, but teasing, or kids being mean to each other (bi-directional negative behavior among equally powerful kids or groups). In most of these cases that I investigate, it is often the case that kids are being insufficiently supervised (at school, home, or elsewhere). This is happening with surprising frequency on internet-based interactions where parents seem to be struggling to apply effective supervision.

Just this morning I heard a report¹ that a new law being proposed gives parents more control over their children's information posted online. In our hope and excitement at seeing our children become more independent (especially with online socializing), let's not forget that they remain relatively unsophisticated human beings. They are still teens gifted with a biological imperative to make dumb decisions.

1 <http://www.kesq.com/news/ca-bill-gives-parents-control-of-childrens-social-networking-sites/-/233092/19992078/-/fbidblz/-/index.html>

Friday, May 10, 2013

Senior Roast

Another first for me this year, I attended the annual Senior Roast. It used to be just Senior Dinner, a time to acknowledge in a small group setting the end of a high school career, and the beginning of college, vocation, and adult life. It has since morphed in to a Roast where students invite a teacher of their choice to roast them, or essentially poke fun at them in front of a group. Like the Senior Challenge, the Roast is a rite of passage that kids anticipate with both excitement and trepidation. For that reason, I spend a lot of time prepping the students, encouraging them to choose their teacher wisely. We also talk about the difference between playful and hurtful teasing, the purpose of a roast, why someone would ever agree to be roasted, and different kinds of roasts.

Despite all of this prep work, and the great pains taken by the staff every year to not go "too far" (they are, after all, still kids), students sometimes get offended. This should not be a surprise to us though. Here's what I think about this:

Our students are egocentric. I am using this term in the clinical (not moral) sense. Their reference on the world is from the inside to the outside; they are at the center. A lot of the time our students do not even realize they are being observed, or that people can see them. More than once at the roast a student is surprised a teacher mentions some quirk because they thought they had successfully hidden this quirk all along. Most of these surprises reveal fairly obvious quirks.

Our students have humor delays. Most of our students think puns are extremely funny, the top of the humor pyramid. Some have discovered, but few have mastered sarcasm. The level of humor sophistication needed to enjoy being roasted (i.e., the ability to laugh at oneself) is a high level of humor, and one that some adults have not achieved.

Our students lack relevant social experience. For many of our students, the only experience they have being teased is the mean, bullying kind. I think I spent most of high school playfully teasing and being playfully teased by my friends. Many of our students have steered clear of teasing completely because of problems differentiating between the two kinds, and thus have limited experience with the good kind-the kind of teasing that actually builds relationships.

Our students can struggle with trust. Most people know that the goal of a parent is to love and support you, so even if they do something you find offensive, you can let it go more easily because you know they love you. How about a teacher? I cannot tell you how much time I spend trying to convince students that Orion teachers are not out to get them. Not only are these good people, but they are paid to teach you and have nothing to gain from tormenting you.

I know this can read as a list of deficits, but I want to also highlight that the Senior Roast was thoroughly enjoyable (I laughed almost the whole time), and most of the students had a great time. It is a gratifying activity for me to watch these individuals transform from children to adults. That transformation is certainly one of the perks of this job.

Tuesday, June 11, 2013

Summer Plans

My reader might be wondering what happened to the end of the year post(s). Orion, its students, and this Psychologist have had another successful year. Another batch of youngsters are “unleashed” on an unsuspecting world. Another group of kids go into hibernation for the next two and a half months (against my recommendations, of course).

There are some neat things happening this summer at Orion. The Juniors are already a week-deep into their summer internships. In reading the clinical notes and talking with the program supervisors I am again struck by the power of this internship program to highlight strengths and weaknesses, and provide specific, direct interventions to actual (non-theoretical) issues the children face in a workplace. Before you read this and think "I could do that (i.e., get my kid an internship this summer)," let me assure you the amount of expertise and leg-work that goes in to setting up and maintaining these internships in a way that creates a positive experience for both the student and the internship host is staggering. Our internship supervisors have my admiration for their abilities and fortitude.

The other Doctor and I will be running the Anxiety Management Camp, starting in less than a week. We have made this an outing-based camp because we found we can get faster and more stable behavioral change, and have more fun while doing it, when we get out of the classroom and in to the streets, so to speak. I am happy to be able to move from an (boring) administrative position where I "oversee" the clinical work, to actually doing the clinical work again. It has been several years since I have run this camp on a day-to-day basis, so I think this way will be more fun. You may remember, from Twitter last year that I painted my office during this time. The office now looks nice, but it also turns out that I am moving offices this summer. I will not be painting the new office (if I can stand it).

Finally, the content from this humble blog has grown into a humble book idea. I sold a book to a publisher a couple weeks ago, and just in time for summer. This shall be the Summer of Writing for Dr. Schlegelmilch. It is a parenting book for teens on the Spectrum (written to parents of teens, not teens who are becoming parents). The book is scheduled to be in print by the middle of 2014, so until that time, you can just ask me parenting advice. Writing something book-length has long been a goal of mine, and I am happy that someone is giving me a chance. So far I am enjoying the process, and most days I have to force myself to stop writing and pay attention again to my family.

Have a nice summer. Please, do not let your kids sleep all day and play video games and watch TV. Make them at least mow the lawn or something. I plan to be back writing the blog in the fall.