Autism in the Classroom

Local schools are working to accommodate the growing number of autistic kids in class, and some interventions are working

By Siarah Myron

Only 10 years ago, at the beginning of the "autism epidemic," the world was a very different place. When her son Josh was diagnosed, Amy Finkel did not know what autism was, but she knew something was wrong when her son had stopped talking by the age of 2.

"I remember the doctor saying, 'It's like he'll be retarded. You'll probably have to institutionalize him.'"

After the initial shock of the diagnosis wore off, the Finkels immersed themselves in gathering all the information they needed to prove that Josh could indeed be educated. Discovering that there was research showing good results with applied behavioral analysis (ABA), they got trained in ABA and hired five therapists for an intensive 40-hour-a-week home program. Because of their persistence, Josh has made tremendous gains. But Amy admits that they're lucky because of their financial security.

"It's extremely expensive to run an intensive therapy program," she says. "There's no insurance funding."

Dawn Sidell, who created the Northwest Autism Center with Dr. Peter Holden in 2003, says early intervention is a big issue for many Washington families, who are frustrated by the state's lack of action. It's also become a bigger issue for schools, which have many students with some form of autism. In Idaho, Sidell explains, families can access Medicaid coverage for three years of intensive behavioral therapy for kids with autism, regardless of their income.

Autism is a medical mystery. Individuals with severe autism live in a strange inner world where their nervous systems do not process outside stimuli correctly, causing a jumble of overwhelming sensations from which they may try to escape by "stimming" — flapping or rocking their bodies.

Autism is not a single disorder, but a spectrum, falling under the even larger umbrella of pervasive developmental disorders. It can look very different from child to child. Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) can manifest as severe mental impairment and inability to communicate (low-functioning) to Asperger's syndrome, a form of high-functioning autism in which the only noticeable symptom is impaired social skills.

While we know that autism is a neurological disorder that affects many parts of the brain, it's not known what causes these abnormalities. Researchers are currently busy inspecting donated brain tissues of autistic individuals, looking for "autism genes" and testing a wide range of hypotheses, including environmental factors, impaired immune system response and mercury poisoning from MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccines. There are no easy answers, as a variety of factors — hereditary and environmental — appear to be at work, creating a complex puzzle.

Adding to the mystery, autism spectrum disorders are increasing at an alarming rate. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of children classified as having an ASD has increased six-fold since the mid 1990s.

"I think some of it is attributed to better diagnosis," says Dawn Sidell, executive director at the Northwest Autism Center in Spokane. "But I've talked to teachers who have been teaching for 25 to 30 years, and they'll tell me that back then they had maybe one kid every five years who had those kinds of behaviors. Now they're getting two or three per year."

With the rising number of children with ASDs, schools have had to meet the numerous challenges of educating kids who also often need expensive services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and one-on-one aides to survive in a school setting.

Though inadequate funding is often an issue, "school districts are responding by having different types of programs to try to help fit the kids instead of trying to put the kids into programs that may not fit them," explains Liz Pechous, an intervention specialist in the Spokane Public Schools and a child psychologist at the Inland Center for Autism and Related Disorders (ICARD).

Pechous works with school officials to help them recognize the signs of autism and learn how to make the school day go as smoothly as possible for kids on the autism spectrum.

"For some kids a fire drill going off is enough to send them over the edge," she says. "We've got to think outside the box."

Pechous says that for kids with high-functioning autism and Asperger's, survival in a typical school environment gets harder as they become older. She explains that all kids on the spectrum thrive on routine and have trouble relating to others socially, making it difficult for them to function in an atmosphere where they must change classes every hour and deal with different teachers and classmates.

Those with high-functioning autism and Asperger's will often have typical academic achievement but "regard the social curriculum as a hidden curriculum." Pechous thinks of it like this: "It would be like putting us in a foreign country and we don't understand the language."

Autism By the Numbers

- As many as one out of 166 children born in the United States has some form of autism
- Nearly 1.5 million Americans have some form of autism
- Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability, with an annual growth rate of about 15 percent
- Boys with autism outnumber girls by 4 to 1
- The cost of lifelong autism care can be reduced by two-thirds with early diagnosis and intervention.

Source: Autism Society of America

Dawn Sidell, co-founder of the NW Autism Center. [Bestrix Danko photo]
and now you have to try to survive.

In her private clinical practice, Pechous sees many teens suffering with depression because of their inability to fit in with their peers. “There is a desire to connect with other people but they are not sure how to do that,” she says.

Dr. Mark Derby, also a clinical child psychologist, has had a similar experience. “Those are the kids who are coming in my door now,” he says. “Kids who are being diagnosed at 11 or 12 years old as Asperger’s or high-functioning autism. They have depression, anxiety disorders and all the stuff that comes with it.

“That is going to be a big area of concern in the public school system very soon,” Derby continues. “The same way we changed our preschool programs, now we are probably going to have to do a re-thinking of what we mean by social skills programs.”

Amy Finkel is busy preparing for her son Josh’s entrance into middle school, which she describes as “the giant vacuum of special education.” There are a lot of early intervention programs for young kids and transition programs for high school kids, but many school districts do not provide services for kids with autism during middle school. That is why she is going to move Josh to a different school district next year, one that can provide better services than the one he is in now.

But Finkel is looking even further into the future as well. “Josh is going to be an adult in society a lot longer than he is going to be a kid at school,” she says. With this in mind, Finkel is going to open a group home in the very near future designed for young adults with autism.

“This is a big deal,” she states, “because there are not any homes specifically for adults with autism on the West Coast.” She explains that it is important for autistic adults to live somewhere with knowledgeable staff who will continue to support their language and social skills development, because without practice they will lose all the abilities they acquired at school.

It is clear that people with autism can learn, and the sooner they start, the better the outcome. Of course funding is always a challenge when it comes to providing services to those with special needs.

“I wish money was no object,” says Pechous. “You could create anything if you had endless amounts of money. But in the public school system, there are limited funds, and you need to try to make it work.”

Since autism occurs in so many different forms, it’s hard to make generalizations, but, as Sreed says, “appropriate educational intervention seems to be the constant that helps all of them. Due to increased awareness, we have seen kids who nobody thought could do anything go on to do all kinds of wonderful things.”

You can reach the Northwest Autism Center at (509) 328-1582 or on the Web at www.nwautism.org.

Why can’t Johnny and Janie stay awake during school?

As Tommy nods off at his desk for the third time today, various studies scream the news from other desks all across the country.

The message?

Teens need a good eight to 10 hours of sleep every night once their sleep patterns change after puberty. According to the National Sleep Foundation’s (NSF) 2006 poll, nearly half of the nation’s teens aren’t getting that amount due to a slowly accelerating wave of culturally and technologically driven distractions. Sleep deprivation is eating away at their performance in school and the quality of their life in general.

“I see so many more students sleeping in class than I remember anyone daring to do when I was in class,” says 29-year-old Jessica Knudsen, an English teacher at Rogers High School. “I read so many journal entries about staying up the night before.

Late-night socializing, video games, the computer, cell phones and a multitude of school activities consume the weeknights of teenagers — time that could be spent sleeping. More than a quarter of high school students said they had fallen asleep at school at least once a week in the past two weeks, when they took NSF’s poll.

Once children enter puberty, sleep patterns change. They begin to favor later bedtimes and later mornings. With school bells going off at 8 am or earlier across the country, getting out of bed for some teens is like a bad dream.

“That’s one of the difficult things that you’ll hear parents say: ‘My child stays up late but he doesn’t want to get up in the morning,’” says sleep technologist Elizabeth Hurd of the Sleep Institute of Spokane. In fact, some schools have pushed their start time an hour later in the morning to better fit the natural schedule of a teen’s brain.

Those schools have seen marked improvements in grades and attentiveness.

So why do teens need more shuteye than other age groups? The body needs a nice long stretch of sleep in general for all kinds of rest and nourishment to take place, but teens’ young bodies are special. They are growing mentally, physically and neurologically, creating a need for growth hormones, which are only produced during the deepest, most restful stage, “delta” sleep called.

“Hormones, especially growth hormones, are secreted in that time of sleep,” says Hurd. “So it’s important that they be in that [delta] stage so they can complete their bone growth.”

But that’s just one reason teens need to hit the sack longer.

“Lack of sleep also affects how well teenagers think, such as decision-making and problem solving; those things that are crucial for learning,” according to Dr. Jodi Mindell of St. Joseph’s University in an interview with the National Sleep Foundation. “Teens who do not get enough sleep are more likely to be moody and irritable. They are not going to function as well at school.”

Overextended teens will have to exercise some discipline to make sure they get their zzz’s — maybe even cutting back on frenetic social lives and making sensible choices about how much time they allocate to after-school jobs and sports. When it comes to the electronic distractions — computers, cell phones, and televisions — hitting the “off” button could be the best thing.

It’s really not impossible and if it helps teens stay awake in class, it will gladden the hearts of teachers everywhere.