



Special Needs Assistants Group Ltd.

NEWSLETTER

Fifteenth Edition April 2012

www.snagroup.ie

A quick word from Karen and Maria

A big "Hello" to all you hard working Special Needs Assistants reading this newsletter. It has been another busy term for everyone, including ourselves at SNA Group.

"Understanding & Managing Challenging Behaviour" was our latest seminar. It was very well attended and received. We have been evaluating your responses and are delighted with the results.

More than three quarters of the respondents rated the content of the day as being either **80% or 100% useful** to you, in the work that you do every day in supporting so many children in Ireland who have special educational needs.

We also asked you to circle words to describe the day. The words most commonly chosen were *Interesting, Well Presented, Helpful, Practical* and *Valuable*.

We are delighted with this response and are working to get Dr. Fergus Heffernan back for the "Sixth Annual SNA Group Conference". Dr. Heffernan delighted and stimulated everyone with his insights on the dynamic of the relationships between us and those we live and work with. Typical of the feedback: Fergus was "both fascinating and life changing, (should have a seminar on his own) brilliant!!" or "absolutely loved Dr. Heffernan-would listen to him all day!" Details of the conference will follow soon and it's expected to be held in early July.

In the meantime you can read and enjoy an article from Fergus in this newsletter. We have also included an article from the Dyspraxia Association and one from Linda Hodgdon, whose excellent website is just brimming with ideas on how to improve your communication skills for more effective interaction with students with many kinds of special educational need.

We have revamped our website, www.snagroup.ie and everyone who is a registered member of SNA Group can get access to the bonus section of the website using the following :

Username: RSNA Password: rainbow.



It's great news that the DES now recognises the importance of "Continuous Professional Development" for Special Needs Assistants. (See article below)

[Circular 0071/2011 and its implications for training for SNAs](#)

Many Special Needs Assistants are enquiring about the latest circular 0071/2011 from the Department of Education & Skills and particularly its implications for training hours undertaken by SNAs.

It is stated in the circular that the previous arrangements regarding the 12 days that SNAs may be required to work has now been adjusted under the Croke Park agreement. Instead SNAs are required to be available for 72 hours of work or training, outside their normal working duties and hours. The circular specifically mentions training and education as a legitimate use of the hours. The circular states this training can be nationally or school mandated, while also saying that "the 72 hours can be designated at the sole discretion of school management".

This means that if SNAs identify a training event /seminar that they feel will contribute to their continuous professional development (CPD), the SNA should bring this training to the attention of the school Principal. The Principal will decide with the board of management if this training, meets the needs of the school and SNA. No SNA should undertake a training event on the presumption that this training will be recognised by the school for the purposes of fulfilling their 72 "Croke Park Hours" without checking with the Principal. There is no mention in the circular of who will pay for funding, but in practice many schools pay for CPD training (often through the SESS (Special Education Support Service)).

Of course all circulars are open to different interpretations and any SNA who wants advice on the various approaches being taken by schools to this circular can contact either Impact Trade Union 01 817 1500 or <http://www.impact.ie/iopen24/> or Siptu Education Sector Organiser: Brendan Cunningham(01) 8588248 or bcunningham@siptu.ie

How well do I know me?



Many of us go through life with just the prescribed script without ever understanding ourselves and subsequently never achieving our own true full potential. If you take it that on average as a population we go through 8 years of Primary school education, six years of Secondary school education, and on average 2 years in Third level education. That's 16 years in the education system. In all of those 16 years how much did you learn about you? Very little I would suggest. In our Irish culture we have a poor understanding of anxiety, a very poor relationship with loss, and no relationship at all with breath. And, yet these three areas are the cornerstone of all our difficulties in life.

If you think about it, for the nine months before you were born you were cocooned in your mother's womb where in the main every need was met, every care was nurtured, you had to think about or worry about nothing. After nine months you arrived into mother earth someone cut the cord and everything changed in that first minute. The first thing that happened was that you took your first breath, which gave you life and will continue for evermore to give you life until you take your last breath, so it is probably fair to say that breath plays a significant role in our journey through life. How much did you learn about breathing in your first 16 years of formal education? In 1932 Otto Warberg won the Nobel Prize for Medicine, in addressing cellular oxygen deprivation he proved that lack of oxygen is a significant cause of cancer. 90 years on from that, at a time where the World Health Organisation

only last week told us that here in Ireland, cancer will have increased by 100% by the year 2020, we still have no proper understanding and teaching around breath in our education system.

The second event that occurred in that first minute of your life (after you took your first breath) was the fact that you suffered your first loss in life, the loss of all your needs being met automatically in the womb. And, then following on immediately from that first loss you suffered your first bout of anxiety and you cried to get a need met. The truth is that in that very first minute you learned that when you have a need to be met, if you go straight to behaviour (a baby cries) you might get that need met. For many of us that becomes the story of our life afterwards. Having needs, not being able to name those needs, getting anxious and going to a learned set of behaviours to try to get these unnamed needs met.

To be well within ourselves in life is actually a very simple process. We are very simple creatures, with very simple needs, and can survive on very little. However, we have managed to make life very complicated and complex. Nothing is simple anymore. Everything from Banking to Social Welfare, from filling in forms for grants, to trying to get to speak to somebody in the gas phone or electricity services has now become so complex with a myriad of form filling, and being put on hold. We really have lost that personal touch and this has led to a lot of isolation and loneliness.

However do not be disenchanted. The greatest gift you possess is the gift of "YOU". If you just learned to stop. Take a few breaths, value yourself and, understand yourself, you actually have all the gifts and resources to survive life within yourself.

You are your own healer, everything you need is within you, the body has the most amazing ability to heal itself. Just learn to take a breath and stop and learn to trust the moment, because whatever you are feeling at that moment it always passes. Learn to have a relationship with "you"; it is well worth it because if you can learn to relate to "you", then relating to the people and the world around you will be very easy.

WELLNESS IS IN THE DOING; IT IS IN THE NOT DOING WE WON'T BE WELL.

Dr Fergus Heffernan.



Insistence on Sameness: How do people with autism handle change?

One of the classic signs of autism is insistence on "Sameness". That can be manifest in a variety of ways. One of the classics is lining up toys in a certain order. Sometimes it means following rules or routines to the point of obsession. Sometimes, in those situations, even accidentally making a change in daily routines, like bathing or driving to school, can be met with a strong behavioural response or tantrums or more.

Of course, the most important word in Autism Spectrum Disorders is the word Spectrum. Because of that spectrum, there are huge variations in how individuals manage sameness vs. change. Some may be more mild. Some severe.

Many of us don't handle change well

How do YOU handle change? I'm one of those people who will order the same item on the menu at whatever restaurant I go to. In contrast, my friend, Jean, loves the unusual and searches out whatever is special or different to try.

Grandma heats a cup of hot water in a pot on the stove even though the microwave is sitting right next to it. It wouldn't occur to her that it would be easier to use the microwave because she has used the stove option for 78 years.

Most of us can point to places in our lives where that insistence on sameness provides clarity or comfort.

Here's what's different about autism

Sometimes people will say that the things individuals with autism do are the same as "neurotypical" people. The difference is in the degree or the amount. (I watched my two year old granddaughter playing not long ago. She was putting a bunch of toys in a line. That doesn't mean it was time to evaluate for an autism diagnosis. But if she did that as a continual, obsessive routine, it would be something to pay attention to.)

You and I may do the same things a person with autism does, but the person with autism may have less ability to adjust. Another way to think about it is that they can't cope or compensate or be as flexible as others.

The question is WHY?

Why is this insistence on sameness such a defined characteristic in autism? We don't have all the answers to this question. Perhaps it's a way to feel in control. Perhaps these behaviours provide a form of comfort or soothing. I think there is less stress when certain things in life happen the same way all the time.

The most important question is "what to do?" Having some ideas about how to manage that insistence on sameness can be useful. Here are a few thoughts:

1. *Decide if the targeted behaviour is something that needs to change*

A behaviour that affects the individual himself or herself is different from something that controls a whole family or a whole classroom. It's important to "pick your battles." Honestly evaluate what is important.

2. *Teach NEW routines*

One of my classic Linda Hodgdon quotes is, "It's easier to teach a new routine than it is to change an old behaviour." Sometimes you can achieve good success by teaching a new routine, starting from the very beginning, so the student will learn a new way to manage or respond or do something.

3. *Find replacements or create change*

One way to manage difficult behaviours or situations is to replace something. When you are teaching a new routine, replace something that automatically creates change in the undesirable routine. Use a new object, change locations, change what happens before or after those difficult behaviours,

4. *Give information*

Give information in a visual form. When you give a student visual information about what is going to happen, what is changing, or how to do something differently, that can often provide just the "twist" to help that student adjust. You can visually show them when they can do something and when it is not allowed. Giving them visual choices can help change an obsessive routine.

Here's the goal - It's important to look at the function of those behaviours that we put under the label of Insistence on Sameness. Do they provide something important for the student? Can that be modified? Can it be substituted? Does it really need to be eliminated? More of this and less of that.

Temple Grandin wrote (<http://autismdigest.com/past-issues/April>) that when she was young, she was allowed to "stim" for an hour a day and that helped her calm down. Then the rest of the time she was required to "keep my brain turned on."

Sometimes the answer to insistence on sameness, obsessions, rituals and related behaviours is "more of this and less of that" management. Considering that, perhaps the real change occurs when WE begin to look at behaviours differently and WE develop some flexibility in how we handle them.

Linda Hodgdon is the author of the best seller, *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication*. To learn more or to sign up for her FREE E-newsletter, visit www.UseVisualStrategies.com



What is Dyspraxia?

Some children, despite adequate teaching, a stimulating environment and generally normal intellect, have difficulty with movement and specific aspects of learning. Dyspraxia is a difficulty with thinking out, planning and carrying out sensory/motor tasks.

How can Dyspraxia be recognised?

The child with dyspraxia may have a combination of several problems in varying degrees. These may include:

- Poor balance
- Poor fine and gross motor co-ordination
- Poor posture
- Difficulty with throwing and catching a ball
- Poor awareness of body position in space
- Poor sense of direction
- Difficulty hopping, skipping or riding a bike
- Sensitive to touch
- Confused about which hand to use
- Intolerance of having hair or teeth brushed, nails and hair cut
- Slow to learn to dress or feed themselves
- Find some clothes uncomfortable
- Difficulty with reading, writing
- Speech problems – slow to learn to speak and speech may be incoherent
- Phobias or obsessive behaviour and impatient

Children with dyspraxia can be of average or above average intelligence but are often behaviourally immature. They try hard to fit in to socially accepted behaviour when at school but often throw tantrums when at home. They may find it difficult to understand logic and reason.

Not all children with Dyspraxia have all of these problems. Many parents will say that their children have some of these problems but if your child has dyspraxia, either diagnosed or not, you may have observed a cluster of difficulties.

What do children with Dyspraxia need?

Children with Dyspraxia benefit most from one-to-one therapy. They need the support of qualified professionals on a regular basis to help them reach their full potential. Children with Dyspraxia need support and understanding in the educational system.

What does the family of a child with Dyspraxia need?

The challenges presented by living with a child with dyspraxia frequently go unrecognised outside the immediate family unit. In addition to the normal stresses and strains of raising a family in today's society, families of children with dyspraxia cope daily with their child's ongoing frustration at their own limitations.

They also cope with the demand and strain of constant teaching. Families must also deal with their child being misunderstood by the general community and in the educational system.

What families need most is for dyspraxia to be better understood and recognised. With greater awareness, both professionals and the general community could respond to the needs of families in a more supportive way by providing adequate therapy, adequate support in the educational system and practical support to families.

What about the future?

Dyspraxia is not curable. However, prognosis is hopeful in that the child will improve in some areas with growing maturity. Children can be helped to a large extent with the appropriate treatment to overcome the continuing problems which they may face.

About the Dyspraxia Association of Ireland

The Dyspraxia Association of Ireland provide access to assessment and therapy intervention, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, drama therapy, educational psychology assessments, counselling, speech and language therapy, activities such as horse riding, football, drama and many more to members. The association also provides a teen and young adult support group network for social interaction and activities.

For further information please contact:-

The Dyspraxia Association of Ireland

Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Telephone: 01 8747085

Email: info@dyspraxia.ie

