Local Support and Parent Training for Families of Children with Autism

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In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported new data on the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and identified 1 in 68 children as having ASD. The number of individuals diagnosed with autism each year continues to be at a concerning level with referrals to agencies for home-based services and family supports also increasing exponentially. Despite the increased numbers and growing supports available, many parents still face a confusing and often stressful journey to find the right help for their family. Moreover, if their child presents with challenging behavior, the quest becomes all the more difficult.

Research shows that traditional parent training approaches do not always meet the needs of families with an autistic child. Barriers such as parental stress and parental attributes such as the parent’s belief in their own efficacy as a parent are not addressed (Durand 2001, Hastings & Brown, 2002). In response, researchers have recently developed parent training models that address skill development in implementing positive behavior supports. These models also provide support to parents in terms of their ability to effect a change in their parenting that will result in corresponding reductions in their child’s behavior difficulties.

One such program is Helping Parents with Challenging Children- Positive Family Intervention developed by V. Mark Durand (2011) as part of the Optimistic Parenting model. The Optimistic Parenting model combines traditional behavioral parent training with optimism training to address the impact of a parent’s attribution style on parent training. In this parent training model, Dr. Durand has combined what is known as best practice in the treatment of autism (Applied Behavior Analysis) with the most effective mental health strategies to help parents not only learn strategies to manage and teach their children, but also to use coping skills that are best suited to their strengths and comfort level. The program consists of individual cognitive behavioral therapy that helps parents change their thoughts about their child’s behavior, and training in behavioral techniques such as functional assessment of behavior and differential reinforcement. This combination of training approaches has demonstrated strong and positive outcomes for parents and children (Durand, Hiene-man, Clarke, Wang, and Rinaldi, 2012). In contrast to other parent training models, and in keeping with the ongoing emphasis for short term effective interventions in behavioral health care, this model provides a clinic-based option for families. It allows greater numbers of families to access an approach that meets their individual needs and shows success in helping them manage the ongoing and stressful impact of having a child with autism and challenging behavior.

At Melmark New England (Andover, MA), a seasoned team of consultants who specialize in evidence-based models of ABA and serve over 500 children with ASD throughout Massachusetts public school systems, has recently begun to implement the Optimistic Parenting Training program. Our professionals consistently experience that significant student gains can come when parents participate in structured and evidence-based training sessions both within the home and clinic setting.

Melmark New England is a non-profit organization whose mission is dedicated to changing the lives of individuals with profound special needs. We provide educational, clinical, vocational, residential, home-based outreach and public school consultation services for children and adults (ages 3+) with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), acquired brain injury, neurodevelopmental disorders and severe challenging behaviors. Our mission is to help each individual served have a meaningful life and attain the highest possible level of personal growth and achievement. For more information about our programs and services please visit www.melmarkne.org or call 978.654.4300