

CLUB ASPIRE: AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM INTEGRATING RECREATION AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *Club ASPIRE (After School Program Integrating Recreation and Education)* provides structure and continuous learning opportunities for children with autism and other special needs after school and during school breaks. *Club ASPIRE* uses a comprehensive incidental teaching approach to foster the development of positive social interaction and skill mastery, while emphasizing communication and self-help skills. No single instructional curriculum is used exclusively; the program attempts to coordinate the child's individual education plan into the daily schedule at *Club ASPIRE*. The education plan for the program is individually designed to reflect areas of strength and development identified by the child's parent.

Autism is a developmental disability whose incidence is on the rise. *Autism Research Review International* (1999) states:

The long-awaited California study of "Changes in the Population of Persons with Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders" documents a shocking recent upsurge in California's population of autistic individuals. The report...is based on analysis of data from California's 21 Regional Centers, which serve a population of almost 140,000 developmentally disabled clients. The data show that the population of autistic clients rose from 3,964 in 1987 to 11,995 in 1998—an increase averaging 26 percent per year....

By the end of 1998, nearly half the population of persons with autism in California consisted of children between birth and nine years. Analysis of the trend in the period covered by the report suggests the increase may be expected to continue.

Autism experts in many countries have engaged in controversy over reports of increasing incidence of autism....While a single study rarely settles a controversy to the satisfaction of all parties, the new California study in many ways presents the most credible finding yet reported, strongly supporting the view that for reasons not yet established, the population of autistic children—especially those at the higher end of the autistic disability spectrum—s increasing at an alarming rate. (1999)

This article further discusses a “cluster of autism cases” in Brick, New Jersey. The Autism Society of America (2000) reports that autism is one of the most common developmental disabilities, with over one half a million individuals having autism or some other form of pervasive developmental disorder. According to the Autism Society of America (2000), the determination of up-to-date prevalence statistics across the nation for autism should be a strong priority.

The History of *Club ASPIRE*

In the Mid-Hudson Valley, there is a great need for quality programs that address the needs of individuals with autism. In 1997, Orange County, New York parents requested a program designed specifically to meet the needs of children with autism, who required structure and consistency in their daily routines to enhance their everyday life skills. Greystone Programs, Inc. met this need for them in 1998 when *Club ASPIRE* was first designed and implemented for Orange County as a school break program. In 1998 and 1999, 17 families were served each year in the Orange County program, and *Club ASPIRE* continues to have a waiting list of over 20 additional families. The school break component currently runs for five weeks per year at the Orange-Ulster Board of Cooperative Educational Services, known as BOCES. However, due to the demand and interest in *Club ASPIRE*, this program was expanded into the after school component in SugarLoaf, New York, where Greystone Programs, Inc. is leasing a building for the operation of the program.

To date, it is very difficult for families to find programs willing to accept children with disabilities—or where there is the understanding necessary to effectively work with, and take care of, them. Children with autism have specific needs and qualified professionals play a key role in working with them. Although children have their current educational programs, after school and on their school vacations they need continued support to make the most of their overall learning experience. Children with autism have difficulty structuring their own leisure time—*Club ASPIRE* provides children with that structure while teaching the children about themselves and enhancing their skills and self-esteem. Additionally, *Club ASPIRE* is a Certified School Age Child Care Program allowing them to include non-disabled children who can learn and play side by side with their peers and effectively role-model, with the assistance of staff, for the children with autism. A new application to the Office of Children and Family Services will allow certification to continue in the new location. Currently there are not enough programs to provide families with the support for children with developmental disabilities. Without this support, children with autism do not have the skills necessary to live independently to their fullest extent.

With the knowledge of autism increasing, parents and professionals are learning that early intervention is key to assisting individuals in becoming as independent as they can be. *Club ASPIRE* strives to do that,

through the use of non-competitive activities, providing recreation combined with leisure education and skills needed throughout the life span.

There are other after school programs in existence throughout Orange County, however, no program specializes in working with individuals with autism. This program was requested by families in the County, who are also eager for the expansion into the after school component. Most children participating in the program attend the Orange-Ulster BOCES, although all children throughout the county, regardless of school district are eligible to attend.

Club ASPIRE: The Program

Club ASPIRE is a program for individuals aged 5-21, designed to provide structure and continuous learning opportunities. The program runs during school breaks, for children with autism or other special needs. *Club ASPIRE* uses a comprehensive incidental teaching approach to foster the development of positive social interaction and skill mastery. Communication and self-help are emphasized using a variety of non-competitive activities. The expected outcome for children participating in *Club ASPIRE* is an enhancement of social integration skills, increased self confidence in negotiating everyday situations, and the promotion of the development of functional communication skills. The children learn to work cooperatively and take responsibility for the choices they make while participating in activities. Functional academics are integrated into a recreational setting while the children are having fun.

Independent play skills are taught using instructional strategies such as peer modeling, task analysis, direct instruction and prompting, fading and reinforcement procedures.

Social interaction training emphasizes the necessary skills for developing friendships. Strategies used by the professionals for facilitating social interactions include structuring the environment to promote peer interactions by: limiting play materials, structuring thematic play activities, peer imitation training and peer mediated strategies.

Language skills are facilitated within *Club ASPIRE* by providing a variety of stimulating and enriching activities that encourage language use. A variety of procedures such as incidental teaching and time delay are used to facilitate language.

The activity and instructional format includes work in small groups of three children to one professional, as well as large group activities with one professional serving in a lead role and the other professionals providing support. The curriculum and activities emphasize the development of skills important for the children's successful inclusion into integrated settings (i.e. ability to follow simple instructions, initiation, parallel play, working in large groups, etc.). Children work on activities in small and large groups with a schedule designed to reflect their abilities.

A broad range of materials are used to teach specific skills, but no single instructional curriculum is used exclusively. The educational play

is weighted to reflect the most important developmental strengths and challenges identified by the child's parents. The objectives typically emphasize play, self-care, and language skills as well as the reduction of problem behaviors.

Where many after school programs provide recreation, *Club ASPIRE* incorporates aspects of a child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) into his or her routine at *Club ASPIRE*. This helps to reinforce the skills being working on at school, rather than having a "set back" as a result of being on vacation. *Club ASPIRE* attempts to integrate these areas within a non-competitive recreational setting, although there are designated "work" times when a child completes educational tasks.

Club ASPIRE follows the regulations for a School Age Child Care Program set by the Office of Children and Family Services in New York State. This important and unique aspect of *Club ASPIRE* provides an opportunity for average children (ages 6-12), whether they are a sibling of a disabled child or not, to participate in a program serving children with disabilities. This integration allows the disabled children to learn skills (i.e. social skills/behavior, language) from their peers, which will carry over into their lives making them as independent as possible. *Club ASPIRE* is unique in offering disabled children the opportunity to work with typically developing children.

Club ASPIRE offers a ratio of one professional to every three children, an intensity that is essential to the education of children with autism. Professionals are trained in education, psychology or have previous experience with children with autism or other special needs. They need to show initiative and be creative and sensitive. Seasoned and clinically astute professionals supervise all staff.

Training

Staff who are employed at *Club ASPIRE* go through a rigorous training process. An initial orientation includes an overview of Greystone Programs, Inc. and its philosophy and a review of children who will be participating in the program. Staff are trained in child abuse and maltreatment prevention, signs and symptoms of illness, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), first aid, medication administration (if applicable), supervision of children/meeting their needs, age appropriate child development activities, proactive strategies and PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System in which pictures represent activities) schedules.

Greystone Programs, Inc. ensures that each staff member receives a minimum of 15 hours of training for each registration period, as stipulated by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services Regulation for a School Age Child Care Program. If staff have previously received any of the above training, they are required to show documentation of such training having occurred within the past year, if they are to be exempt from that portion of the orientation. In such a case, staff will receive Greystone-specific information in that area, and then will receive

additional training in another area to meet the 15 hour requirement. All staff sign documentation outlining the type and length of the various types of training in which they have participated. The program director will also complete 15 hours of training for each registration period and will further utilize that training for staff working in the program.

Activities

Activities and learning opportunities are designed to meet the interests and educational needs of each child. We develop activities which would enhance the educational experience, as well as produce learning opportunities in areas children may have had little or no exposure (i.e. basic first aid skills). Children are grouped according to skill level, interest and age to individualize each learning experience. *Club ASPIRE* is designed to provide structure and continuous learning opportunities, foster the development of positive social interaction and learning skills and emphasize communication and self-help skills. As we incorporate areas of a child's individual education plan, this further reinforces his or her learning and promotes a cooperative relationship between the school district and *Club ASPIRE*.

Some of the areas *Club ASPIRE* focuses on during the program include:

1. Cooking—children, working with staff and learning to follow a recipe, create small, nutritious meals and/or snacks related to a weekly theme. This offers the opportunity for children to enhance their skills in the following areas: measuring, planning ingredients, time skills, reading, simple arithmetic, fine motor, hygiene and working together.
2. Community Experiences—children will have the opportunity to engage in community based learning experiences such as: going to the library or museums, shopping at local stores, developing money skills, and cultural appreciation, i.e. art, music, dance.
3. Cooperative Social Skills—individually, or in small groups, children will develop appropriate interactive skills such as: turn taking, waiting, sharing, greetings, manners, appropriate play, assisting other children as appropriate, friendships and relationships, developing confidence and self-esteem, choice making—taking responsibility for choices they make. These skills are utilized and developed in the natural setting of recreation and play through arts and crafts activities, games and fine and gross motor play.
4. Adventure Curriculum—in this area children can work to develop map/compass skills through hiking and nature walks; learning to identify trees, leaves, plants, birds, insects; participating in sensory awareness activities appropriate to developmental level; and learning weather concepts.

5. Children can learn basic first aid skills.
6. Communication Strategies—we have a strong focus on children indicating their needs through appropriate means. Children are exposed to a variety of communication strategies including: picture boards, sign language, computer, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System). Children utilize multiple communication systems throughout the day depending on skill level.
7. Fine and Gross Motor Play (indoor and outdoor)
8. Academic—children work on areas outlined on their IEP or as indicated by their parents. These can encompass skills such as: color and shape recognition, time telling, money skills, simple math, reading, letter recognition, scissors skills, sequencing etc.

Throughout the day children participate in scheduled activities which are outlined for them through the use of a PECS schedule, with pictures representing each activity. Although the structure is set at the beginning of the day, there is flexibility throughout the daily use of the schedule. A sample schedule is outlined below:

9:00 am	Arrival, greetings, bathroom
9:30 am	Calendar, weather, story time
10:00 am	Snack, clean up
10:30 am	Worksheet on time telling skills
11:00 am	Cooking Group
11:30 am	Outdoor play
12:00 pm	Bathroom, wash hands
	Lunch
12:30 pm	Clean up, VCR
1:00 pm	Arts and Crafts activity
1:30 pm	Socialization Group
2:00 pm	Outdoor Play
2:45 pm	Bathroom, wash hands
3:00 pm	Snack, clean up
3:30 pm	Free play until pick up
4:00 pm	Pick up by authorized person

Throughout the day, children continuously participate in activities to increase their skills and learn new things. In addition, children are encouraged to participate with other children and learn and grow in their relationships.

Anticipated Outcomes of *Club ASPIRE*

- Children with autism benefit from early intervention when intervention efforts are conducted across all environments.

- Children with autism can master important skills (i.e. social skills, language skills, and social behavior) from typical same-age peer activities.
- Children with autism benefit from intervention efforts that are planned, systematic, and individualized.
- Children with autism benefit from activities that reflect developmentally appropriate practices.

Club ASPIRE: Where We are Now

Work during the past two years has reinforced skills and aided in the development of children's independence. This has been evident through regular parent feedback surveys, other professionals advocating for the child, and the continued support and growing waiting list for *Club ASPIRE*. Obviously, there have been challenges and difficulties, however those experiences have assisted in further developing the program and enhancing the knowledge of individuals working with the children, both in and out of the program. Some of these challenges have been: recruiting staff for a 5-week per year position, the difficulty of getting to know children's skills during a 5-week per year program, lack of storage, change of classrooms and financial support. Because of many of these challenges, Greystone Programs, Inc. was dedicated to locating a building in which to run the program that would allow them to enhance the services offered. A new building, and an enhanced program opened during the summer of 2000.

With the relocation of *Club ASPIRE* into the new building in SugarLoaf, New York, and the support of the families, children and other professionals, *Club ASPIRE* is expected to continue to grow and provide quality services for more children in the Orange County area. The strong support for this program demonstrates the need for quality programs for individuals with autism. Since its inception, children have adjusted and behavioral issues that once existed in the transition from school breaks, no longer occur. As one parent stated, "The consistency I see in the programming is invaluable for my daughter." Since the development of the program, many have noted their children's abilities to make the transition from school breaks with ease. Their socialization skills have been enhanced through the regular participation in *Club ASPIRE* because of the added opportunities to interact with peers in an educational, yet recreational setting. Through this program, children with autism are able to develop their skills and therefore, be able to live more independently with fewer supports as they enter adulthood and other vocational programs. The structure and consistency provided through this program enhances learning for the children, which widens their horizons.

The use of picture icons as a means of communication has increased expressive communication skills and has assisted staff in getting to know the children. In addition, the icon schedules assist the children in understanding what activities and work is expected from them throughout the

day. This structure and predictability helps the children to learn expectations and practice time-telling skills. The wealth of educational, recreational and sensory experiences provides the children with a solid foundation to build upon as they grow older.

The parents involved in this program have been extremely supportive as *Club ASPIRE* has evolved. Without family support, *Club ASPIRE* would not be where it is today. Family members have given us skill areas to build upon, as well as assisting us greatly in getting to know their children. With our expansion into SugarLoaf, *Club ASPIRE* is expected to grow and provide more assistance and services, as well as developing enhanced skills for children who participate. One thing has become apparent through discussions with families—*Club ASPIRE* has been successful in meeting its objectives and will continue to grow with the expansion. As one parent stated, “Greystone Programs, Inc. has provided children a compassionate and professional staff. The children are treated as individuals, not clients, and for this we are deeply grateful. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to children with autism.”

APPENDIX A

Greystone Programs, Inc.

Greystone Programs, Inc. is a not-for-profit agency providing opportunities for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities. Greystone supports and assists individuals while they learn the skills necessary to become active members in their community.

Greystone Programs, Inc. provides the following opportunities:

- *Residential Services* are currently offered in Hyde Park, Staatsburg, Pleasant Valley, Pawling, Unionvale and Wappingers Falls, in Dutchess County, New York, providing individuals the assistance and support in home like settings. Through our residential programs, we have a strong focus on individuals, their needs and desires, as well as their future.
- *Greyco*, an employment service for persons with and without disabilities, offers vocational opportunities in horticulture, landscaping and floral design.
- *Club ASPIRE (After School Program Integrating Recreation and Education)* is a program designed to provide structure and continuous learning opportunities for individuals ages 5-21 who have autism and other special needs.
- *Early Intervention* services are provided for children and their families from birth to age 3 who are developmentally delayed or at risk, with social emotional delays. These services are provided throughout Putnam, Dutchess, Orange and Ulster counties.

- *Residential Habitation* services provide persons with developmental disabilities a menu of opportunities and experiences to become more self determined and involved in their local community. These services are available throughout Putnam, Dutchess, Ulster and Orange Counties.
- *Home Behavior Therapy Program* is a family support program designed to improve the quality of family life, providing members with training support, information and behavioral services directly in the family home. Services are available throughout Putnam, Dutchess, Ulster and Columbia Counties.

APPENDIX B

Basis Skills Curriculum

Communication

Requesting Assistance
Following Instructions
Indicating Preference
Indicating Termination
Appropriate Requesting

Self-Care

Toileting
Handwashing
Eating
Dressing

Preacademics

Matching
Puzzle Completion
Coloring
Cutting
Tracing

Social

Eye Contact
Appropriate Sitting
Working in a Group
Motor Imitation
Waiting Appropriately

Behavior

Tantrums
Aggression
Noncompliance
Respect for Others

Play/Motor

Isolate Play
Parallel Play
Cooperative Play
Gross Motor Activities

Cultural Skills

Art and Crafts
Music and Dance

General Information

Nature Study

References

Huge increase in autism incidence reported in California; autism cluster investigated in Brick, (1999). *Autism Research Review International*. 13(1), 1.

What is autism? (2000). Autism Society of America Foundation website, www.autism-society.org.