

The Role of the Family-School Liaison Counselor: Safety & Risk Support for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

From the Autism Spectrum Quarterly, Summer 2004

Reprinted in The Resourcer (An official publication of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), Summer 2005

By Walter Coles and Dennis Debbaudt

In Alberta, Canada, many school districts employ a Family-School Liaison Counselor (FSLC). The FSLC position is an educationally creative way of providing home-school proactive support for students on the autism spectrum. The FSLC is a new position in Canada. In the U.S., these duties are often performed by a school social worker. The FSLC differs from the School Resource Officer (SRO) as they are not sworn police officers who either visits or is assigned to a particular school. An SRO's duties would include taking and investigating assault complaints and threats; developing evidence for a drug searches; intelligence gathering and arrests; and creating crime prevention presentations for students.

The FSLC can offer a degree of respite to parents who may otherwise not want law enforcers interacting with their child. Of course, discretion is built in to this position as it would with a school resource officer. For instance, if the FSLC discovers criminal activity, neglect or abuse in connection with a student, he or she would need to follow school district policy (or good common sense!) to report these findings to law enforcement or social service agencies. If anything, the FSLC would compliment the role of the SRO by gathering information and taking proactive measures to identify risk, enhance school safety, and improve the lives of students on the autism spectrum.

FSLCs are not teachers, but rather people with backgrounds in social work, psychology, sociology, psychiatric nursing, or law enforcement. Police officers with post secondary education would be especially well suited for the position of FSLC. Social Workers who have investigative experience would also make excellent FSLCs. Though there are similarities, the FSLC is neither a guidance counselor nor a therapist, but rather an advocate for students, and an information resource within the school system.

The FSLC's job is to gather information, investigate, and intervene before something serious happens. Although we live in an information society, information oftentimes is not shared. When information goes unshared opportunities to prevent unfortunate situations are missed.

Spectrum Risk Factors

Research indicates that persons with developmental disabilities, including autism spectrum conditions, will have up to seven times more contacts with law enforcement authorities during their lifetimes than will members of the general public (Curry et al, 1993). Hence, students on the autism spectrum will need some extra attention to keep them risk-free and safe. The FSLC can help identify potential risks and develop strategies to minimize them.

There are many factors--both environmental and internal--that predispose the student to potential risks. These include the following:

- Student may not respond to commands or directions
- May not react well to changes in routine, or may become hyperactive because of sensory issues, resulting in escalated or aggressive behavior
- Student may have difficulty judging appropriate social space
- Student may model or repeat the spoken word, body language or emotional responses of others in situations in which they are inappropriate

- May have difficulty interpreting social situations and cues
- May not understand and/or may misinterpret verbal and nonverbal communication such as jokes, slang, and body language, and such facial expressions as the rolling of eyes, the raising of eyebrows, shrugs, or hand signals.
- May have accompanying medical conditions such as seizure disorders, asthma, or hypotonia (i.e., low muscle tone) that may lead to unusual mannerisms or behavior
- Student may wander / bolt (Debbaudt, 2002)

Sharing autism recognition and risk information with all district employees is crucial. The FSLC can work with the SRO to provide autism spectrum risk and safety training to all staff. It is essential to include transportation, maintenance, cafeteria, and secretarial staff in briefings and training on issues such as school safety, threat assessment, information gathering, and crisis intervention procedures.

Spectrum Response Techniques

These sessions and briefings should also include the sharing of good basic autism spectrum response techniques. These techniques can be used to improve communications with a spectrum student at all times, especially when there is a risk of or manifestation of escalated behavior.

These response techniques would include:

- Talk calmly, softly. Talking louder will not aid understanding.
- Speak in direct, short phrases such as Stand up now. Come with me.
- Avoid literal expressions, such as, *What's up your sleeve? Are you pulling my leg?*
- Avoid behaviors and language that may appear threatening.
- Allow for delayed responses to your questions or commands.
- Repeat or rephrase your questions or commands.
- Consider the use of pictures, written phrases, or sign language.
- Use slow gestures for attention; avoid rapid pointing or waving, as these may be anxiety-provoking.
- Model calming body language, such as, slow breathing, keeping hands low.
- Model the behavior you want the student to display
- Look and wait for a response and/or eye contact; don't interpret limited eye contact as deceit or disrespect.
- If possible, avoid touching the student, especially near shoulders or face; avoid standing too near or behind the student; and avoid stopping repetitive behaviors unless self-injurious or potentially harmful to yourself or others.
- Evaluate for injury. The student may not ask for help or show any indications of pain, even though injury seems apparent.
- Be aware of a student's self-protective responses to things he or she finds off-putting (i.e., lights, sounds, touch, odors, and animals. If possible, adjust or dampen down the sensory environment.
- If the student's behavior escalates, maintain a safe distance until any inappropriate behaviors lessen, and remain alert to the possibility of additional outbursts or impulsive acts (Debbaudt & Rothman, 2001).

The Role of the FSLC in Bullying Prevention

There are many reasons why it is important to include transportation, maintenance, cafeteria, and other non-teaching staff in autism risk and safety sessions. For one thing, when these individuals learn to use basic spectrum communication and response techniques, they can become valuable assets for the FSLC. For another, there are added benefits for the students, since these staff members may come to be viewed as teachers or administrators, and as such, the student may seek assistance from them. In addition, these employees can assist the FSLC by providing extra sets of eyes and ears, especially when it comes to monitoring episodes of bullying, teasing and taunting. Most importantly, the relationships developed with non-teaching staff can pay off in early recognition of school-place bullying.

It is predictable that the behaviors and characteristics that students on the spectrum inherently display will draw the attention of other students. Unaware that their behaviors, physical posture, vocal tone, apparent aloofness and social gaffes are attracting unwanted attention, students with ASD can make perfect targets for bullies (Debbaudt, 2003). Bullies typically become adept at selecting their victims. Their actions often take place quickly, and out of the sight and hearing space of teachers. Since bullying often occurs on the school bus, the FSLC can and should observe the interactions between the student on the spectrum, and his or her peers on the school bus. Likewise, the FSLC should exercise vigilance with respect to observing students entering and leaving schools; navigating the hallways between classes; and using the restrooms, cafeteria, and playground, since these are also target areas for bullies. Finally, it is important to be mindful that older, more independent students on the spectrum may be at greater risk than those who require, and hence receive, more adult supervision.

It is well understood that early intervention and education are the keys to helping students with ASD to develop critical life skills. Helping students on the spectrum navigate the tough and confusing unstructured social spaces in school, and in life, is one of those critical life skills. Addressing this issue will take some forethought; however, the FSLC can learn valuable information through his/her contacts with drivers and aides, maintenance and cafeteria employees that can enable him or her to discover the seeds of bullying and to deal with it early and effectively.

Working with Parents and Families

An FSLC can enhance the parents' role in safety and risk management. Parents may be all too well aware of the risks their children on the spectrum face. For example, wandering away into potentially dangerous situations is a safety risk many parents confront on a regular basis. For parents, two of the diagnostic characteristics of autism--high tolerance for pain and the lack of fear of real danger--is a frightening and combustible combination. Combined with wandering, these and the risks described above affect families in their relationships with their neighbors, and during excursions outside of the home. Moms and dads may very well know what triggers their son or daughter's behaviors. They may also have well developed techniques designed to deal with or avoid those triggers, or they may know ways to de-escalate their child's behavior.

The FSLC can work with parents to discover information about the specific risks that are likely to occur with the student, and together they can develop strategies to help all staff respond appropriately. For example, the parents may know what triggers an episode of screaming or provokes a tantrum in their children. They may also be able to describe their children's fears or dislikes as well as offer valuable information regarding what their children's favorite items and topics of discussion are. This type of information is invaluable to school staff when developing strategies and tactics to "lower the temperature" during a be-

havioral outburst. Most importantly, they provide options other than restraint for successfully de-escalating a student's behavior.

Information sharing can be a two-way street. Specifically, a well-informed FSLC can also provide valuable safety and risk information to parents who struggle in vain with these issues.

Safety and Risk Education for Students on the Spectrum

The FSLC can work with teachers to help develop a simple curriculum that helps keep students safe on and off campus. This type of life skills education needs to be delivered early and often, and must be suited to the learning styles, ages, needs, and abilities of the individual student. For example, students on the spectrum can be taught to:

- Expect contact with law enforcers
- Recognize and respond as best they can to law enforcers
- Stay with--not run from--safe, "go to" police or other uniformed first responders
- Keep an appropriate distance when interacting with a law enforcer--or anyone else
- Carry and produce an ID card
- Disclose their autism or produce an autism information card
- Recognize inappropriate touching or sexual come-ons directed at them
- Effectively report bullying or other incidents
- Tell someone they need help, or use the phone to request it

The FSLC can work with police, fire rescue, paramedics and emergency medical technicians, 911 dispatchers, and hospital emergency room professionals to arrange non-stressful visits to the environments in which these individuals work for the purpose of helping to reinforce appropriate responses in these environments. These individuals can also visit classrooms to help familiarize students with the important roles they play in the community. Rather than operate in a traditional teacher's role, these first responders can sit with the students and discuss their perspectives on the life skill currently being taught. This informal teaching opportunity will also benefit the first responders by exposing them to the very spectrum students that they will likely meet in future field situations.

Conclusion

All students and their families can benefit from a well-planned autism awareness campaign. The FSLC can be a key player in this campaign by proactively offering clear information about spectrum conditions, and being available to answer spectrum-related questions. Proactive awareness campaigns can dispel spectrum rumors, myths and preconceptions; discover students and families who are willing to become buddies with the student on the spectrum, and deprive bullies of their favorite excuses (e.g., *I didn't know*; or *I thought he/she knew I was kidding*) (Debbaudt, 2002).

Clearly, many school districts have dwindling financial resources for students with special needs. Notwithstanding, it is also clear that school districts are experiencing a dramatic rise in the number of students with ASD that they are called upon to serve. Given the nature of the disability, students on the spectrum will typically have special needs in the areas of safety and risk that other students do not have. Finally, whether the school district employs an FSLC, or designates some other district employee with a different title, it is important that someone oversees and manages the types of programs described in this article, because, having a well-trained autism spectrum risk and safety specialist on the scene can help not only to ensure safety, but also to maximize scarce time and resources.

References

Curry, K., Postuszny, M. and Kraska, S. (1993) Training Criminal Justice Personnel to Recognize Offenders with Disabilities. Washington, DC: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services News In Print

Debbaudt, D. (2002a) Autism, Advocates and Law Enforcement Professionals: Recognizing and Reducing Risk Situations for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders, London-Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Debbaudt, D. (2002b) Protect Students with Autism from Bullies¹ Taunts. Maintaining Safe Schools LRP Publications, 9, 1, 7

Debbaudt, D. (2003) Safety Issues for Adolescents with Asperger Syndrome.¹ In Liane Holliday Willey (ed) Asperger Syndrome In Adolescence: Living With the Ups, the Downs and Things In Between London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Debbaudt, D. and Rothman, D. (2001) Contact With Individuals With Autism: Effective Resolutions.¹ FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 7, 4, 20-24

Recommended Reading & Viewing

Coles, W.(1990). Sexual abuse of persons with disabilities: A law enforcement perspective. Developmental Disabilities Bulletin, 18(2), 35-43.

Coles, W(2004). School Sleuth: Detecting Undiagnosed Disabilities in Students. Alberta Teachers Association Magazine(Canada). Winter 2004, Volume 84, number 2.

Debbaudt, D. and Legacy, D. (2004) Autism & Law Enforcement Role Call Briefing Video. Debbaudt Legacy Productions, Port St. Lucie, Florida. (video and booklet)

Hutchinson-Maclean, L. (1997) Admissible in Court: Interviewing Witnesses Who Live With Disabilities. Hutchinson-Maclean Productions, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. (video and curriculum)

About the authors:

Walter Coles is a retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer who currently works in Alberta, Canada as a Family School Liaison Counselor. He has written articles, and presented training workshops on disability and law enforcement issues since 1990. He played a key role in the development of the curriculum and video Admissible In Court: Interviewing Witnesses Who Live with Disabilities, 1998, Alberta, Canada.

In the 1980's, Dennis Debbaudt wrote for the Detroit News and worked with broadcast TV current affairs programs in the U.S., Canada and United Kingdom. A professional journalist and investigator, Dennis turned his attention to autism spectrum disorders in 1987 after his son was diagnosed with this condition. Over the past decade he's authored numerous articles and books. His new Autism & Law Enforcement Roll Call Briefing Video was recently released. More information at www.autismriskmanagement.com

