

# PROMISING PRACTICES



## Restructured agency focuses on strategies for success on the autism spectrum

By Deborah Capuano, executive director, Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities

*(Editor's note: Many different therapeutic approaches exist for persons with autism spectrum disorder. This article highlights an agency's experience in combining early intervention with individualized supports.)*

Responding to an increasing demand for services for persons with autism spectrum disorder, the management of [Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities](#) in west central Ohio agreed that its services for children and adults must reflect best practice models when it began a multiyear restructuring.

In its most recent [CARF](#) survey report, Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities was "commended for its outstanding programs for persons with autism spectrum disorder. Beginning with the early intervention program and moving on to its programs for adults, the programs include excellent and innovative assessment procedures; use of assistive technology; strong emphasis on interventions that are positive and nonrestrictive; practices that include the P.L.A.Y. Project and Responsive Teaching; facilities that are beautiful and designed to facilitate learning; staff members who are well trained, positive, and highly motivated; and program documents and information that are user-friendly and available in a variety of formats."

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### About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

Find current and past issues of ECS Promising Practices at: [www.carf.org/ecspromisingpractices](http://www.carf.org/ecspromisingpractices)

Issues are categorized by topic: Business Practices, Community Services, and Employment Services.

## **Early intervention leads to improved results**

Research shows that the earlier intervention occurs, the easier it is to offset the disability's impact.

At Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities, the Autism Diagnosis Education Project (ADEP) Team of pediatricians works with speech and early intervention specialists. Using standardized screening and evidence-based evaluation tools, they can provide earlier and more reliable autism diagnoses.

In the Play and Language for Autistic Youngsters (P.L.A.Y.) Project, a consultant visits homes monthly and offers parents and families intervention strategies that enable them to become their child's expert and an effective, lifelong advocate. This time-intensive (two or three hours per day) project is integrated with schools and other therapies.

The early intervention program helps transition families from ADEP Team testing to the P.L.A.Y. Project and beyond. These transitions can help define the child and his or her family's strides and accomplishments.

Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities follows the comprehensive, structured Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) principles for individual development, person-centered planning, and structuring the physical environment. Visual supports make individual tasks understandable, and personalized task books and peer mentoring are proven strategies.

## **Services for adults are individualized**

The Atrium Center has specialized environments for adults who are on the autism spectrum. Multisensory rooms use therapeutic lighting; modern, sparse settings; calming wall fountains; aromatherapy; optional New Age music; individualized cubbies; and lighted, tactile options to relax and calm agitation. These environments are effective in diminishing aggression and anxiety by reducing the numbers of peer-to-peer assaults and other aggression-related incidents.

Staff members maintain therapy cards for each person served, enabling customization of the room to match the preference of each individual. Many persons on the autism spectrum enjoy the vibrations of the water bubble tubes or do not care about colors. Others like a lighted tunnel.

Staff members play a discreet role in sensory rooms. Although

they supervise for safety, they promote the feeling of the person served seeming to be alone, especially if he or she is overstimulated.



*Above: This photo of a Snoezelen® room illustrates many light options. Snoezelen, a Dutch word for calm, can be individualized. Most often, the room will be dimly lighted. If an individual with autism is already overstimulated, he or she should not be overwhelmed with an assortment of bright colors. Perhaps a person prefers a darkened room with only twinkling lights in the ceiling or no lights at all.*

Understanding that people take information constantly through their senses is important for creating multisensory rooms. Although the most used sense is vision, sensory responses are unique to each individual. Therefore, it is important to complete a sensory assessment to determine what balances the person.

The human brain organizes and interprets information, and people respond with an appropriate action. For most persons, the process occurs automatically without cognitive awareness. However, individuals who experience difficulty with sensory processing do not register, orient, interpret, and organize information in the same way as persons who have no difficulty. Therefore, their responses are markedly different.

### **Restructure brings lessons**

Throughout the restructuring of services, staff members at Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities say they have learned:

- Never assume that persons with autism cannot achieve

beyond what most people believe is possible.

- Services for children and adults with autism are ever-changing and will always present challenges.
- Strategic planning, evidence-based research, and investing in and building a well-trained staff are imperative to sound program development and best practices.
- Innovation, creativity, and superior customer service establish consistent, positive customer satisfaction.
- Environment counts! Avoiding clutter is essential for creating a relaxing environment.

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For more information about the autism services at Greene County Board of Developmental Disabilities, please visit the organization's website at [www.greenedd.org](http://www.greenedd.org) or contact Deborah Capuano, executive director, at (937) 562-4218 or [dcapuano@greeneinc.org](mailto:dcapuano@greeneinc.org).

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