

Summer 2010

Monthly Newsletter Column

Summer Time Challenges: Swimming, Sun, & Socialization

by Michael C. Selbst, Ph.D. (Behavior Therapy Associates, P.A.)

Summer time is a wonderful opportunity for change. The air is warmer, school is out, and many families are heading out of town for vacation. Children are outside playing sports and games, swimming, and making new friends. There are barbecues, family reunions, and many opportunities for new adventures and changes in routine.

What sounds like fun and adventurous for one family, however, can be pretty daunting for a family with a child who has an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Change is oftentimes not welcomed, as it plays havoc among children who are quite rigid and who have taken 10 months to finally understand and follow the school structure. The idea of being outside among the dreaded bugs, in the sticky heat, and around the pollen is scary. These are commonly triggers for a child's fear responses, sensory overload, and compulsive sneezing episodes. Meeting someone new would be delightful if it was an easy task. Yet, we know that children with social skills deficits have significant difficulty initiating conversation, developing and maintaining friendships, and navigating simple games and sports. Lastly, food preferences and "people" preferences compound the already challenging family barbecue.

So....what is one to do as summer is fast approaching? Fortunately, there are some options that families have when trying to keep their child busy and the summer successful. First, it is important to delineate specific and realistic goals for the summer. These may include the following: "I want my child to meet at least five new children his/her age"; "I want my child to learn a new sport", "I want my child to replace five hours of video game playing per week with a family activity." These goals should be discussed with your child, to learn what goals he/she has, how strongly he/she is motivated to attain the goals, and to develop some common goals.

Once the goals are decided, then the parent and child should brainstorm solutions to reach those goals. This may include day trips to amusement parks, family picnics or barbecues, choices of group-related activities, and/or participation in a summer program. When one considers a summer program, many factors need to be considered. This includes, for example, the characteristics of the students attending, philosophy of the program, ratio of staff to students, training of staff members, variety of activities, focus on skill development (social skills, problem-solving, anger management, meeting new people), experience of staff, and recreational activities.



The decision to have your child participate in a summer program can still be quite unsettling. Yet, it is important to decide whether or not you truly want your child to participate. When parents are anxious about sending their child off to a weekend or day program focusing on social skills, their own fears may be conveyed to the child. The child may then experience similar anxiety, he/she may ask "what if" questions, and engage in various behaviors to avoid the situation. If the parents are more confident about sending their child to a summer program, the child is more likely to feel comfortable as well. Furthermore, it is recommended that the parent and child discuss the child's relative strengths and weaknesses so that there is a greater understanding regarding the benefits of a summer program (e.g., opportunity to improve friendships making skills, gain greater self-control, learn problem-solving, develop sports skills).

Parents need to consider the type of social skills programming provided at the program. There are various modalities, including: incidental teaching without any formal, structured approach; individual social skills lessons via counseling; and small-group social skills programming involving game-playing, targeted lessons, and/or following a curriculum. There are a multitude of social skills curricula, most of which commonly include a "3-D Approach" to teaching social skills (Asher & Gordon, 1998). This refers to a discussion of the specific problem impacting the child's social success. Then, the group leader demonstrates the socially appropriate and desirable behaviors needed for social success. Lastly, children have an opportunity to practice the skills (i.e., role play) in the doing procedure, and the skills are generalized to the appropriate social setting.



There is also a growing area of research highlighting the benefits of video modeling and video self-modeling to promote social skills for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (e.g., Bellini & Akullian, 2007; Neumann, 2004). There are specific programs targeting children in the spectrum, which include photographs, activities, and targeted lessons (e.g., Baker, 2001, 2003; Committee for Children, 2002). Other programs have a greater emphasis on social decision-making and social problem solving (Elias & Butler, et al., 2005). It is recommended, therefore, that parents learn about the approaches used at the program, what skills may be targeted, how progress is monitored, and what they should expect regarding generalization of skills to the "real" world.

It is important as well to review a copy of the program's daily schedule. There should be a balance among formal social skills programming, sports and recreational activities, and opportunities for child-directed activities. Staff members should provide frequent feedback to the children, including behavior specific praise, activity rewards, and/or tangible rewards. Strategies should be shared with the parents to transfer skills across environments. Additionally, there should be some data collection to monitor students' progress and evaluate performance.

Ultimately, the child needs to see the program as a desirable place to go each day. Having a happy child who is learning as well is the ideal situation. Finding a program that offers an array of activities with energetic and enthusiastic staff member likely is a better match for most children. It is also recommended that parents discuss with the program director how individual problems may be handled and what disciplinary approaches are used. There should be emphasis placed on antecedent interventions to increase stimulus control, teach necessary skills, and prepare children, rather than a focus on trying to change negative behaviors. While the recipe for success involves many ingredients, the summer is more likely to be successful with careful planning, a well-informed parent, and preparing the child for the experience. One can then embrace the change from the school year to the summer time rather than run from it.

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Dr. Selbst is a Licensed Psychologist and Certified School Psychologist in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He is Associate Director of Behavior Therapy Associates, P.A. in Somerset, New Jersey. Dr. Selbst is the Executive Director of the HI-STEP Summer Social Skills Program (formerly called Stepping Stone Summer Program) and the Director of the Weekend for Improvement Social Effectiveness (W.I.S.E). He also provides therapy, consultation to school districts, social skills programming, evaluations, and workshops on various topics.