

OTAC's Family Centered Autism Training and Technical Assistance

The principles and philosophy of self-directed support and person-centered planning are at the heart of the work OTAC does with families in its Autism Program. The program provides technical assistance to families in their homes as well as workshops designed specifically for parents. In this program, we emphasize proactive visual strategies that are tailored to the unique needs and strengths of the person with autism and the family. These strategies help people with autism understand their environment, become more independent in daily life and have positive experiences in the home and community. As a result, individuals and families feel valued for who they are and can be more in charge of their lives.

When we provide technical assistance, one of the first and most important things our trainers do is LISTEN to the family tell their story. Not all families are alike -- each has different passions, worries and styles. Through kitchen table discussions, we discover how the family learns so we can adjust our approach; we ask about the family's strengths, issues, wishes and needs so these things can be incorporated into the support plan for their child. Together with the family, we make sure our recommendations are a good fit for their child and pass the "real life" test in their home.

Our goal is to leave families stronger and less dependent on outside experts. So we teach the family support strategies and show them how to use visual tools for daily activities. We show them how all behaviors have meaning. We give them guidelines they can use in problem-solving. We help them to understand better how autism affects their son or daughter. Together, we list their child's strengths and interests and these are incorporated into a support plan designed just for their child. No two plans are ever alike -- even though the basic principles remain the same.

Our work is built on the belief that people with autism, like all of us, have a basic right to "predictability." In other words, we need to know the answers to those all important questions:

1. Where am I going?
2. What am I supposed to be doing?
3. How much am I supposed to do?
4. How will I know when I am finished?
5. What's next?

Our parent workshops teach families and their caregivers how to use visual strategies to answer these questions for their son or daughter throughout their daily living activities. The training focuses on how the disability affects the child and ways in which children struggle with daily living because of it. We also talk about the fact that many children with disabilities struggle because they lack ordinary, everyday things such as friendships, joy, power, a chance to make a contribution to others, good health care, and the ability to let others know what they need and feel. We encourage parents and caregivers to consider ALL aspects of the child's life.

We talk about ways parents can approach their child so they can build relationships, have friends and experience a more typical life. We also attempt to answer the question "why does my child do that?" by explaining the underlying reasons for challenging behavior. We explain how some simple practical strategies, such as a dedicated area for play or a consistent routine for bedtime or a left-to-right system for getting dressed can make daily life more understandable and easier for all. We also explore communication issues and building a positive behavior support plan. Parents learn about the crisis cycle and the components of a support plan and how to incorporate environmental structuring and visual strategies to help decrease difficult behaviors and increase daily opportunities.

In sum, OTAC's Autism training and technical assistance program concentrates on some of the essential ingredients of a self-directed life -- knowledge, skills, independence and community connections. Our family-centered approach boosts self-esteem and confidence. It helps families to succeed and even to live happier, more ordinary lives with their child.