

UA autism study pairs theater with peer mentoring

By Ed Enoch / Staff Writer

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Researchers at the University of Alabama are preparing for a four-year study that pairs theater and peer mentoring to help improve social skills of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder.

“It is really good and healthy experience for the non-autistic peers to be a part of that,” said Susan White, principal investigator for the project at UA. “It is good on that side. It is really good for those kids who have autism to be part of something that is not just therapy.”

The heart of the theater exercise is helping adolescents with autism disorders pay attention and understand facial expressions and other nonverbal cues.

UA’s Center for the Prevention of Youth Behavior Problems is enrolling Tuscaloosa-area adolescents with autism spectrum disorder between the ages of 10 and 16 and their typically-performing peers for a multi-site trial of the SENSE (Social Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology) Theatre intervention, which is funded with a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

White, who is now at Virginia Tech, will begin her appointment in August as director of UA’s Center for the Prevention of Youth Behavior Problems.

The other sites include UA, Stony Brook University and Vanderbilt, where the program was developed by associate psychiatry professor Blythe Corbett. The program has shown positive results, but researchers want to see if the results can be duplicated at different sites, White said. The study will involve 240 children between the three sites.

“You need to show any an intervention like this can be done by a different team,” White said.

The participants will be randomly assigned to either the SENSE program or a well-established development program, Tackling Teenage Training, as a control.

UA is working with the theater program at Tuscaloosa Academy for the local trial.

Work with the control group will begin in May, said Nicole Powell, a research psychologist and associate director of the UA center. Work with the theater group will begin this fall.

The theater intervention is a 10-week program, with weekly practice sessions and a final performance. Practices and the final theatrical performance will be at Tuscaloosa Academy.

The UA trial will include 80 children with autism disorders. The UA researchers plan to have 20 students during the first year, 40 participants in the second year and 20 in the final year, White said. The fourth year will be follow-ups and data analysis, White said.

The researchers will study neural activity among participants using an electroencephalogram while also observing behavior recognition with unfamiliar faces. The team will also collect data from self-surveys filled out by parents and participants.

The trial will use theatre scripts developed for SENSE, theatre games, rehearsal of lines and songs, and peer modeling to help the students with autism improve their social competence.

“You have one-on-one peer mentoring throughout the program so they learn in a very didactic way,” White said. “Kids learn better when the model looks a lot like them.”

The peers participating in the programing are trained on how to serve as models, she said.

Most teenagers don't like going to therapy, White noted. The theater program doesn't feel like a trip to the therapist's office.

“What is really nice is this has been going on for years in Nashville,” she said.
“Kids like to come back for multiple sessions. It doesn’t feel like therapy at least.
They come in, and it is a lot of fun to hang out.”

Sara-Margaret Cates, theatre educator at Tuscaloosa Academy and theater director for the program, was attracted to the research project because of her belief that theatre is for everyone.

At the heart of theatre is a human connection, she said. Theatre potentially can help, she said, because it the human experience concentrated for the stage. Students will learn communication skills but also empathy and understanding for each other, she said.

“That is so important in today’s society,” Cates said.

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