



autism assets

Autism Assets

Neal Sarahan and Randy Copas

Autism can interfere with social relationships necessary for positive development. Two organizations have collaborated to create an innovative strength-based relational model for children with autism and other neurological differences.

The Center for Disease Control estimates that 1 in 88 children have been identified with autism (CDC, 2012). Autism is often associated with other psychiatric, developmental, neurological, and genetic diagnoses. However, the majority (62%) of children identified on the autism spectrum do not have intellectual disability. Instead, they are hurting. Autism can create a kind of brain-based developmental trauma that blocks social relationships necessary for safety, self-regulation, and positive growth.

Monarch Institute and Starr Commonwealth are collaborating in leading-edge strength-based research to transform futures for individuals with neurological differences. Both organizations have developmental, relational approaches. Programs using the Monarch model are currently operating at schools in Houston, Texas; Guatemala City; and Mexico City; and at Starr's Montcalm School in Albion, Michigan.

Starr Commonwealth was founded in 1913 by Floyd Starr with the ethos that there is no such thing as a bad child. This positive philosophy proposed that all children can thrive in an environment of trusting adult and peer relationships and stimulating living and learning communities. Many young people who have resisted traditional consequence-based interventions are able to thrive and grow toward independence in the challenging, supportive group setting of Montcalm School.

The Monarch Schools are dedicated to providing an innovative therapeutic education for individuals with neurological differences. The curriculum is grounded in a developmental perspective of learner-centered principles of growth (APA, 1997). Students enter Monarch because their progress in typical instructional settings has either come to a halt or has never really begun. They come to know themselves, claim ownership of their learning and behavior, and contribute as part of a community.

Reclaiming Goals

For a century, Starr has pioneered restorative methods based on the philosophy that even the most difficult young person possesses potential greatness. A series of publications and model programs applied this reclaiming philosophy to schools and youth

organizations (Redl & Wineman, 1966; Trieschman, Whittaker, & Brendtro, 1969; Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985). This legacy includes the Circle of Courage and Positive Peer Culture models of resilience and strength-based intervention (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002; Tate, Copas, & Wasmund, 2012).

The Monarch Institute curriculum encompasses key dimensions of learning represented in Monarch's Four Core Goal structure. Its various programs are grounded in a consilience of research associated with developmental psychology, neuroscience, and educational intervention. Meeting these four goals creates a pathway toward Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity:

- **Relationship Development** strengthens the ability to share mind, emotion, and action with others, including celebration, reciprocity, and restoration.
- **Self-Regulation and Self-Awareness** address the unique needs of learners to stay balanced physically, emotionally, and psychologically.
- **Executive Functions** equip individuals with the multitude of skills that decision makers need to perform increasingly complex tasks.
- **Academic and Professional Competence** builds cognitive, personal, and professional competencies necessary for life-long learning.

Each of these areas has developmentally sequenced, written objectives, drawn from a rapidly growing body of research in these four domains.

Students at Monarch progress through four developmental levels. The learning challenges at the Novice Level are emotional regulation and connection with an adult who teaches students to calm and follow adult instructions. At the Apprentice Level, students learn to accept coaching, expand language processing, and filter out distractions in order to fully participate in social and learning tasks guided by the adult. At the Challenger Level, students practice perspective taking, project planning, and participating in partnerships; the goal is learning to coordinate self with others. Finally, Voyager Level students practice personal initiative, becoming more self-reflective and self-organizing.

As they assume greater personal responsibility, these students explore their knowledge of self and others in multiple environments.

Reclaiming Strategies

Just as there is no such thing as a bad child, there is no such thing as a child who cannot learn. Children with autism and other neurological differences need opportunities for functional expansion to overcome obstacles. Monarch and Montcalm schools work to make learning environments less traumatic. Careful attention to lighting, sensory stimulation, classroom and play arrangements, and group structure are necessary. Visual schedules and predictable routines help take the chaos out of the learning environment.

Social and community opportunities must be carefully staged to assist students to find safety, connection, and meaning. A positive peer climate is essential for youth to experience teamwork, contribution, and celebration in their daily experience and is an integral part of the school day. Time and procedures to support recovery and repair miscommunication are a normal and daily practice. An offering to belong and to connect is intentionally and mindfully included throughout routines and schedules. Social engagements enable students to escape the panicked state of isolation that so many children with autism experience. A seventeen-year-old girl proudly showed her drawings of “my first sleepover” with the first real friend she had ever had.

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Problems are seen as opportunities for learning and growth. Students engage in hands-on projects and use alternate communication strategies, including technology and media. This draws out previously untapped potentials, strengths, and talents. Individuals with neurological differences are taking in all sorts of learning. It is how they give it back—what their output is—that becomes the learning challenge. As they gain in understanding of self and others, they build a sense of empathy essential to enduring relationships. Danny was furious at peers who teased him about his

severe neurological tics. When he learned to see this bullying as a problem of his provocative peers, he was able to calm and deal with this challenge in a more confident manner.

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Finally, students practice transition to independence by participating in meaningful work and community engagement. Students learn the skills of social interaction and the productive, meaningful engagement necessary for future employment. The tools, skills, and stamina for work are learned and practiced by students. Meaningful relationships empower youth to become independent problem solvers who can contribute within family and community. Many youth on the autism spectrum have remarkable assets which are clouded by their differences. The challenge is to uncover and nurture these strengths.

Kevin's Journey to Responsibility

Kevin was defiant, defeated, and disconnected. He had been removed from other settings because of violence with peers and teachers. He also experienced discord in the family and had been given a series of diagnostic labels including ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Mood Disorder, and Asperger's Disorder. When frustrated, he would blame others, become verbally abusive, and either flee or destroy school property and lash out at others. Kevin was bright enough to be able to mobilize peers against adults and provoke chaos. This is how he had learned to cope with a world he saw as dangerous and unpredictable. His first months after admission were more of the same, battling adults and peers. What was different was that Kevin was not removed. Instead, he was provided coaching and firm but respectful feedback.

One of Kevin's maladaptive strategies was kicking holes in walls. When his needs were not met, when held accountable for assignments, when he felt dominated by peers or authority, he would race to the nearest wall and give it a rageful boot. One particular day, he became frustrated and kicked a hole in the classroom wall. Faculty realized this was an opportunity to help Kevin learn new strategies to deal with anger.

At the earliest time for reflection, Kevin and his coach reviewed his care plan target for self-regulation. We had Kevin contact the maintenance supervisor, Mr. Ron, to make a plan for repair. They went on the web to Google the topic of “sheetrock repair.” Kevin developed a list of necessary materials and tools and went shopping with Mr. Ron for these. Kevin then followed the sheetrock repair instructions from the web, mentored by Mr. Ron. The process involved measuring and trimming drywall, taping, mudding, sanding, and painting. When the project was complete, both the wall and Kevin were restored. Kevin proudly posed for a photograph with his accomplishment.

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Beyond self-regulation, Kevin connected with an adult mentor, developed new competence, and took full ownership of his behavior. This seemed to mark a turning point. Kevin began to engage in learning and relationships, working to contribute to the community. He developed better strategies for coping with challenges. Now, he watches other students who are struggling and offers to help them. This newfound ability for connection and competence is seen in his investment in school, respectful relationships with family and teachers, and positive peer relationships.

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