Chang-yu Hsiao/ LBSC 622 Present/Write about Tech or a Program March 26, 2012

**Sensory Storytime for Children with Autism**

**The background and description of the program**

Current statistics released in December 2009 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention show that one in every 110 children is diagnosed with autism (Winson and Adams, 2010, p. 15), and some studies indicate that the prevalence rate of autism is increasing by 10-17 percent annually (Voors, ALSC Blog, June 25, 2011). The growing number of children with autism highlights that it is important for libraries to provide programs and supports to enhance their accessibility to the wide range of library services.

According to Autism Society of America, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental and spectrum disorder, typically appearing during the first three years of life. It affects each individual differently and at varying degrees. Akin and MacKinney (2004) pointed out that ASD refers to disruptions in development in three main areas: language and communication, social skills and sensory modalities, and behaviors. Thus, young people with ASD will benefit from oral reading, storytimes, multimedia, songs and literacy efforts (p. 35).

However, a child with autism experiencing the symptomatic motor and sensory processing difficulties might not be able to sit still or keep up with the activities during a regular storytime. As Akin and MacKinney (2004) described, many children with autism exhibit self stimulatory (stim) behaviors such as full body rocking, flicking fingers, flapping arms, or any repetitive non productive physical behavior. Some of them experience hypo- or hypersensitivity to noises, textures or smells common in libraries (p. 36).

Additionally, Ashley Waring (2012), the Children’s Librarian at the Reading Public Library, MA, observed that no matter how welcoming, friendly and inclusive the libraries are, families with autistic children may still refrain from bringing their children to “regular” storytimes for fear of disrupting the group and getting the “look” from other parents. Therefore, Waring emphasized that “offering a special program for these families is a powerful way to let them know they are welcome in your library” (Waring, ALSC Blog, March 14, 2012).

Therefore, in the past few years, more public libraries offer a sensory storytime, a free and specialized type of programming that makes sense for children with autism. It usually includes 15 to 20 minutes storytime and 10 to 15 minutes free play with sensory activities. Most of them are geared to preschool autistic 2-6 year olds and their family or caregivers (few of them include kids up to eight year olds) and are offered either once a week or once a month.

In accordance with the analysis of Parrott (2009), Voors (2011) and Waring (2012), the main features of the sensory storytime are:

1. In addition to incorporating some of the books, songs and movement activities typically found in a storytime, a sensory storytime can also incorporate sensory activities (beyond just sight and sound) such as balance beam or bean bag activities. Other examples include: making sensory masterpieces, using bubbles to improve oral motor skills, and Therabands (stretchy and colorful thick exercise bands, $9.40/6 yard on Amazon.com) or soft colorful scarves to provide sensory input (participants can bring their own scarves).
2. It is imperative to use a visual schedule, a simple pictorial representation of what will take place in storytime (some can be created by using Boardmaker software), because children on the spectrum like to know what is coming up. It helps reduce their anxiety.
3. Books used in a sensory storytime are somehow interactive. The picture books have flaps or can be manipulated by children (Press Here was a BIG hit). Stories are presented so that autistic children can take turns and get involved in the story experience. Picture books with repetitive language, adaptive books designed for autistic children and social stores that teach a social or behavioral skill with visuals are great choices, too.
4. It is important to eliminate extra chairs, posters and distractions from the room and to pay attention to the value of a time for kids to play and for parents to network after the storytime. It is best if no food is offered and perfume/hairspray and other scents are avoided.
5. Repetition, routine and predictability are very important with these kids. The more they are familiar with the songs and fingerplays, the more successfully they can interact with them. Repeating using them in each program would help set up the familiarity.

**How to present the Sensory Storytime**

Room setup: Use a contained program room with either an open space layout with floor mats, or a few defined zones or circles. Examples of zones include a storytime area, an activity area set up with the tables and supplies used for sensory activities, and a free area that is calm and plain, so children can escape if the other areas prove over stimulating at any point. It will be helpful to lay out some fun sensory items or fidget toys that are available from Lakeshore Learning website or stores, dollar stores or homemade supplies (Parrott, 2009).

Environment: Build a safe, soft, calm and quiet environment. Play some music in the background at the very beginning of the program and during the sensory activity. (Parrott, 2009) Choose music with a regular rhythm to facilitate movement and help with transitions (Read, 2009, p.14), and play it in a soft volume that will not overstimulate participants.

Based on the experience of Ashley Warning, a children's librarian in MA and Kiera Parrott, a children's librarian in CT, who are presenters of sensory storytimes, the basic general outline used for the Sensory Storytime could be:

* Welcome Song: “Hello Today and How are You?” (to the tune of London Bridge)
* Fingerplay: *Itsy Bitsy Spider* or *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*
* Action Song: *The Wheels on the Bus*
* Book: *The Bus for Us* by Suzanne Bloom
* Scarf play to music (on a CD player or sung by the group) or do physical stretch
* Therabands (sticky bubblegum song – Therabands “stick” to parts of their bodies)
* Book: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* By Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle.
* Sensory Activities: Bubble playing, bubble painting, making sensory masterpieces or balance beam activity.
* After storytime: Hand out feedback surveys to parents or caregivers.

**How to implement the sensory storytime at public libraries**

In addition to posting sensory storytime (marketed and targeted for autistic children and their family) on the public library website, library Facebook page and local newspapers, it helps to spread the word in the ASD community by contacting local and state autism organizations, autism research institutions and local support groups for autism families. Anne Leon, the executive Director of Public Library Service at the Alvin Sherman Library, Florida, suggests requiring preregistration to ensure small sessions (maximum of ten children with their parents or caregivers) and using parents as partners to maintain a strong focus on parent involvement in helping the library to create a positive experience for autistic children (Leon, 2011, p. 14).

Many autistic children have benefited from this program. For instance, after attending the sensory storytime every week at Gresham Library in Oregon, Valerie McClure noticed that her four-year-old daughter Keeleigh has become more responsive and comfortable with the presenter, and interacts more with other children, based on the news article in *The Oregonian*.

**Citation**

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