



ASPERGER  
CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

## **Cognitive Behavior Drama**

### **An Innovative Intervention Model for Children and Adolescents on the High End of the Autism Spectrum**

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*“I really despise the ones who describe aspies as “loners.” Okay, some aspies are loners. I’m to bet that for a lot of us out there, we’re only loners by default. You say loner, I say outcast. What’s the difference? A loner chooses to be alone; an outcast is there by the choices of others.”*

<http://www.lastcrazyhorn.wordpress.com>

Contrary to popular belief that people with autism prefer to be alone, rather than in the company of others; most high functioning individuals with autism and Asperger syndrome are desperate to make friends and fit in. However, they are often unable to figure out the rules of social interaction and slide into a solitary existence by default. Withdrawal may often be a survival mechanism for individuals with ASD, in order to avoid rejections, humiliations and bullying; or to distance themselves from an overwhelmingly demanding social world, where they never seem to get it right!

Retreating into their own worlds and engaging in solitary activities, such as watching television or playing computer games, may become dangerously gratifying for this population, with such habits threatening to become obsessive to the exclusion of any other activity. Furthermore, as they become increasingly more proficient in such solitary activities, their obsession about them becomes even more intensive, while, at the same time, their ability and willingness to engage in the social world shows a corresponding decline due to lack of practice, leading them to further avoidance of social situations.

A number of social skills interventions have been developed to address the social deficit of children on the autism spectrum, using explicit instruction, modeling and role playing in order to teach them the rules of social interaction. It has often been suggested that children with autism should learn these rules the same way one learns a foreign language ‘...they should learn what to say and how to say it’.

Although research suggests that children with autism are capable of learning the skills taught within the therapeutic context, there is no evidence that these skills were generalized, nor that they did produce meaningful changes in the participants’ overall social functioning. This is not surprising since the skills taught within the context of a social skills training may not be

reinforced in the real world, where no one situation is identical to another, and where what is appropriate in one occasion maybe inappropriate in another. For example, a child that may be praised in a social skills training class, impressing parents and relatives with his/her manners, may be picked on and severely bullied at the schoolyard for exhibiting the exact same behavior.

The root of the problem lies in that most social skills interventions fail to see social behavior as a complex and dynamic process contextually determined, and only view it as a set of discrete skills. The skills learned are therefore often of little relevance to the dynamic nature of real life social interaction, frequently making individuals with autism stand out even more, as they try to imitate neurotypical behaviors they have learned by rote. Furthermore, by turning social communication into yet another pedantic lesson of set rules that children with autism have to learn and abide, it is highly unlikely to nurture their desire for social interaction. If social interaction is just another task for children with ASD, no wonder they will opt to play computers games if they want a break.

Cognitive Behavior Drama (CBD) is a research-based intervention model that was originally developed, implemented and evaluated at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland. It is specifically designed to meet the needs of children on the high end of the autism spectrum, uniquely combining concepts and techniques from cognitive and behavior therapies with the art form of drama. The CBD model seeks to empower children with autism to take control over their lives by enabling them to realize that they do have a choice.

The overriding aim of the CBD model is to provide children with ASD the motivation to engage in the social world so that they can benefit from learning opportunities in their environment, as opposed to teaching them a set of skills. Drama is used as a means to entice them into engaging in social interactions and provide them with positive experiences that will reinforce further engagement, thereby more learning opportunities.

The method involves engaging the participants in exciting fictional scenarios and encouraging them to seek various solutions on numerous problems such as saving the chocolate factory; travelling to the place of the ice cream mountains, the chocolate rivers and the candy trees; flying with magic carpets; setting up their own business; bringing back home a missing child etc., that would not only empower them to develop self confidence but will also lead them to an understanding of causal relationships (e.g. how a different course of action/behavior may produce a different outcome).

In the course of their imaginary journeys the children have the opportunity to practice and develop a number of skills associated with communicative success, including: listening, turn taking, team working, initiating and responding to social initiations, recognizing and interpreting non verbal cues (body language, facial and vocal expression), self awareness and appropriate use of body language, verbal and vocal expression, and recognition and expression of emotions. Importantly, the children are never explicitly instructed to perform the target skills but are rather led through a problem-solving methodology to understand the functions that these skills serve and how these could help them to achieve their objectives. Motivation is based on understanding as opposed to reward, and reinforcement arises as a natural consequence.

Research results suggest the success of the CBD model with reported benefits in areas such as self-confidence, theory of mind, ability to differentiate between reality and fiction, flexibility to deal with new situations, tolerance, frequency and quality of engagement in pretend play, reduction of ritualistic mannerisms, and overall well being. But most importantly, one of the greatest achievements of the CBD model lies in the children's enjoyment and their enthusiasm to engage in the program.