Model Asperger Program
Summer 2010
Career Research and Development Program:
Brief Version of Program Description and Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

The Model Asperger Program (MAP) at Ivymount School serves students with average or above-average cognitive abilities with difficulties in social skills, executive functioning, flexible thinking, and self-regulation. The program used evidence-based practices and integrates social learning into all aspects of the school experience. Furthermore, MAP pilots new and innovative programming and encourages evaluation for efficacy whenever possible. The curriculum described in this report is just one of many that MAP has piloted and evaluated so that it can continue to grow and improve. The program currently serves students grades 2-10.

During Summer 2010, MAP piloted the Career Research and Development (CRD) Program to facilitate high school students' self-determination. The CRD Program was designed to increase students' self-knowledge, career awareness, and choice-making through both classroom and community-based experiences. Central to the CRD Program was the use of video camera by students and staff to document learning and enable self-reflection. This brief report summarizes program components, evaluation of program effectiveness, and recommendations for program improvement.

DATA COLLECTION

Program Description

The author conducted two group interviews with key staff from the MAP Summer 2010 CRD Program. Staff members were asked to describe the objectives of each of the five key program components, as well as provide details regarding program implementation. The author also reviewed key documents such as the course outline and lesson plans.

Program Evaluation

The author developed a staff interview protocol in collaboration with the high school coordinator, and conducted individual interviews with each of five key staff members. A survey instrument was also developed using Survey Monkey for use with participating students, and seven of the participating students responded.

Recommendations

As part of the staff interviews and student surveys, respondents were asked for feedback on how the CRD Program could be improved. Based on these responses, the author generated a list of recommendations.
PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Overview

For four weeks during the Summer of 2010, nine 8th to 10th grade students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) participated in the MAP CRD Program. The purpose of the program was threefold:

- expose students to a wide range of vocational options and provide opportunities to apply the MAP curriculum (especially social cognition and executive functioning skills) at actual job sites.
- Provide regular opportunities for self-reflection on personal strengths, weaknesses and preferences, as well as opportunities to practice perspective taking.
- facilitate self-determination through frequent opportunities for independent choice making choices and problem solving.

Key components of the program included:

Video Journal

The video journal was the cornerstone of the CRD Program. Students were required to complete weekly video segments about themselves. Topics included personal style preferences, friends and family, and interests and hobbies. Students used story boards to organize their ideas, shot video footage, and revised video segments to incorporate feedback from teachers and peers.

The purpose of the video journal was for students to use video cameras to understand that they have choices about how they present themselves to others, and to think more deliberately about the images they wish to present to others.

Get a Job

The purpose of “Get a Job” was to encourage students to think seriously about their career preferences and goals, and expose them to a range of real job settings. Students updated their resumes, completed an interest survey and an employment preference survey, and staged mock job interviews. Students also identified workplaces and/or jobs they wanted to learn more about. Based on their interests, staff scheduled group visits to jobsites, including an independent bookstore, chiropractic office, music studio, horse farm, and thrift store. At each of these jobsites, one student was required to interview an employee about his or her job. These interviews were videotaped and later discussed in class.

SSL Volunteer Site

The purpose of the SSL volunteer site was to provide an opportunity for students to experience a real job. Students worked each week at either the ReStore in Gaithersburg or The Nature Center in Locust Grove, and ate lunch with other volunteers. MAP staff did not act as job coaches, nor did they mediate interactions between students and bosses,
colleagues, and/or customers. This ensured that students were able to practice solving their own problems.

GQ

The purpose of GQ or “Style Preferences” was to make students more aware of their clothing and grooming choices, the wide array of appropriate options available to them, and the effect of their choices on how others see them. Topics addressed personal style preferences, dressing for specific events and contexts, seasonally appropriate apparel, and selecting clothing for comfort/sensory sensitivity.

Hang Time

The purpose of “Hang Time” was for students to learn how to be comfortable in unstructured social settings, with a focus on game playing. Although the goal of “Hang Time” was originally to include learning to play strategy games (e.g., Monopoly, Risk, and Stratego), tournament games, “need to know” games (e.g., poker, Cranium, and black jack), and improvisational comedy games, staff revised the curriculum in response to students’ needs for additional focus on instrumental skills such as turn taking, negotiating differences of opinions, coping with frustration, and winning and losing with grace. As a consequence, the curriculum covered only strategy games and improvisational comedy games.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Both staff and students were invited to evaluate the CRD Program in terms of effectiveness. Staff members participated in individual interviews and students participated in an online survey.

Staff Interviews

The following section describes staff impressions of what worked and did not work both overall and in terms of each of the key program components.

Overview

Overall, staff members were very positive about CRD Program outcomes. For example, one described the program as “absolutely successful,” and another described it as “universally successful for all kids.” Major points included:

- increased independence when problem-solving;
- improved self- and other-awareness;
- increased awareness of choices;
- ongoing challenge of self-reflection; and
- lack of sufficient program time to introduce/reinforce key concepts.
**Video Journal**

Staff agreed that the video journal component of the program was effective in meeting intended goals. Major points included:

- use of storyboarding to organize ideas (generalized throughout academic year);
- improved self-reflection;
- improved ability to give and receive constructive feedback;
- important opportunities for peer guidance;
- challenges related to certain topics such as the future.

**Get a Job**

Staff agreed that Get a Job was a success and that students “took seriously” the goal of thinking about and discussing plans for their post-high school lives. Major points included:

- thinking about job options;
- exposure to a variety of workplaces; and
- opportunities to practice job interviews.

**Student Service Learning (SSL) Volunteer Sites**

Staff agreed that SSL volunteer sites provided students with concrete job experience and real-world consequences. Major points included:

- improvements in independent problem solving;
- opportunities for natural social interactions; and
- importance of preparing students in advance regarding what to expect at volunteer sites.

**GQ**

Staff agreed that students were actively engaged in discussions and especially responsive to the personal preferences component of GQ. Major points included:

- opportunities for students to identify their personal styles;
- opportunities for thinking about self-presentation;
- improved awareness of choices; and
- need for hands-on experiences and greater emphasis on hygiene issues.
Hang Time

Staff members agreed that Hang Time provided a rare opportunity for students to participate in unstructured social situations, but were surprised by how challenging this was for them. Major points included:

- opportunities for developing both strategic (e.g., game playing) skills and social skills; and
- opportunities for identifying multiple ways of participating in hang time.

Student Surveys

Seven students completed a survey evaluating the CRD Program. Students were most enthusiastic about Video Journal, Get a Job, and Hang Time; and they reported learning most from Get a Job (even though they didn't particularly “enjoy” this component of the program), followed by Video Journal. They were least enthusiastic about GQ.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff recommendations for program improvements included:

Overall

- Allot more time for CRD Program activities.
- Integrate use of video throughout all components of the CRD Program.
- Improve documentation of CRD Program activities (e.g., comparing edited and unedited versions of videotapes, and having students type or dictate their reflections following visits to job sites).

Video Journal

- Start with a more concrete assignment (i.e., something focusing on the mechanics of videotaping rather than the content of self-reflection).
- Begin with a group project in order to better scaffold students’ learning processes.
- Require more consistent use of storyboards.
- Make assignments more structured.

Get a Job

- Provide more opportunities for students to conduct interviews (not everyone was able to do one).
- Spend more time visiting jobsites, rather than talking about jobs in a classroom setting.

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1 Students were surveyed more than six months after the conclusion of the CRD Program. As a consequence, student recall of specific details was limited.
Student Service Learning (SSL) Volunteer Site

- Expose students to a more diverse range of jobsites, including those with different expectations and rules.
- Provide opportunities for more hours at each jobsite.

GQ

- Include a field trip to a department store or mall as the culminating experience of the GQ part of the program.
- Invite teenagers from local high schools to talk about style.
- Include a segment on hygiene.

Hang Time

- Share video models of appropriate “Hang Time” behaviors.
- Develop individual plans for stressful situations.
- Include 15 minutes of reflection time (with or without the use of video) as part of each lesson.

Student recommendations for program improvements included:

- Increase the number of field trips.
- Provide more “hands on” experiences at job sites.
- Increase the range of job sites available.
- Provide more information about work environments.
- Offer more multiple choice “preference” surveys.
- Include more opportunities to engage in “Hang Time” type activities.

SUMMARY

Staff evaluations of the 2010 CRD Program were consistently positive. Staff agreed that in addition to having opportunities to observe and experience a variety of workplace settings, students were more self-aware and more adept at independent choice making by the end of the program. Staff gave high points to all five components of the CRD Program, but also generated a number of recommendations for improving the program in future, most of which were to increase embedded opportunities for practicing newly learned skills. As evidence of students’ improved ability to make choices and assert preferences, almost all generated recommendations for improving the program.