9-1-2005

Shifting Focus

Ann Carney

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.usfsp.edu/usf_mag_articles_usfsp

Recommended Citation
https://digital.usfsp.edu/usf_mag_articles_usfsp/35
It starts with a simple "no" in the cookie aisle. Quickly it escalates—a young child slapping, pulling his hair and knocking cans off the shelf. In no time he's on the floor, writhing, banging his head and sobbing uncontrollably. A crowd gathers.

To the boy's mother, the episode is just one more example of her failure as a parent. One more example of her inability to control her own child. In her mind, she's doomed; nothing will ever change.

But it can change, says USF St. Petersburg's V. Mark Durand, a world authority on developmental disabilities and child behavior. It can change if someone treats the parent first.
This summer, Durand and colleagues at the State University of New York in Albany will launch a five-year, multi-center study that could change the way psychologists help parents of special needs children. Earlier this year, Durand was awarded a federal grant from the highly competitive Innovations in Research program of the U.S. Department of Education. At more than $892,000, it is the largest research grant ever awarded at USF St. Petersburg.

For more than 25 years, Durand has studied severe behavior problems in children, particularly children with developmental disabilities like autism, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorders (PDD). In 1997, he was the catalyst for an amendment to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that bars schools from removing any child with a developmental disability without first completing a communication-centered assessment and training program to change inappropriate behavior.

The program, called Functional Communication Training, was first studied in 1985. It assumes that most inappropriate behaviors, such as biting oneself, are an attempt to communicate a message, such as a desire to stop doing an assigned task. Using Functional Communication Training, a child can be taught to replace the inappropriate behavior with an acceptable form of communication, such as saying "break." When implemented properly, the program, which Durand helped develop, can reduce inappropriate behaviors at home and at school by 90 to 95 percent.

Even so, 50 percent of families don't succeed at the program. They cancel scheduled appointments, make excuses and convince themselves nothing will work, despite compelling evidence to the contrary. Trying to understand why these families give up led Durand to his current research study.

Why, Durand wondered, would some children not succeed at a program that clearly works? For three years, Durand and colleagues studied a group of three-year-olds to understand why some would succeed at Functional Communication Training while others would fail.

Their conclusion was somewhat surprising. The best predictor of who would fail at Functional Communication Training, they found, were those children in families in which parents gave up—families in which parents were pessimistic about their child's behavior and their ability to change that behavior.

"IQ, diagnoses, communication abilities—we looked at all those factors. But the single best predictor of who would fail was parents who had given up," says Durand. "It's not about race or religion or education or income."

Giving up as a parent, says Durand, means seeing no light at
Psychology professor and autism expert V. Mark Durand was awarded an $892,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education—the largest research grant ever awarded at USF St. Petersburg. The grant will fund further research in Functional Communication Training, a program Durand helped develop, where children are taught to replace negative behaviors with acceptable forms of communication.

the end of the tunnel. It means feeling bad or guilty about the child’s condition. It means feeling incompetent as a parent.

Durand’s new study targets those parents.

Currently, Durand and his colleagues in St. Petersburg and at SUNY Albany are recruiting and assessing families for the study. Candidate families have a child age three to six with a diagnosed developmental disability such as autism. Additionally, the child’s parents score high on pessimism tests and already feel they are unable to control their child’s behavior. The study accepts both intact and single-parent families who meet the study criteria.

Families in the study will receive one-on-one therapy for a period of eight weeks, learning communication-based approaches to deal with current and future behavioral problems. Depending on when they are enrolled in the study, families will be followed up regularly for a period of two to four years. All sessions will be conducted at the USF Center for Autism or the University of Albany Center for Autism. Forty families, enrolled in waves, will be studied at each location.

Participating families will be randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group will receive one-on-one, state-of-the-art communication training, while the other group will receive one-on-one, state-of-the-art communication training combined with optimism training.

Durand hypothesizes that families in the group not receiving optimism training will leave the study quickly. He believes that families who receive optimism training will succeed at controlling the inappropriate behaviors of their children. That’s because parents come first in the group receiving optimism training.

“We’ll be talking to parents first,” Durand says. “We’ll be saying, ‘Let’s talk about you. What do you think about when your child is screaming in the supermarket?’”

“We want to get these parents to understand why they are feeling the way they are feeling and how their feelings interfere with their ability to control their child,” Durand says, adding that the thoughts and feelings of pessimistic parents are similar to those of depressed individuals.