



Creating Futures

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News Release

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Autism Workshops Making Connections

Parents and Educators come together to learn more about autism spectrum disorder

Fort Smith, NT – Since February, parents and education assistants have been meeting together to discuss their children and how they can work cooperatively to get meaningful improvements in the child’s development. A growing number of students have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the South Slave region over the last few years. Creating educational plans and interventions tailored to their needs can be very challenging.

Workshops are being held in Fort Smith and Hay River, led principally by Sheila Kindred, an inclusive schooling coordinator with the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) and Mario Milovac a Program Support Teacher at Harry Camsell School and Princess Alexandra School in Hay River. The workshops guide parents and educational assistants through the latest research around autism. The atmosphere is light and friendly and participants are invited to share anecdotes and observations. **“The most important thing to remember is that the parents are the experts,”** says Sheila Kindred, **“They spend more time and see their kids in more situations than we do. These workshops are about sharing information and giving everyone here more tools to be more effective.”**

The program was made possible by a \$25,000 grant from *Autism Speaks Canada*, a charitable organization aimed at improving the lives of everyone with autism spectrum disorders. The grant is aimed at building capacity and permanent resources for the South Slave region, sharable to partners across the North to benefit children with ASD, their teachers and families. Milovac reminds, **“This has been the second time we have partnered with *Autism Speaks Canada* to help us with our goal of building capacity within the region, so that knowledge is being shared with all stakeholders. It is valuable to learn from each other.”**

Participants are often engaged in enthusiastic, frank exchanges. Barb Brake, Fort Smith, has a son with autism, **“Reading about autism isn’t enough. Having this training and these conversations opened my eyes to new things. It is helping me deal with my son and I think everyone should take part; teachers, town staff, everyone.”** Diana Daniels and Sheila Evans, education assistants at Paul W. Kaeser High School and Joseph Burr Tyrrell Elementary School in Fort Smith respectively, agreed that there was tremendous value in the workshop and building stronger relations with parents. Evans added, **“We are sometimes asked to interpret for our**

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students. Trying to get inside their head and see the world as they do is a unique experience. This training has helped us to better understand the child.” Derise Rehm, who has an autistic step-son agreed, **“We are working together with the school better now and I am learning skills that I can apply outside of my relationship with Carter to diffuse situations that come up in everyday life.”**

Claire-Anne Bouchard, an Educational Assistant at Princess Alexandra School, agreed, **“We now have real concrete ideas and approaches to get to the nitty gritty to help our children.”** Parents in both communities were very happy for this training being available for free locally and not having to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars for conferences at their own expense.

The workshops are teaching participants how to respond to their child’s needs and work with them. During the sessions Kindred frequently reminded them, **“Every child is unique, there is no one form of autism.”** The wide-ranging presentation of strategies, ideas and experiences as well as a safe environment to openly discuss questions is fostering a positive approach for parents and educators to work together for the benefit of their children.

The training is divided into 6 sessions, being delivered concurrently in both Fort Smith and Hay River. The next session (5 of 6) in Fort Smith will be Tuesday, May 5 at the SSDEC regional office. The next session in Hay River will be May 8 at Harry Camsell School.