

New approach finds success in teaching youth with autism

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As the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders continues to increase, the one thing that won't change is the need for those children to develop social skills. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri are developing an effective social competence curriculum, with a virtual classroom component, that could help educators meet the demand of this growing population.

Janine Stichter, a professor of special education at the MU College of Education, and her team have developed a curriculum that has shown success in an after-school format and is now being tested during daily school activities, with help from two three-year grants from the Institute of Educational Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education. The key factors in Stichter's curriculum focus on specific needs and [behavioral traits](#) within the autism spectrum. By doing this, the instructor is able to deliver a more individualized instruction within a small group format and optimize the response to intervention.

"Children with autism have three core deficit areas: difficulty with communication, issues with [repetitive behaviors](#), and social competence," Stichter said. "Social competency has a big impact on communication and is essential for post-school outcomes. While there are several social curricula available, they haven't adequately discriminated between and targeted certain parts of the population. At MU, we've worked to develop intervention to meet specific needs, similar to a medical model for treating cancer: doctors don't use one treatment model for all forms of cancer, for example."

High-functioning children on the [autism](#) spectrum usually have trouble with determining and managing goals, understanding others' feelings, and regulating emotions. Stichter's curriculum focuses the student on recognizing [facial expressions](#), sharing ideas, taking turns, exploring feelings and emotions, and problem-solving.

"For parents, this means a reduction in the need to be shopping constantly for a program that fits their child. There's a tendency for programs to promote social skill development, but parents have a hard time determining if it fits their children; this program is structured so that parents know they have a good fit," Stichter said. "Also, this creates a model for schools so these lessons can be added to the student's overall educational experience, rather than an add-on to the student's schedule. To date, the special education teachers involved have been very pleased to have a comprehensive curriculum and with the outcomes for their students. Even general education teachers are saying 'show us more – we can use this with all of our kids.'"

The ultimate goal is to tailor the learning process for any student who has social competency issues. Part of that goal includes the continuing development of an internet-based, virtual learning environment that any school in the country could use. Stichter is currently collaborating on this project with James Laffey, professor in the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies, also in the College of Education.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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