

# Collaborative Team Teaching

The ASD Nest Program

Part 1:  
The Collaborative Mindset

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**F**inding an appropriate placement for children on the higher functioning end of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be a very daunting task. A self-contained special education class can often more easily provide the necessary academic and behavioral modifications, but may lack opportunities for socialization. In a general education class children with ASD can benefit from socializing with age-appropriate peers, however their special needs may not always be understood or met. Finding the right balance seldom occurs in one setting. So, where do children with ASD fit in? What type of setting best serves their needs? One model known as Collaborative Team Teaching, or CTT, may be just the answer.

In a typical CTT class, a special education teacher and a general education teacher work as a team in an integrated setting that includes students with disabilities and their typical peers. Most individual therapies for the child with ASD are provided outside the classroom setting. Although the needs of many children may be met via this model, children with ASD often present as puzzles. These children need a group of specialists who are good problem solvers, are flexible, and know how to de-escalate situations. In response to the growing needs of the ASD population, a specialized variant of the CTT model was created in 2003 when the New York City Department of Education (DOE) piloted the ASD Nest Program at Brooklyn's PS 32 school. Drawing its name from the concept of "nestling" children in a supportive community, the program extends the two-person team teaching concept to a multi-disciplinary team. This expanded team is able to cohesively address the specific challenges of children on the spectrum using a problem-solving approach.

The ASD Nest multi-disciplinary team consists of two classroom teachers (general and special education), a special education teacher to support the children during lunch, recess and special subjects, an occupational therapist, a speech/language pathologist, a social worker/guidance counselor, and a member of administration. Some key components

to the success of the program include: smaller class size and ratio, push-in therapies, social development intervention, weekly team meetings, mandatory pre-service training, and on-going professional development. (See sidebars for more detailed program information.)

The success of any CTT model depends on the team's approach. Each member must possess a particular mindset that fosters a collaborative relationship and can overcome the to-be-expected "bumps in the road." At Castlewood School's ASD Nest program in Bellerose, NY, our team has identified five essential components of a collaborative mindset: respect and trust, flexibility, co-ownership, humility, and a desire for continuous learning.

### Respect and Trust

Respect and trust among team members is the foundation of the collaborative mindset. Operating on the assumption that everyone is looking out for the children's best interests ensures that all opinions are respected. This is critical as each member brings a unique perspective and knowledge base that all team members must consider. For example, writing is one area that often presents a challenge to students with ASD. The classroom teachers may want to focus on helping the student generate ideas and build writing stamina. The speech therapist may focus on how to organize the child's thinking. The occupational therapist may identify the child's pencil grip as a problem. When team members demonstrate mutual respect, they are open to each other's ideas and suggestions, and are able to formulate a unified plan that incorporates diverse perspectives.

Building respect and trust takes time and effort. It does not happen automatically. Team members must work consciously to foster an environment in which trust and respect will flourish. We start each year with a team-building activity to "break the ice" and help team members get to know one another. This jump-starts the process of collaboration and encourages communication.

Creating an atmosphere of direct and open communication goes hand-in-hand with building respect and trust. While an intervention plan is being created, interruptions by one team member may overshadow the suggestions of another. It is important for members to "check in" with each other to make sure egos are intact. If there is a conflict between team members, it is essential that those individuals converse with each other, privately and in a professional manner, to resolve the situation.

### Flexibility

Team members must be willing to accept the ideas of others and be flexible even when they disagree. During a case conference, members brainstorm strategies they hope will help a child. Sometimes those ideas may conflict. Once the team reaches consensus on a plan of action, it's important for all members to agree to implement the plan in a cohesive way, regardless of their personal feelings.

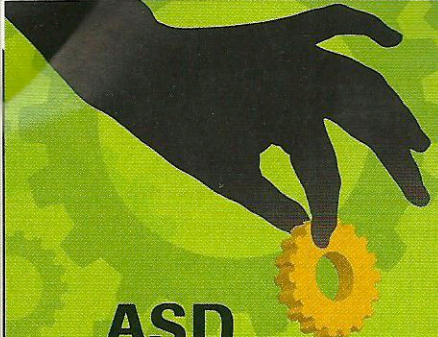
### Co-ownership

Most classroom teachers spend their day with minimal adult interaction. Once the classroom door is closed, the teacher is in charge and responsible for most decisions. However, the CTT model challenges

## The ASD Nest Model - History

- Pilot class: 2003 at PS 32 in Brooklyn, NY - 9 children on the spectrum
- Geared to individuals with higher functioning autism/Asperger's
- Work of then Superintendent of NYC DOE District 15 Carmen Farina
- Grown with support from recently retired Linda Wernikoff, Executive Director of the Office of Special Education Initiatives, NYC Department of Education
- University partners - Dr. Shirley Cohen, Professor of Special Education at Hunter College, NYC and Dorothy Siegel, ASD Nest Project Director, New York University
- As of 2009: servicing 300 children in 16 elementary and two middle school sites
- September 2010: anticipate approximately 375 students total with five new middle schools added two years thereafter





## ASD Nest Model in a Nutshell

### Class size:

- 12 students in each kindergarten class; 16 students in Grades 1 – 3; 20 students in Grades 4 –5
- Four students with high functioning autism/Asperger's Syndrome per class
- Two Nest classes per grade

### Co-teaching model:

- Two classroom teachers, one certified in special education and one in general education
- Special Education Cluster teacher travels with class to specials (music, art) and to instructional lunch and recess

### Social Development:

- Social Development Intervention (SDI) provided five periods per week in kindergarten and three periods in 1st grade and above

### Home-school connection:

- Home and school visits before children enter program
- Two-way communication notebook
- Monthly parent group meetings

**Specialized pre-service training** for staff at Hunter College

### Multi-disciplinary team

consists of all Nest teachers, a speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist, social worker, and administration

### 90-minute weekly team

meetings to “case conference” individual children and provide time for professional development

teachers to change that mindset. What was once done alone now is done as a team. A teacher no longer refers to “my student” or “my classroom,” but “our student” and “our classroom.” This is the essence of co-ownership. Co-ownership means shared decision-making as well as co-teaching. The ASD Nest program extends the idea of co-ownership to the entire multi-disciplinary team.

### Humility

Humility is another important component of working well together. Team members must focus on the best interest of the child and not one's personal gain or validation. Professionals with more experience, and those who often have great ideas need to recognize that others may have equally good or better suggestions. The importance of this component was illustrated when one of our co-teaching teams disagreed on which classroom management strategy to use. Each teacher felt strongly that her chosen strategy was the best option. Following much discussion, the team agreed to implement one strategy. After a couple of weeks, it became apparent that the chosen strategy was not working as well as the team had hoped. The team agreed to try the other strategy, which worked. For the teacher whose idea didn't work out, having humility—putting the child's needs first and ignoring her own ego—was absolutely necessary for the team to move forward.

### Desire for Continuous Learning

Being open to continuous learning is the fifth component essential to the collaborative mindset. The team meeting structure can support continuous learning by dedicating time to continued professional development. For example, six of our team members attended a two-day conference with experts in the autism field, such as Tony Attwood, Temple Grandin, and Jed Baker. When they returned to school, the participants shared what they had learned with the team. It is important that team members regularly seek out and share new research findings, cutting-edge

ideas and practical strategies. The collaborative mindset is about working with, and learning from, each other.

### The Benefits

A supportive, respectful and flexible mindset is the key to the success of any collaborative team model. In our ASD Nest CTT model, this shared positive mindset has created a win-win environment for all members of the school community. The collaborative language, as well as instructional and classroom management techniques, have migrated throughout the school. The children reap the benefits when team members work well together, learn from each other, and plan cohesively. Instead of benefiting from just one teacher's ideas, the children have an entire network of experts to provide intervention, instruction, and support. The collaborative mindset provides Nest team members with many opportunities for professional and personal growth.

Working with children with ASD can be challenging. However, when one is part of a strong collaborative team, the rewards far outweigh the difficulties! As industrialist Henry Ford once said, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

Stay tuned for Part 2 of this article in the next issue: the “nitty gritty” of how to implement a CTT model such as the ASD Nest program. ■

\*For a more thorough description of the ASD Nest program, see Cohen, S. et al. (2009). *The ASD Nest Program: A Model for Inclusive Public Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. TEACHING Exceptional Children, vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 6–13.

The authors – special and general educators, a social worker, a speech-language pathologist, and a principal – comprise part of the ASD Nest team at the Castlewood School (PS 186). The Castlewood School is recognized as an exemplary inclusion school by the New York State Education Department.