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Interview with Kathi Calouri, Ph.D.

By Stephen M. Edelson, Ph.D.

Kathi, Can you explain how a Family Immersion Model of service differs from a traditional model of service for families with a child with A.S.D.:

One of the strongest indicators of a successful intervention for A.S.D., or for any childhood disability, lies in how competently a family can address a child's goals and incorporate effective strategies into the flow of their daily lives. A Family Immersion Model strongly influences new learning and retention for each family member because families live away from their own homes for a period of time, often one week. In a unique environment and with professional support, a family can affect change in their challenges that are often elusive in more traditional service models. A Family Immersion Model teaches a life-style while guiding the family within a home environment and within the community. A Family Immersion Model of service is designed to help restore a family's confidence and competence while guiding their child during the course of their daily lives in a home setting and in the community. Focusing on "real-life situations," a Family Immersion Model helps empower parents and restore confidence.

The goal is to guide competence within the family's interactions by exploring and discovering effective strategies specific to each parenting style within the family. This insures greater success of carry over and developmental progression. Professionals break down theory to practical day-to-day application that parents can readily recognize and apply to change their family's future for the better. Professionals working within the Family Immersion Model teach families how to remediate the core deficit areas of a diagnosis while strengthening and nurturing relationships within the family. Rather than interfere with family life, professionals want to help parents learn how to assess and develop compensatory systems that lead to a higher quality of life. They help families enjoy being a family, regardless of the obstacles they face. In an effective Family Immersion Model, the home environment allows everyone to feel comfortable. The full days spent in a unique environment with professional support helps families immerse themselves in the therapeutic lifestyle without feeling rushed.

In a Family Immersion Model, professionals are entrenched with the parents, sharing their observations and expertise in every aspect of daily life. For example, the professional might go grocery shopping with the family or eat a meal together at a restaurant. The professional can offer guidance on all aspects of the adventure, including planning the outing, the transitions within the activity, the challenges and joys of the adventure, and the wrap-up of the event. Many families struggle with community based activities such as getting a hair cut, going to the zoo, or running errands. Many families struggle with home based activities such as getting dressed, doing chores, or family play time. Professionals working in a Family Immersion Model help families get a better handle on these regularly occurring aspects of typical family life.

How does a Family Immersion Model of service differ from working with a family in their own home?

During an immersion experience, the absence of familiar routines and structures provides a catalyst for change for everyone in the family. The absence of routines means that more choices and decisions have to be made. The “routine” doesn’t make the choice, the family does. An immersion experience creates a rare opportunity to jump out of a family’s typical routine and focus on areas of difficulty while considering which compensations help and which compensations hinder the growth of the child. Then, even when families return to their own home with the usual responsibilities and routines, they have a renewed focus on the priorities of their family’s goals and on various strategies for reaching those goals.

After a Family Immersion experience, families leave with a better understanding of how the diagnosis of one or more family member impacts the entire family system. For very good reasons, when a family member receives a diagnosis of any type of delay, parenting strategies can be heavily influenced by the parents’ uncertainty about how best to guide their child. Thus, the intent of an immersion experience is to help parents assess the pattern of development unfolding within the child and determine what experiences will promote progression. The goal of a Family Immersion Model is to help parents review their parenting style and parenting strategies and discover their own vision and abilities for raising their children.

What can parents expect from a Family Immersion Model of service?

Families are guided to discover a higher quality of life, without the diagnosis overriding all aspects of their personal and professional lives. An immersion experience intends for parents to remain or become the most influential force in the development of their child. Along the way, parents can rediscover the joy of parenting, not just the burden of responsibility. In a Family Immersion Model, professionals partner with parents to help inspire parents to think about their children in a new way, nurturing their strengths and supporting their challenges.

A Family Immersion Model of service provides a family with the rare opportunity for both parents to listen to the same information, at the same time. This gives both parents the opportunity to ask questions, share their own perspectives, and filter the discussions through their understanding of their unique relationship with their child. This is a very powerful strength of a Family Immersion Model of service. With traditional hourly therapy sessions, one parent usually attends therapy appointments and conferences while the other parent cares for the child or goes to work. Thus, one parent typically carries the burden of having new information that must be disseminated to the other parent. Conversely, one parent can often feel disconnected from the child and uncertain what his/her role can be. An immersion experience is the great equalizer, allowing each parent to contribute, learn, and develop a level of understanding based on a uniquely shared experience. For very important reasons, any two parents can have different concerns, expectations, and accommodations for their children. In an immersion experience, both

parents are learning how to leverage their unique abilities and perspective on how to help the child.

A core goal of the Family Immersion Model is to create a safe environment for parents to discover their competence and confidence. Families dealing with ASD need to make many unique decisions regarding support therapies, medications, diets, and education. An immersion experience does not replace the many effective services for children with ASD. However, after an immersion experience parents may collaborate more successfully with service providers. Some parents have reported a decrease in services from outside providers as their own competence and confidence increases, thus reducing a financial burden on the family. A Family Immersion Model is not a methodology, but rather a lifestyle approach to how parents can create a higher quality of life by making informed decisions that best fit their family.

Does an Immersion Model of service include the whole family?

A Family Immersion Model of service should include the entire family. In family-centered intervention, families are encouraged to bring all of their children. This helps the professional staff better understand the entire family system. Like “real life,” all of the children should participate in the day’s activities. Many siblings are grateful for an immersion experience. As often is the case, siblings are expected to be very flexible, compensating for a non-flexible sibling. Often siblings are extraordinarily compassionate and are eager to help. They are thrilled to have an effective role with their brother or sister. All too often, siblings are frustrated by the amount of time their parents spend with their brother or sister and are relieved that some new strategies may give their parents a better handle on the child with challenges and free up time for the other children.

Why does a Family Immersion Model of service work?

A Family Immersion Model works because parents are empowered to regain the primary role in the growth and development of their child and their family. Families are supported and guided in practical everyday situations, as they develop and grow the relationships within their family. Families learn to recognize which experiences are related to a diagnosis and which are not. When a parent can make this crucial, fundamental distinction, they can begin to create experiences that foster developmental progression within everyday interactions.

For more information about one Family Immersion Model of service for families with a child with autism, please contact PACE Place at (503) 356-8334 or visit their website at www.paceplaceinc.com.