

Utilizing the Sanford Harmony Program for

Children on the Autism Spectrum

Jennifer Kampmann and Mary Bowne

South Dakota State University

Abstract

This article introduces readers to a collaborative community of practice that implemented the Sanford Harmony curriculum, a curriculum that was implemented at a social skills camp for children who were *typical developing*, as well as children on the autism spectrum. Even though a small number of families enrolled in the camp, several positive results and benefits emerged after a two-week implementation period. In addition, several potential directions for using the Sanford Harmony curriculum emerged for this type of experience.

Keywords: Sanford Harmony program, play-based curriculum, school counselors, autism spectrum disorder, collaboration

Utilizing the Sanford Harmony Program for Children on the Autism Spectrum

The Sanford Harmony curriculum is a pre-K through sixth grade program that focuses on affective skills development, specifically in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. The no-cost curriculum, aligned with CASEL and Common Core standards, offers practical strategies, stories, activities, and lessons that focus on skill development for children to improve relationships, empathy, and confidence.

The social skills camp was designed to be a bridge between the end of the academic school year and special education summer school for pre-K and kindergarten students on the autism spectrum, as well as *typically developing* peers, by utilizing both teachers and counselors as the curriculum planners, implementers, and assessors. The camp's purpose was to practice social emotional skills in a play-based, inclusive type setting as a complement to an applied behavior analysis (ABA) curriculum. ABA (based on behavioral modification, also called behavioral engineering) is a research-based method of reinforcing a child to behave in a desired way by using positive reinforcements and an antecedent-behavior-consequence model to help them understand how to respond in social and emotional situations (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968; Pierce & Cheney, 2017).

Social skill growth is a vital component of intervention for children on the autism spectrum. Social skills deficits are common among children who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and typically manifest at a very young age. Common difficulties include initiating social interactions, responding to the social initiations of

others, initiating or responding to joint attention, and recognizing their own emotions (Gillis & Butler, 2007). Areas of social deficiency frequently observed in children ages three to five with ASD include social play, dramatic play, friendship-seeking behavior, and cooperative play. According to a 2020 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as many as one in 54 children has been identified with ASD (CDC, 2020).

Current curricular trends in P-12 education are concerned with producing college- and career-ready youth to be productive members of a democratic society. When public policy relegates the value of success to test score performance, it is very possible to overlook the consequential link that half of success is founded on the *belief* that one can succeed (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007). If schools want youth to succeed in more meaningful ways, content learning should be complemented by the growth of social and emotional development. A 2010 study researching the impact of social-emotional learning on literacy intervention supports the idea that content learning does not happen in a vacuum; affective development drives the rate at which content acquisition and maintenance are achieved (Jones, Brown, Hoglund, & Aber, 2010). Given this association, one strategy that warrants investigation is how school counselors can act as co-facilitators of content learning. School counselors have specialized skills that may assist teachers in documenting changes in affective skills and becoming more emotionally responsive during differentiated learning (Greene, 2005). For students who struggle with learning in the typical classroom, affective development can be vital (Gillis & Butler, 2007). It has long been noted that the self-fulfilling prophecy impacts a student's ability to achieve and thrive. The researchers in

this project aimed to provide explicit instruction and practice on the foundational skills of early childhood to children who struggle with social interactions.

School counselors provide prevention and intervention programming along with classroom guidance curriculum to students through individual counseling, small group counseling, and classroom teaching. These interactions often occur without teachers being involved, as counselors may visit classrooms while the teachers are completing other tasks. For example, counselors may teach classroom guidance lessons on topics such as anger, grief, behavior, relationships, self-esteem, or family issues. School counselors can be collaborative partners in finding strategies and curriculum that will support academic, career, and social/emotional needs within and outside of the classroom setting. In order to achieve this collaboration, changes may be needed in schools and in counselor education programs where students learn to become counselors (Barrow & Mamlin, 2016). This sort of collaboration may be developed and enhanced through a concept known as a community of practice (CoP). A CoP is a group of professionals who work together on common goals and/or professional interests to improve practices by sharing knowledge, insights, and observations (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Program Structure and Assessment

A team of researchers, undergraduate students, teachers, and counselors worked together as a CoP to formulate the daily schedule, curriculum, potential program goals and outcomes, and potential individual goals and outcomes for each child enrolled. The overall goal was to evaluate if the Sanford Harmony curriculum improved social competencies for children on the autism spectrum. The team wanted to find a

neutral, central location with observation capabilities that could house groups of children in a play-based setting. Few were present in the Midwestern rural area even though the public schools and local preschools were not in session for the academic school year. The team chose the local Boys and Girls Club Early Learning Center due to limited access to suitable sites and to an existing relationship with the Boys and Girls Club.

Participants

Marketing, through emails and flyers, began by focusing on a special education preschool classroom in a local school district and a pre-K program at the Boys and Girls Club. After a few weeks of targeted marketing, the camp was open to the public. The children who were enrolled were typical and atypical in development with most being on the autism spectrum. If families enrolled their child in the preschool summer camp, they provided consent for the researchers to observe and assess their individual child. Children also gave consent prior to collecting data.

Camp Structure

Sessions were held from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. so that parents could choose which session their child could attend so as to not interfere with their child's other summer enrichment activities. The schedule began with free play where children could explore various areas set up in the classroom. Next, group time contained structured activities to support the Sanford Harmony curriculum lesson of the day. Harmony instruction time and reflection followed with the remaining time designated for outdoor play. The lead teacher incorporated traditional ABA programming with play-based lessons. The ABA process was used to address any immediate behavioral needs and to improve a child's quality of life by giving him/her

tools to interact with others and to self-regulate. The team met before and after each class daily to discuss the activities planned, individual behaviors, familial requests, and potential changes that should be made for the present or upcoming day of camp. See Table 1 for an example of a large group time activity.

Table 1

Day 1 Large Group Activity

Skill	Activity	Process
Sanford Harmony Preschool Unit 2 – Lesson 2.1 Identifying Emotions	Large Group Time How are you feeling?	Each child was asked to point at the whiteboard to a picture representing how they were feeling that day. The full choice of emotions was reviewed by the group before the chosen child would identify their emotion. That child would then show everyone how that emotion looked by making a facial expression and verbally expressing how they were feeling. The teacher would then recognize the efforts of that child before the next child had their turn.

Families could observe from the observation booth, which offered a unique way to view their child's interactions and behaviors. Families also spoke directly to the teachers upon arrival and departure from the camp each day.

Assessment

Data were collected from family members as well as the children enrolled in the summer camp. Families who enrolled a child in the camp were asked to complete an introductory online survey, which gathered information about their individual child. The information concentrated on identifying the child's strengths, social skills needing improvement, challenges in the classroom, strong fears or aversions, and successful

calming strategies that worked for the family and classroom teacher, and general demographic information.

The families also completed a follow-up survey regarding their satisfaction with the camp and to provide feedback for future camps. The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment-Clinical Form (DECA-C) was used as a pre- and post-assessment since the primary purpose of the camp was to evaluate healthy social and emotional growth. The DECA-C was also used to help identify children who may need special services. The pre-assessment was completed with the children on the first day of the camp and the post-assessment was conducted during the last two days of the camp.

Outcomes

Most parents noticed improvement in their children's self-awareness, as indicated by the information gathered during the post survey. For example, one family stated that their child started to verbalize his feelings, regulate emotions, and had fewer issues during transitions. In addition, DECA-C data indicated that all but one child made gains in the social emotional area; however, quantifiable data were not included because the data were not statistically significant. However, qualitative data showed positive results using the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Preschool Program (2nd ed.). The DECA is comprised of scales for Attachment/Relationships, Initiative, Self-Regulation, Total Protective Factors (a scale that combines the Attachment/Relationships, Initiative, and Self-Regulation scales), and Behavioral Concerns. Although the camp was short in duration and there were many confounding variables, the assessment results from the DECA scales indicated the following observations for the nine students assessed:

- Increase for all nine students with special needs in Initiative scale,
- Increase for eight students with special needs in Self-Regulation scale,
- Increase for five students with special needs in Attachment/Relationships scale, and
- Decrease for eight students with special needs in Behavioral Concerns scale (decrease represents a perceived improvement).

All the students showed improvement in one or more of the areas assessed. The impact that teaching social skills to students with special needs during their school day may benefit them for a lifetime.

One child did not show improvement in the assessment. The mother stated the child was having various issues during the camp, including losing his glasses, not getting enough sleep, and having problems at home. These issues may have affected his progress in the program. In addition, the researchers and teachers all reported improvement in social awareness and self-regulation, particularly the ability to identify and verbalize emotions and to regulate interactions with others through formal and informal observations.

The team also valued the importance of collaborating with one another on various aspects related to the camp, such as scheduling, curricular implementation, and assessment. When asked what the future held for the summer camp, the entire team agreed that a CoP was the preferred method for everyone involved as it may have influenced student outcomes and it helped meet the needs and aspirations of the camp instructors and staff.

Discussion

There were many benefits associated with this camp. Although not planned originally, an adult/student ratio of 1:2 increased the number interactions and the one-on-one attention that was provided to each student. The head teacher was also highly qualified due to her educational background and years of experience in working with children with special needs, particularly children on the autism spectrum. In addition, both assistant teachers had knowledge and experience working with children with special needs. The school counselors assisted with guidance strategies, intervention strategies, family communication, and referred children if situations were noted. The counselors were also trained to deliver and analyze the assessment tool used and the Sanford Harmony curriculum. Daily discussion of these strategies and interventions maintained ongoing communication and collaboration for the instructional team.

The observation booth provided an additional benefit for a play-based curriculum. Families, teachers, counselors, and researchers could observe in a neutral, non-school space. Children played in a natural setting, unaware that others were observing them. Communication strategies with parents included traditional (face-to-face) and virtual (electronic and social media) methods. Sensitivity and respectful dialogue were essential communication elements for interactions with and among parents.

Last, the Sanford Harmony program works specifically on affective skill development in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness – all significant topics for children with ASD. Since the camp was inclusive, children who were typical and atypical could learn from each other as well as benefit from this type of curriculum.

Limitations

This project had several significant limitations. First, there was a small number of participants enrolled in the camp. Consequently, in this exploratory project, there is no way to assess probabilities or to generalize the data collected to a larger population. There was an inadequate balance of typical versus atypical children for comparative reasons, with most children being on the autism spectrum. The researchers believed that extending the length of camp to another week or two and hosting the camp a few weeks prior to school starting would provide better results, not only for the children's development but for school readiness aspects.

Implications for School Counselors

When planning this type of camp, the researchers encourage school counselors to form a multi-disciplinary team approach in order to gain multiple insights, ideas, and strategies to help improve children's learning and social-emotional development. In addition, using a CoP approach encourages a team to work collaboratively on shared goals and/or interests related to children and their families. Consistency is an important element. The Sanford Harmony is a free curricular program with specific lessons in place that focus on children's social-emotional development and this curriculum may be offered on a continual basis.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Since the children showed improvement from the two-hour, two-week sessions, longer sessions and more days could be offered to increase the children's development. A longer time period would also allow a school counselor to complete different types of pre- and post-assessments related to various developmental domains. The type of

environment and the curriculum used benefitted the participants, so the same location, curriculum, and staff will be utilized again. The collaboration among highly trained and experienced team members provided a well-planned and executed, family supported, nurturing, and safe environment for the children to explore and improve their social emotional learning. Utilizing a CoP may increase the efficacy of the design, implementation, and assessment of an effective academic program.

References

- Baer, D. M., Wolf, M. M., & Risley, T. R. (1968). Some current dimensions of applied behavior analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 1(1), 91-97. doi:10.1901/jaba.1968.1-91
- Barrow, J., & Mamlin, N. (2016). Collaboration between professional school counselors and special education teachers. *Vistas Online, Sponsored by the American Counseling Association*. Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/article_427cfd25f16116603abcacff0000bee5e7.pdf?sfvrsn=e2eb452c_4
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Data and statistics on autism spectrum disorder. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>
- Gillis, J. M., & Butler, R. C. (2007). Social skills interventions for preschoolers with autism spectrum disorder: A description of single-subject design studies. *Journal of Early & Intensive Behavior Intervention*, 4(3), 532-547.
- Greene, M. J. (2005). Teacher as counselor: Enhancing the social, emotional, and career development of gifted and talented students in the classroom. *Gifted Education International*, 19, 226-235.
- Jones, S. M., Brown, J. L., Hoglund, W. L. G., & Aber, J. L. (2010). A school-randomized clinical trial of an integrated social-emotional learning and literacy intervention: Impacts after 1 school year. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 78(6), 829-842.
- Lave, J., & Wenger E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pierce, W. D., & Cheney, C. D. (2017). *Behavior analysis and learning: A biobehavioral approach* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Radley, K. C., O'Handley, R. D., Battaglia, A. A., Lum, J. D. K., Dadakhodjaeva, K., Ford, W. B., McHugh, M. B. (2017). Effects of a social skills intervention on children with autism spectrum disorder and peers with shared deficits. *Education and Treatment of Children* 40(2), 233-262.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

White, S. W., Keonig, K., Scahill, L. (2007). Social skills development in children with autism spectrum disorders: A review of the intervention research. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 37(10), 1858-1868.

Biographical Statements

Jennifer A. Kampmann, Ed.D. is an assistant professor at South Dakota State University. Dr. Kampmann is also the assistant department head in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership and the coordinator of assessment and accreditation for the College of Education and Human Sciences. In addition to her teaching work in the early childhood education program, she has been a Sanford Programs ambassador since 2015 where she has been working with school counselors on implementing the Sanford Harmony program into their daily practice. Dr. Kampmann has also been working with school counselors and Harmony curriculum across eastern South Dakota in the Boys & Girls Club's Power UP summer programs. Her teaching expertise is in the area of curriculum, assessment, and affective learning.

Mary Bowne, Ed.D., is a professor at South Dakota State University. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in the early childhood education program of the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership. Her expertise is in the area of parenting, child development, wellness, professionalism, and curriculum. She has served on numerous organizations and committees at local, state, and regional levels, advocating for and supporting children and families in various ways.