

Impact Case Study

UoA 4: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience

Bringing a Science of Behaviour to the Community

Recent years have seen a surge in the number of children and young people being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Ulster University has been at the forefront of research in addressing the needs of these children and their families.

In 1997 Ulster University Professor Mickey Keenan, moved by the plight of a local family, offered free training in the science of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to parents of children with ASD. The forty families who came to his teaching sessions from all across Northern Ireland helped him set up a local charity called "Parents Education as Autism Therapists" (PEAT) to help others in a similar situation to themselves. Since its foundation PEAT has helped over 800 families to learn the principles of ABA. PEAT has also received several Big Lottery grants to offer free home visits and support to families, and to offer solutions to families whose children have been, or are in danger of, exclusion from School. Thirty seven American states have passed legislation mandating insurance companies to provide the same science promoted by PEAT as treatment for autism.

Ulster University was also approached by local parents to set up a Masters level course in Applied Behaviour Analysis to ensure international standards of training. In 2006 Ulster University met this challenge by setting up the MSc in ABA. The course has very strong links with the New England Center for Children in Boston USA – a world leading centre for research and behavioural interventions for children and young people with ASD. In order to meet the demand of parent training a certificate level on-line course has also been running since 2008.

Due to a mismatch in Europe between increasing rates of autism diagnosis and the availability of professionals trained in ABA two Leonardo Da Vinci Lifelong Learning programmes were carried out in 2008 and 2011 lead by Ulster University in conjunction with European partners (i.e., Spain, Germany, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, Iceland, Sweden, and Portugal). The STAMPPP (Scientific Treatment for Autism: A Multimedia Presentation for Parents and Professionals) translated and expanded upon a multimedia presentation based on an educational pack called "Simple Steps" (www.simplestepsautism.com) developed by Ulster University in conjunction with a local autism charity (Parents Education as Autism Therapists) and QUB. Through the use of video footage tutorials, animations, and interactive exercises, parents were taught the basic principles of behaviour analysis to allow them to 1) understand why their child's behaviour was occurring, 2) reinforce the appropriate behaviours in which their child already engaged and teach new skills, 3) decrease those behaviours which inhibit a child's ability to function successfully in their community, and 4) develop data-driven, evidence-based programmes in conjunction with their ABA professional.

Feedback from the projects showed that parents strongly agreed that the tool helped them

- understand their child's behaviour
- decrease inappropriate behaviour
- teach new skills

Parents also noted that the multimedia presentation was easy to understand and use, and made a significant difference to their child and family. The resource was also available continuously and was therefore easily accessible when required.

For further information on the Simple Steps resource visit www.simplestepsautism.com and for more information about the development of Simple Steps see www.stamppp.com.