

Potential of Autistic Children
From the Northeast Region Community Booster
Monday March 11, 2002 By Dennis Hegland

A week-long workshop in Nipawin has provided new hope for the parents of autistic children in the northeast region.

Thirteen individuals, most of them teacher's aides, took advantage of the special workshop, organized by SASKFEAT and financed by the provincial government, to familiarize themselves with the special needs of children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

Conducting the workshop was Dr. Janet A. Butz of Las Vegas, Nevada and originally of Nipawin. She is the daughter of Ron and Marg Currie of Nipawin.

Assisting her was Denice Donahue, a senior therapist with Technology Enhanced Education (TEE) of Las Vegas, a group with which Dr. Butz is an educational consultant.

At the workshop, held in classroom space at L.P. Miller Comprehensive School in Nipawin, the 13 participants had an opportunity to gain hands-on experience with autistic children by working with four children from the northeast region who have been diagnosed with the neurological disorder.

The children's parents were also present during the week as observers – and they were impressed with what they saw and learned.

Among the parents in attendance were Tim and Lynn Verklan of Nipawin, whose efforts in support of their young son Joel have led to the formation of SASKFEAT (Saskatchewan Families for Effective Autism Treatment Inc.), the organization through whose auspices funding for workshop was realized.

Lynn Verklan has seen her son make great strides since the family has become involved with the teaching methods of Dr. Butz a year ago and sees great potential for continued improvement as persons in the health and educational systems receive specialized training.

“The goal of parents is to have their children mainstreamed in the educational system,” she said. “All four of these kids have a lot of potential, they are cognitively very bright. We must not lower our expectations for them.”

The workshop was geared for participants from the northeast region to receive introductory training in the principles of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) and intervention strategies such as Discrete Trial Instruction (DTI), while providing them with the opportunity to work with a variety of children.

Dr. Butz extended congratulations to the SASKFEAT organization and the parents involved for organizing the workshop, noting that some of the parents had taken the week off work to be involved in the exercise.

Also giving up a week's holiday to take part in the workshop were the 13 participants, most of them teacher's aides from the Nipawin and Tisdale school divisions.

Each of the 13 received a Certificate of Participation at the conclusion of the week, recognizing “an overwhelming level of commitment and support.”

Dr. Butz said that the participants had been asked to make a midweek evaluation of the program and those evaluations had been “very positive.”

The former Nipawin resident, a graduate of the University of Saskatchewan (BA and B.ED.), is among the leaders in dealing with autistic children in North America.

Currently serving as a consultant for several families with autistic children in Saskatchewan, she received her doctoral degree in Special Education from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in 1999 and also has an (MA) in Special Education from California State University, Dominguez Hills.

Dr. Butz also completed graduate course work in Applied Behavioral Analysis and an internship at Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center at Rutgers State University in New Jersey in 1999.

She currently serves as the assistant principal for Odyssey Charter School in Las Vegas and just completed training in the Autism Diagnosis Observation Scale provided by Dr. Catherine Lord.

Noting the number of teachers' aides who participated in the Nipawin workshop, Dr. Butz said she was happy to learn that the school divisions will recognize that professionals who work with children with autism need specific skills.

"You really need to have people who know behaviorally what needs to be recognized," she said. "We would like to see more training for health professionals."

"We need additional training in both the health and educational systems."

Dr. Butz said that up until recently, kids with behavior disorders or autism were dealt with through mental health services. "Autism was often misdiagnosed as other conditions," she said. Adding that autism should be addressed by the time a child is three years of age – "but research show autism can be addressed in a child as early as 18 months."

Dr. Butz said that major research is going into autism at major academic institutions across the United States.

"And there has to be a lot of funding to look into the disorder for which there is no known cause or cure. It's a neurological disorder and while some children require medication – there are many ways of dealing with individual cases."