



# Focus On... Summaries

Research Alliance for Children with Special Needs

June 2006

**Focus Ons** are one-page summaries of our research findings or topics of interest. They are published by the **Research Alliance for Children with Special Needs (RACSN)** and are distributed free of charge. This is a listing, with short summaries, of the 28 Focus Ons we have published to date.

## RACSN Alliance Members

RACSN is a multidisciplinary research partnership, involving health, social services, and education in the London, Ontario region.

### Thames Valley Children's Centre

- ◆ Gillian King, Research Director  
Research Program

### Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

- ◆ David DeWit, Scientist  
Social, Prevention and Health Policy  
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### Child and Parent Resource Institute

- ◆ Shannon Stewart, Research Director  
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### London District Catholic School Board

- ◆ Terry Spencer, Research Director  
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### Thames Valley District School Board

- ◆ Steve Killip, Research Director  
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### The University of Western Ontario

- ◆ Doreen Bartlett, Associate Professor  
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- ◆ Marilyn Kertoy, Associate Professor  
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- ◆ Linda Miller, Associate Professor  
School of Occupational Therapy
- ◆ Jacqueline Specht, Associate  
Professor  
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## Action Plans to Increase the Participation of Children with Special Needs in our Community

*Volume 6 Issue 3, March 2006 (Servais)*

A Community Forum brings together participants from a variety of sectors (e.g., corporate, education, government, health, industry, non-profit, volunteer, families) to discuss an important community issues. Participants attended RACSN's third Community Forum *Creating Success Stories Together – Enhancing the Participation of Children with Special Needs in Our Community* to provide an opportunity for community members to dialogue, network, and collaborate to develop community Action Plans to enhance children's participation in our community. Invitees were asked which of five theme areas they were interested in developing action plans for and were placed into working groups based on these selections. In addition to developing Action Plans around each theme area, working groups also discussed who would be responsible for carrying out Action Plans, what resources would be needed, and what would be evidence of success of a Action Plan. The five Action Plans are included in this summary with goals, improvement strategies, and tasks/action steps recorded. Attendees also identified key challenges/issues that needed to be addressed to increase the success of the Action Plans.

## Child Behaviour Problems and Maternal Depression

*Volume 6 Issue 2, March 2006 (Stewart, Bachand, Harris, Johnston, Lawrence, Rupert, Wallace-Piccin, & Cullion)*

Maternal depression can have an impact on children socially, behaviourally, and emotionally. Previous research has indicated that children of depressed mothers have interpersonal problems and are at risk for psychological disorders. However, little attention has been paid to the mechanisms associated with the risk factors affecting young children of depressed mothers. This study investigated the relationship between behavioural problems in young children and maternal depression. Data were gathered as part of an outcome study of 59 families with children (ages 2-6) who were referred to a children's mental health facility due to disruptive problems. As part of the study,

mothers were asked to complete a number of questionnaires. The quality of the mother-child interaction was assessed, as well as the children's behavioural/social adjustment. We found that there were differences in the way mothers with depression, compared to those without depression reported their life stress, child temperament, and their relationship with their child. Strategies to prevent maternal depression are included and what families and teachers can do to help are discussed.

## Smooth Transition to Junior Kindergarten: Influential Factors and Outcomes of a Parent Program to Prepare Children for School

*Volume 6 Issue 1, March 2006 (Kertoy, Killip, Miller, Hatherell, & Korzenicki)*

As children begin school for the first time, they are faced with adjusting to classroom routines, meeting and making new friends, and learning new academic skills. The new role of being a student can be stressful for some children. It is important for children to have a smooth transition to kindergarten because socialization and academic patterns begun in kindergarten tend to remain stable over time. This study assessed the outcomes of a voluntary program in which parents learned how to help their children adjust to school. Parents and children participated in activities designed around literacy, numeracy, healthy living, music, and art. Positive, appropriate, and sound learning activities were modeled and parents learned about the support available from community agencies. Parents and teachers completed surveys and rated the readiness and adjustment of junior kindergarteners both of those children who had participated in the program and those who did not. Key factors that are associated with the smooth transition of children to junior kindergarten were identified. Findings from this research can help inform parents, teachers, and community partners about the important issues related to adjustment to school.

## Factors Influencing Students' Attitudes Toward the Peers with Disabilities

*Volume 5 Issue 6, December 2005 (McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller, & Killip)*

Negative peer attitudes are generally considered as being a major barrier to social inclusion at school for children and youth with disabilities. Indeed, studies have found that,

although physical barriers are considered problematic, the most frequently reported barriers to inclusion at school for these children and youth are attitudinal. This summary presents information about personal, interpersonal, and environmental factors related to students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities distinctly to highlight the unique influence of each level of factor on attitudes. In reality, however, as the summary suggests, attitude formation is a complex developmental process that depends on complex interrelations among these factors. Schools need to be aware that, along with providing specific initiatives to modify attitudes, it is also essential to promote a socially accepting and supportive school culture where all students can experience positive student and teacher interactions, develop meaningful friendships, and enjoy full participation in school activities.

### **Development of a Questionnaire to Measure Perceptions of Prescription Review in AAC**

*Volume 5 Issue 5, September 2005 (Batorowicz, & Shepherd)*

Prescription Review (PR) is a discussion within a transdisciplinary team of the rationale for recommending specific Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) equipment for clients. PR allows professionals practicing in AAC to authorize government funding towards communication equipment. Although reviews have been mandatory in Assistive Devices Program AAC designated centres in Ontario for over a decade, PR has never been evaluated. This summary presents information about a study that developed a measurement tool to examine the advantages and disadvantages of the PR process, and tested the psychometric properties (i.e., content validity and reliability) of this tool. The Prescription Review Questionnaire (PRQ) was created using focus groups and pilot testing. The tool consists of 19 questions grouped into 4 subscales, scored on a 7-point rating scale. There are 7 questions in the Decision Making subscale, 5 in Team Support, 3 in Learning, and 4 in Developing Quality Services. Reliability of the questionnaire was examined through establishing internal consistency and test-retest reliability (stability over time). The findings of this study provided evidence that the PRQ is a valid and reliable measurement tool. The next study will evaluate clinical staff's perceptions of Prescription Review using the PRQ and the relationship between these perceptions and variables such as professional background, years of practice, size of team, range of experience of the team, and team processes.

### **The Multidimensional Peer Rating of the Clinical Behaviours of Pediatric Therapists (MPR)**

*Volume 5 Issue 4, May 2005 (Gilpin, King, Currie, Bartlett, Willoughby, Strachan, Tucker, & Baxter)*

The MPR is a peer rating measure that was originally developed for research on clinical decision making among pediatric therapists. During the course of this research, the MPR

was determined to be a useful way of conceptualizing clinical expertise in a manner that was both reliable and meaningful in the context of pediatric rehabilitation.

### **Enabling the Participation of Children with Motor Problems: The CO-OP Approach**

*Volume 5 Issue 3, May 2005 (Mandich, & Miller)*

Participation in the typical activities of childhood plays a crucial role in development of a child's self-concept. These activities include leisure activities such as participation in sports, self-care activities such as typing shoelaces, and productive activities such as school work. Research has shown that children's motor competence influences their self-esteem and social adjustment. However, there are children who experience difficulties with motor skill development. These children are sometimes described as exhibiting Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). These children are often isolated on the school playground and marginalized by their peers. Intervention is crucial because mounting evidence suggests that DCD is a life-long disability that may interfere with children's academic, social, and vocational development. CO-OP is an innovative occupational therapy intervention which supports children's acquisitions of motor skills. CO-OP is a problem-solving intervention that promotes children's on-going skill development, strategy use, and generalization of learning. It was created to help children master their goals--to help them do the things they want to do, need to do, or expected to do.

### **School-Based Occupational Therapy: Evaluating Service Delivery Models**

*Volume 5 Issue 2, May 2005 (McDougall, Bayona, Tucker, Nichols, & King)*

The provision of occupational therapy (OT) services in the school system is a growing area of pediatric practice. The ultimate goal of school-based OT services is to improve children's functioning on school-related tasks and activities. School-based OT services, however, are expensive and little is known about whether they actually improve children's functions. In response, there has been an increasing demand for services that are both cost-effective and evidence-based. There are two primary types of service delivery models for providing school-based OT therapy: a direct model and a consultation model. The purpose of this summary is to present two studies that have evaluated the utility of school-based OT services as delivered by the School Health Support Services Program in the London-Middlesex area of Ontario. In the first study, OT services were delivered according to a direct model of service and in the second study, OT services were delivered according to a consultation model.

### **Clinical Decision Making Expertise in Pediatric Rehabilitation Therapists**

*Volume 5 Issue 1, February 2005 (King, Currie, Bartlett, Gilpin, Willoughby, Strachan, Tucker, & Baxter)*

Well-informed clinical decision making is the core of optimal rehabilitation practice. In pediatric rehabilitation, decision making is particularly complex due to multiple needs of children and families, and the complexity of the service delivery environment. Since few research studies have examined how therapists make decisions and develop expertise, we set out to examine these issues with a three-part project that consisted of a classification phase to develop a system to identify levels of therapist expertise and two qualitative studies to examine the ways therapists make decisions.

### **Planning Successful Transitions from School to Adult Roles for Youth with Disabilities**

*Volume 4 Issue 5, September 2004 (King, Baldwin, & Currie)*

Like all young people, youth with disabilities face a number of "stage of life" transitions at the time of leaving school and their entry into the adult world. Transitions can have multiple and complex effects on youth with disabilities and their families. Four main approaches are described that have been used in transition planning (skills training, prevocational/vocational guidance, client-centred, and ecological/experiential approaches), along with related strategies and evidence for their effectiveness. All of these major approaches appear to have something to offer, which is why programs often employ a combination of approaches. A number of recommendations are made for service providers and school personnel about how to plan and provide a system of transition services. These recommendations are based on best current knowledge and reflect values and strategies identified as underlying the best practices of transition programs.

### **A Profile of Canadian School-Aged Children's Health and Disability**

*Volume 4 Issue 4, May 2004 (McDougall, King, DeWit, Miller, Hong, Offord, LaPorta, & Meyer)*

Policy makers require basic descriptive information about the occurrence of chronic physical health conditions, impairments, and activity limitations among Canadian children. To develop policies and provide services of greatest impact, policy makers also need information about the relationship of these health problems to important aspects of children's lives. Also lacking are accepted criteria for defining the various distinct features of children's health. This Focus On summarizes the findings of a study examining (a) the occurrence of chronic physical health conditions, impairments, and activity limitations among Canadian school-aged children, and (b) the relationship of these distinct features of health to important aspects of children's lives. Implications are also

addressed with respect to policy makers, service providers, educators, and parents.

### **Pathways to Children's Academic and Social Outcomes**

*Volume 4 Issue 3, May 2004 (King, McDougall, DeWit, Hong, Miller, LaPorta, Meyer, & Offord)*

Educators, service providers, and policy makers need a clear understanding of the factors and mechanisms affecting two main life outcomes for school-aged children – how they perform academically and socially. This Focus On summarizes the findings of a study using data from the 1994-95 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth to examine (a) the influence of physical health status and various child, family, and environmental factors on children's academic and social outcomes, and (b) the ways in which these factors affected their outcomes. Implications relevant to educators, service providers, parents, and policy makers are outlined.

### **Promoting Success in School for Children with Special Needs**

*Volume 4 Issue 2, April 2004 (King, Specht, & Willoughby)*

"Success in school" refers to a broad range of academic, social, and self-development outcomes. All children need opportunities to explore different roles in the school setting, to pursue their interests, and to develop their skills. This includes children with cerebral palsy, and other conditions requiring some type of therapy intervention, such as communication difficulties or attention deficit disorders. The ideas presented in this Focus On are based on research that has examined the factors promoting success and resilience in children and adolescents with special needs and disadvantaged children and adolescents. Key factors that promote success in school are identified and that can be fostered in the school setting are listed.

### **Volunteers: What Motivates Them?**

*Volume 4 Issue 1, April 2004 (Baldwin & Specht)*

Volunteers are a crucial resource to support and enhance services offered throughout the non-profit sector. It is important to recognize that there may be many and varied reasons for volunteering. Determining the motivations of volunteers helps managers of volunteers to understand individuals' goals and expectations, leading to more successful placements. This Focus On summarizes the findings of a study that explored, in-depth, the motivations of volunteers with and without disabilities. Implications for professionals in volunteer management are also identified.

### **What Adolescents with Disabilities Want in Life: Implications for Service Delivery**

*Volume 3 Issue 5, October 2003 (King & Cathers)*

Contrary to popular opinion, adolescence is not always a time of turmoil and strife. When the environment meets the psychological needs of adolescents, adolescence can be a relatively "smooth"

period of transition between childhood and adulthood. Quality of life, success in life, and happiness are defined, and personal and interpersonal issues that adolescents with disabilities face are identified. The few studies that have been done on opinions of what is important to success in life suggest that adolescents with disabilities want the same things that other adolescents do such as jobs, marriage, and families. Suggestions for service providers are provided.

### **Resilience: Learning from People with Disabilities and Turning Points in their Lives**

*Volume 3 Issue 4, September 2003 (King, Specht, Cathers, Brown, Willoughby, Miller Polgar, MacKinnon, Smith, & Havens)*

Many people with disabilities do well in life. Little is known, however, about the processes people go through and the assistance that is useful at critical times in life. This summary outlines the findings of a qualitative study involving 15 adults between 30 and 50 years of age with chronic, non-progressive conditions. In the first of two interviews, participants identified the major turning points in their lives. In the second interview, they provided more detail about the ways in which these turning points were experienced and the factors that helped or hindered them at these times. Implications for rehabilitation services and teachers are provided.

### **"Best Approaches" in Pediatric Rehabilitation: Intervention Principles for Service Providers**

*Volume 3 Issue 3, September 2003 (King)*

This four-page summary presents practical intervention principles that will lead to optimal choices and decisions for children with disabilities and their families. Current knowledge is translated into clear directions for service providers and provides a broad understanding of the aspects of intervention that are most important. Four service delivery principles are identified – customize, enable, strengthen, and promote. Eight intervention principles, grouped according to these service delivery principles, are also provided along with examples of intervention strategies and the supporting evidence.

### **Children's Beliefs About Learning and Physical Difficulties**

*Volume 3 Issue 2, June 2003 (Nowicki)*

This summary outlines the findings of a project funded, in part, by a RACSN Studentship Award. The purpose of the study was to explore the nature of children's beliefs about learning and physical difficulties and to

determine how these beliefs change in accuracy and content throughout childhood. One hundred and twenty-five children from Junior Kindergarten, and grades 1, 3, and 5 were interviewed individually with the use of pictures and age-appropriate questions. Participants' beliefs about: why some children find learning difficult; changes in ability to learn with age; why some children use wheelchairs; and changes in the need to use a wheelchair over time are presented, along with implications for educators and parents.

### **Community Awareness & Attitudes Toward the Participation of Children with Special Needs**

*Volume 3 Issue 1, June 2003 (Servais & Currie)*

This is a summary of information gathered through a questionnaire on the participation of local children with special needs that registrants were asked to complete prior to RACSN's 2002 Community Forum (see *Findings from a Community Forum on the Participation of Children with Special Needs, Focus On, Volume 2 Issue 4, October 2002* for a summary of the Forum proceedings; the full Community Forum report is available to download from our website at [www.racsn.ca](http://www.racsn.ca)). Community members' beliefs about terms such as "special needs" and "participation" are discussed. Respondents' views of participation in the community, and community barriers and supports, also are presented. Implications relevant to community groups, service providers, families, policy developers and society in general are provided.

### **Strategies for Including Children in the Classroom**

*Volume 2 Issue 6, October 2002 (Ross & Specht)*

This summary was created in response to a concern expressed by educators (see *Focus On, Educators' Attitudes Toward Inclusion, Volume 1 Issue 3, December 2001*) that training focusing on including children with special needs into the regular classroom is lacking. The intent of this summary was to provide teachers and parents of children with special needs with some initial strategies that can help welcome all children into the regular classroom. A review of the literature produced examples of best practices employed by teachers in inclusive classrooms. The strategies outlined include general approaches as well as those directed toward children with more specific needs.

### **The Physical Benefits of Therapeutic Horseback Riding for Children with Special Needs**

*Volume 2 Issue 5, October 2002 (Browne & Bartlett)*

Many physical and occupational therapists consider Therapeutic Horseback Riding (THR) to be a beneficial addition to therapy for children with special needs. Perceived physical (e.g., improved balance, posture, strength) and personal (e.g., improved self-esteem, self-confidence, body image) benefits come mostly from testimonials and anecdotes. The aim of this research was to determine if THR truly is an effective form of therapy for children with

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special needs by conducting a systematic review and synthesizing the research-based evidence. Research articles describing original research on THR that examined the effectiveness of this programming for children or adolescents were reviewed. Outcomes on which THR participants demonstrated meaningful changes are listed, in order, from strongest to weakest effects. Implications for children, parents, service providers, and researchers also are identified.

### **Findings from a Community Forum on the Participation of Children with Special Needs**

*Volume 2 Issue 4, October 2002 (Currie, Servais, & Bartlett)*

In June 2002, the Research Alliance for Children with Special Needs (RACSN) hosted a community forum titled "The Participation of Children with Special Needs in our Community." Participation includes formal activities (e.g., organized sports and youth groups) and informal activities (e.g., reading and playing). Seventy individuals shared their different perspectives and varying degrees of experiences regarding the issue of participation. Forum attendees included individuals who work in the areas of business, education, government, health, industry, not-for-profit, and volunteer sectors, as well as individuals with special needs and their families. Attendees formed into groups to generate ideas about the factors that lead to the successful participation of children with special needs and what specific actions would confirm that the community participation of these children has been enhanced. The ideas brought forward from the Forum are presented according to dominant themes and suggested specific actions are listed. Implications for the community also are identified.

### **Technology-Related Recommendations of Occupational Therapists for Students with Handwriting Problems**

*Volume 2 Issue 3, June 2002 (Freeman, MacKinnon, & Miller)*

Many elementary and high school students experience handwriting difficulties. These problems can lead to serious consequences affecting students' development of writing skills, and their avoidance of tasks requiring writing. Handwriting difficulties are one of the most common reasons for the referral of students to occupational therapists. These therapists use a range of approaches to assist these students, such as the recommendation of various technology solutions (e.g., keyboard, dictation using tape recorder). The purpose of this research project was to collect data on (1) the nature of the technology-related recommendations made by occupational therapists for school-aged children with handwriting problems, and (2) the factors influencing these recommendations. The results of this project are presented, along with implications for teachers and parents.

### **Researching Childhood Disability: Impact Through Community Involvement**

*Volume 2 Issue 2, June 2002 (Currie, King, & Kertoy)*

Research alliances can have impact in three major areas: (1) enhanced knowledge, (2) enhanced research skills among community members, and (3) enhanced use of research-related information by individuals, organizations, and communities. RACSN investigators share these goals and want to be sure that their work is relevant, useful, and has a positive impact in their local community (London and area). In June 2001, RACSN held a Forum to: (1) increase the recognition of issues relating to research about children with special needs, (2) define strategies useful in promoting the awareness and use of research findings in the area of child disability, (3) review the appropriateness of RACSN's goals, (4) gain consensus on these goals, and (5) understand the expectations of the local community. Individuals with diverse perspectives and experiences with respect to involvement in research were invited to make the forum as representative as possible of the families, teachers, and service providers from our community. The ideas brought forward from the forum are organized into four key themes and implications are identified.

### **Expertise in Services for Children with Special Needs**

*Volume 2 Issue 1, January 2002 (King, Bartlett, Willoughby, & Currie)*

The purpose of this summary is to provide information about the nature of expertise in service delivery for children with special needs. Expertise is important because it is thought to lead to a smoother intervention process and better outcomes for children and their families. A definition of expertise is provided and the differences between experts and novices are outlined. Developing expertise takes time, thought, and opportunity. Tips for developing expertise are provided and implications for managers, therapists, parents, and teachers are described.

### **Educators' Attitudes Toward Inclusion**

*Volume 1 Issue 3, December 2001 (Specht, Currie, Killip, King, Burton, Eliav, Lambert, & Thornton)*

The expectation of inclusive practices in schools is that the individual learning needs of all children will be met. Educators working with children who have special needs in the areas of communication (e.g., speech), mobility (e.g., walking), and fine motor skills (e.g., writing) were invited to discuss their opinions of the inclusion movement. Results of the discussions are presented and issues for future consideration are identified. *Focus On, Strategies for Including Children in the Classroom (Volume 2 Issue 6, October 2002)* provides tips and ideas to help classroom teachers succeed with inclusion.

### **Physical Accessibility of Schools**

*Volume 1 Issue 2, July 2001 (Denver, Lee, Masek, Sillet, Bartlett, Miller, & Killip)*

Parents of children with special needs have many questions when looking for a school that best suits their child. Among other things, parents require information regarding the physical accessibility of the school building grounds to determine whether the environment will permit their child to participate fully in school activities. Five categories of accessibility were defined using building code guidelines. Focus groups were held with youth with special needs, parents of children with special needs, therapists, and school personnel. Participants were asked to identify the most important aspects of accessibility. The results and recommendations for improving accessibility can be found in this summary.

### **What is Childhood Disability?**

*Volume 1 Issue 1, June 2001 (King, McDougall, Kertoy, & Currie)*

Disability is expressed in many different ways and can have very different impacts on people's lives. Disability is associated with many terms including "impairment," "handicap," and "functional limitation." These terms are often treated as the same, but they actually mean different things. The words we use to define and describe childhood disability reflect our beliefs and shape our understandings. Recent thinking acknowledges that disability has physical, psychological, and social aspects. How disability is defined has major implications for children, parents, teachers, and service providers. Issues such as how organizations document children's needs and decide who receives services, and whether they provide services to meet a broad range of physical, psychological, and social needs all depend on the definition of disability.

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