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Kennedy Hope Academy offers starting point for success

by Alex Speredelozzi

On a recent Friday afternoon, Rui Carreiro, MEd, program director of the Kennedy Hope Academy (KHA), and Nicole Abenaim, EdM, director of Clinical Services, sat down to discuss a student's progress. They reviewed a graph of the student's aggressive behavior. What they saw pleased them: a downward sloping trend since the student first entered the program.

"This student came to us after being rejected from about a dozen other programs," said Carreiro. "His parents got to the point of true hopelessness. They told us, 'We're scared. We've yet to find a program that is willing to serve him.'"

"So far, he's done very well here at Kennedy Hope," said Abenaim, pointing to the 160 aggressive acts per day shown on the graph during the child's first days at the school, and then noting the much-lower 10 to 20 aggressive acts he now commits daily. "We're set up to deal with this level of challenge. We have the expertise and a committed team to help children with severe challenging behaviors."

Founded in 2000, KHA is a year-round residential school housed at Franciscan Hospital for Children in Boston. The program brings together Franciscan's pediatric rehabilitation specialists with McLean's psychiatric expertise. It is one of the few hospital-based programs with both a residential component and a school. KHA serves mostly Massachusetts residents, with a few students coming from out of state. Funding comes from local school districts and from the state.

The program serves students ages five to 22 with autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities and neurological disorders who exhibit severe challenging behaviors. Many also have co-occurring psychiatric illness and have been hospitalized multiple times. The school has 17 licensed beds.



Abenaim and Carreiro

KHA utilizes applied behavior analysis (ABA) and positive behavioral supports (PBS) to help students learn healthy and adaptive behavior and skills. ABA, the evidencebased treatment of choice for children with autism spectrum disorders, drives the service delivery in all domains, including speech and occupational therapy, recreation therapy and psychopharmacological treatment.

ABA requires comprehensive assessment and detailed tracking of behavior. The staff also assesses and tracks information on academic performance, communication, hygiene and community safety, using a variety of specialized assessment tools. All of this information is reviewed weekly and used to evaluate progress and guide educational and clinical decisions. "We don't rely on memory or subjective impressions for making decisions," said Carreiro, "but on facts."

The method has proven successful in helping children with severe special needs who engage in aggression of all forms. Many children who have not been helped sufficiently elsewhere arrive at KHA for a new start. This new start hinges on an intensive educational program. The school day begins at 8:30 am with activity in the gymnasium or outside. Students then settle down to one-to-one classroom learning from 9:15 am to 11:30 am. Three classrooms are organized by age and functioning level.

After academics, the students have lunch then recess. They play basketball, tag and other games. "They work hard," said Abenaim.

"We promote a healthy balance between structured learning and having fun."

Though the school day ends at 2:30 pm, the learning continues in the residential program, located directly above the school. The program fosters as much independence as each student can handle. Chore boards hang in the corridors on the second- and third-floor residence halls. Each student has an individualized daily residential schedule tailored to cognitive ability and skill level. Students participate in everything from folding laundry to watering plants.

Leisure activity is also important. There is a television room and play area for relaxing or arts and crafts. On weekends, some students go home; others participate in community recreation. They go to museums, theater, sporting events and take part in trail walks, swimming, games and other activities. Away from their usual living and school area, the students learn to interact with the larger community, a needed skill for when they move on to less-restrictive environments.

Despite the success of its students, KHA continually works to improve its programming. The school has set important goals for 2009. It plans to become a Chapter 766-approved private school and to submit an application to the Massachusetts Department of Education for specialized services. The school is already approved by the City of Boston School Committee. Carreiro and Abenaim also plan to increase support services, including on-site training and in-home training, to families. "We work with parents to help them gain more skills and confidence and improve the quality of time with their children," said Carreiro.

The program directors also plan to offer staff more training and professional development. "We're privileged to work with such a dedicated team and it's satisfying to see these children make progress," said Abenaim. "I can't imagine doing anything else." ♦