



## Going Full *CIRCLE*

### PROJECT CIRCLE—

Creating Innovative, Responsive, and Consistent Learning Environments

—by SESA staff

When SESA Specialist Patricia McDaid, Ed.D. applied for a federal grant more than three years ago, she had one central focus—supporting teachers. McDaid, who has been an autism and positive behavioral intervention and supports specialist with SESA for 7 years, completed the final phase of Project CIRCLE this fall. The goal of Project CIRCLE was to develop a culturally respectful and appropriate training and technical assistance model for Alaskan Native Head Start teachers and combine it with evidenced-based curriculum.

Project CIRCLE was funded by an Innovations grant awarded to SESA by the Federal Office of Head Start in Washington D.C. The intention of the grant was to develop and promote innovative Head Start programming. Project CIRCLE was designed specifically for Head Start programs that were operated by Alaskan Native corporations. “The purpose of the grant was two-fold,” McDaid said, “to increase the use of evidence based positive behavioral support practices in Head Start programs, and to modify evidence-based training materials and classroom materials to be appropriate for use in Alaskan Native villages.”

McDaid used an evidence-based, comprehensive curriculum model, known as the “Pyramid Model” training curriculum from The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL), a national center for resources in early child development located at Vanderbilt University. Next came the task of modifying the CSEFEL curriculum so that it would be culturally appropriate and culturally relevant in rural Alaska. The goal was to accommodate the cultural integrity of Alaskan Native villages while preserving the fidelity of the evidence-based curriculum.

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VISUAL STRATEGIES:  
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*Village Head Start schools using CIRCLE strategies and materials in the classroom.*

To achieve this goal, McDaid used the Kumpfer model (Kumpfer et. al, 2008), which provides a systematic method of cultural adaptation. “It was done in a very systematic way, with the goal of preserving the fidelity of the intervention,” she said. “The research question from my prospective was how do we provide something that is culturally appropriate and relevant without having an impact on the fidelity of the evidenced based practice.”

After the curriculum was developed, McDaid built relationships with four different Alaskan Native corporations and began working with them to deliver Project CIRCLE. Seventeen Alaskan Native Head Start programs from four regional hubs participated in the program. More than two hundred Head Start teachers were trained in several sessions, each lasting two days. Additionally, each Alaskan Native corporation chose five sites to receive subsequent on-site coaching. The results of the training showed improvement in all 17 classrooms, with the vast majority reaching the CSEFEL criteria for fidelity of implementation. In addition to training and coaching, each classroom also received a variety of teaching resources and classroom materials to support the social-emotional development of the children.

“Much of the research literature regarding early childhood education cites a lack of behavioral management training for teachers,” McDaid said. She is certain that if early childhood teachers are better prepared to deal with behavioral challenges in the classroom, over time teachers will see growth in student achievement. “I started to think of all of the kids who could benefit from having a more structured environment and a more systemic approach to their behavior challenges. My thought was maybe we would see an impact on the kids as they get older.”

Alaskan Native corporations provide many programs for their members. One of the community projects they provide is early childhood development programming in areas where services are not available through school districts. In addition, they also administer the Head Start programs in their particular regions. The teachers in

these programs are of Alaskan Native heritage, which provided McDaid a wealth of information regarding adult Alaskan Native learning styles. She said the training process was reciprocal; it was a collaborative and interactive process between the teachers and herself.

“I incorporated adult learning theory to modify the training materials so that they were culturally appropriate to native ways of knowing—based on feedback I got about Alaskan Native adult learning styles,” she said.

The work of Project CIRCLE will be continued with a 5-year grant from the Alaska Department of Education to continue project work in pre-school classrooms operated by school districts across the state.

McDaid was invited to present at The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which included members from the Tribal and Indigenous Early Childhood Network (TIECN). She also presented her work to the Center for Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL) National Training Institute where she presented her findings



*Training Kowerak staff in Nome.*

on the cultural modification of the CSEFEL curriculum. ■

Kumpfer, Pinyuchon, de Meio, & Witeside (2008). Cultural adaptation process for international dissemination of the strengthening families program. *Evaluation and the Health Professions*, Jun 31 (2), 226-239.

## Welcome New Staff

**WILLIAM BRADSHAW** is SESA’s new Program Director and oversees the LID, GAINS, BTKH programs and the SESA Library. William has many years of educational experience in districts throughout Alaska. He has worked as a School Psychologist for Bering Strait School District, Site Administrator and School Psychologist for the Copper River School District, and Teacher, Counselor, Principal, School Psychologist for the Lower Yukon School District. Additionally, he worked as the Director of Special Education and the Assistant Superintendent for Yukon Flats School District. Prior to his career in education, William provided clinical services to children with profound emotional and behavioral needs. In his spare time, William enjoys the nature of Alaska with his wife Pia, who is also his “sunshine.” They especially enjoy fishing and being out on the water.

**MARY CALISTI** joined SESA last spring as new Executive Assistant. She works with the Executive Director and the SESA Board of Directors. Mary came to SESA with many years of experience as an executive assistant and as an office

manager. Mary moved to Anchorage and with her husband in 1990. She was immediately hired at the University of Alaska, Anchorage Governance Office, followed by a position in the Advising and Counseling Center and remained there for nine years. Mary has also held the positions of Executive Assistant and Office Administrator with the Anchorage Municipality’s Department of Health and Human Services, Providence Alaska Health Systems, and Delta Western, a petroleum products distributor.

Mary has been married for 30 years and has two stepchildren, and three grandchildren. Among her family members is her sister Sharon, who is an adult with autism. Mary said she feels honored to be working for SESA. Although she is not helping her sister directly, she feels a sense of gratitude that her efforts touch the lives of people with disabilities.

**PAMELA CAMPBELL** started working for SESA in July as a Program Assistant and Travel Coordinator. She earned her undergraduate degree in Biology and has taught physical

science at the high school level. Most recently, she worked at the University of Mississippi, School of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction assisting the graduate coordinator with all aspects of the advanced degree program. She moved with her husband, who is based (U.S. Army) out of Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER), to Alaska in May of this year. She loves being a mom and really likes living in Alaska.

**KIRA LEVEY** is a new PBIS Specialist for SESA. She has worked as an Intererant School Counselor with Bering Strait School District for 3 years, where she served schools in Unalakleet, Shaktoolik, Koyuk, and Wales. She received her undergraduate degree in Sociology and Anthropology from Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island and in 2008 earned a M.Ed. in School Counseling from the College of St. Joseph in Rutland, Vermont.

Kira developed a love for travel when she was young and went on family excursions to places as varied as Germany, Maine and South Dakota. During college she studied abroad in Florence, Italy. While there, she traveled to Paris, Barcelona, and various other cities throughout Europe. In her 20s, she volunteered at a school in Ciudad Quesada, Costa Rica. She and a few friends also visited Ireland.

When, in 2008, Kira announced that she would be moving to Alaska, it came as no surprise to family and friends. Now, as a PBIS Specialist, she is looking forward to new adventures and is excited to support schools and community efforts in creating and maintaining positive learning environments.

**CHANDA LIV** joined SESA this summer as the Agency Operations Assistant. She attended the University of Hawaii, Hilo, and will be finishing her degree in Occupational Therapy at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Among her professional experiences, she has fond memories of working full-time at a nursing home in Hawaii, where she put some of her OT training into good practice.

Chanda was born in Fresno, California, and moved to Anchorage when she was 10 years-old. She stays pretty busy at SESA, but when she has free time, she likes to sleep in, watch movies, fish, swim and hike. In addition, she is planning on snowboarding this winter and biking next summer. She also has a large family, including her dogs, that she enjoys spending time with, "I pretty much enjoy doing most, if not all of the things that an average 'Joe' likes to do," she said.

**JENNIFER ROMER** is a new PBIS Specialist at SESA. Jennifer was born and raised in Alaska and is Alaskan Native on both sides of her family; of both Yup'ik and Athabaskan descent. Before joining SESA, Jennifer taught high school social studies at Effie Kokrine Early College Charter School, where she also coached basketball and volleyball. Additionally, Jennifer has had experience as a classroom teacher in multiple subject areas and special education case management experience in rural Alaska and inner-city Washington D.C. Jennifer holds a B.A. in History and Political Science from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and a M.Ed. in Secondary Social Studies with an endorsement in Transition Special Education from George Washington University.

**REYNA SIGURDSON** is a new Autism Specialist with SESA. She has worked as a preschool teacher, life-skills teacher at the elementary level and as a special education assistant. She received a M.Ed. from Southern Oregon University in 2004 and Master of Special Education, Preparing Autism Specialists for Schools, (Project PASS) from The University of Oregon in 2011. She received her undergraduate degree in English and Writing from Southern Oregon University in 2003.

Reyna was raised in Pelican, Alaska, where her father worked as a crab fisherman, and her mother worked as a special education teacher, librarian, waitress, and bartender. At age eleven, her family moved to Oregon where she stayed until she joined the Peace Corps as a teacher in the Philippines. "I got to do something different every day. I traveled to different SPED centers on my bike, by bus and by tricycle and provided Filipino teachers with trainings – all done by hand on huge yellow sheets of paper," she said. Reyna feels that she has found her ideal career at SESA. One of her favorite mottos: "All paths lead to the same place, so you may as well take the path with heart."

**TERRA SWARTZBACKER** is a new SESA Program Assistant. Currently, she is a full-time student attending the University of Alaska, Anchorage. She enjoys school and is presently working on her degree pre-requisites for the Dental Hygiene Program.

Terra also enjoys hiking, swimming, and attending car races in the summer. She was born in Palmer, Alaska and raised in Wasilla, where she had many opportunities to enjoy the Alaskan outdoors. Additionally, she has two dogs, that are more like children, and they go with Terra just about everywhere. When asked how she feels about working for SESA. She said, "I love every minute of it!" ■

*"...They teach the younger generations and that generation will teach the next.  
Without Elders, nothing would be the same."*

— Whittier Burns from Noatak, *Courtesy of the Alaska Native Heritage Center*

# “Dad, Where’s the Plunger?”

—by Richard Holloway

**F**rom the Editor of Future Reflections: It is often said that 80 percent of all learning is visual. For a totally blind child, however, 100 percent of learning occurs nonvisually. Given plenty of opportunities for hands-on exploration, a blind child can acquire most of the information about the world that sighted children possess. In this article, Richard Holloway describes how he helped his blind daughter, Kendra, fill in some important information gaps.

“Dad, do we have a plunger?” my daughter asked one afternoon. “Where’s the plunger?”

I was a little concerned. Why would my eight-year-old daughter possibly need a plunger, after all? This just couldn’t be good!

“I want to know what a plunger feels like!” she explained.

Wow! I had done it again. I pride myself on describing the visual world to my blind daughter, but there it was—another little hole in her understanding. Did we have a plunger? Sure. Was I going to let her explore it with her hands? Well, no, that didn’t seem the best plan. You might find ours to be as well-washed as any slightly used plunger anywhere, but I’m not going to put it into a child’s hands for tactile exploration. “I’m sorry,” I said, “we don’t have a plunger that you can touch. It isn’t clean enough. But what if I take you to the store and let you explore a new, clean plunger?”

Kendra was delighted with the idea. That’s how I came to take her on her first Home Depot expedition.

## Adventures at Home Depot

**T**here was nothing I needed to buy. This was an outing of exploration, a true quest for knowledge. We made our way to Home Depot’s plumbing aisle. Not only did Kendra get to look at a plunger. She soon learned that there are different styles of plungers, made from different materials, and that they come in various sizes. She was fascinated and full of questions.

After a while we moved on. I had blocked several hours of the day for this outing, just in case. Where should we head next? Toilet seats! There was an entire wall of them only a few feet away. Standard length, elongated, with lids, without lids, plastic, wooden, hard, padded, even some with a cutout in front—which prompted another whole discussion! The greatest fascination for my daughter was why the seats were arranged vertically on the wall that way. I began to realize how much information she was missing, information that most kids pick

up without any special effort on anyone’s part.

What about whole toilets? We have never encouraged Kendra to explore toilets with her hands, but brand-new ones are as clean as anything else in a store. We checked out the toilets, then moved on to tubs and showers. Next we found sinks for both the bathroom and the kitchen.

Before long, we had examined all the plumbing supplies we could find. We began to roam the store’s other aisles. Appliances, Carpet and Flooring, Lumber, Fencing, Landscape. Kendra hates the noise of lawnmowers and other loud machines. In the store she understood that they were turned off and would make no frightening sounds, so she explored them freely.

Kendra seemed to enjoy hardware a lot, too. She was fascinated to learn how small and how large nuts and bolts can be. Tools were also fun. The many shapes and sizes of hand tools and power tools were quite new to her.

## Shoes, Balls, Motors

**T**he Home Depot outing left me exhausted. It involved several hours of intense describing and explaining, but the effort was well worthwhile. Not long after that Kendra had a question about shoes for sports. The concept of cleats seemed bizarre to her. We headed to Sports Authority and went straight to the shoe racks. I showed her baseball cleats, soccer cleats, football cleats, turf shoes, golf shoes, and any other unusual shoes I could find. I also let her explore more conventional tennis shoes so she could compare them to basketball shoes and running shoes.

Many questions followed, and ideas started popping into my head. Did Kendra have any idea that a baseball glove is a giant oversized thing nothing like the gloves she’d seen before? Did she know that there are different kinds of gloves for baseball and softball? Had she ever heard of a catcher’s mitt? Did she know what a wooden bat was like compared to an aluminum bat?

We explored baseballs, softballs, and footballs. Kendra was surprised to learn that some balls aren’t even round! She wondered why some balls have laces or seams. How many



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kinds of balls were there? We found tennis balls, soccer balls, golf balls, and bowling balls. We compared inline skates with roller skates. We noticed that skateboard wheels felt a lot like skate wheels. We compared different kinds of life preservers and various wet suits. We found the weights department and felt weights from one pound up to twenty pounds or more, one pound at a time. We compared the shapes of the weights and how hard they were to lift. We examined barbells, dumbbells, ankle weights, and free weights. Who knew there were so many kinds of weights to choose from? I could sense the wheels turning in Kendra's mind. Pieces were coming together for her about a lot of things.

Since then, we've made trips to a lot of different stores. Bass Pro Shops was especially interesting, with row after row of boating and camping supplies. In the boating area Kendra learned what an anchor is like. She discovered that anchors come in assorted designs and sizes. Outboard motors, too, come in a wide range of sizes. We examined little electric motors and gas engines from two horsepower up to 350. My five-year-old son could just about lift the smallest engines, but the big ones are over seven feet tall and weigh over 800 pounds. Fortunately, the store had a rack with at least a dozen engines of various sizes for Kendra to touch and compare. I took her to the back of a boat with a 350-HP engine. She studied it from the ground up. It was taller than she could reach, so I lifted her on my shoulders until she could touch the very top.

We've searched the auto parts store for all things automotive. We've compared many wheels and tires at a tire store. They come in lots of sizes, but the different tread patterns on tires seem to be the most interesting feature. We've explored all sorts of electronics at stores such as Best Buy and Fry's, though feeling the internal parts of an old junk computer at home seemed to be more interesting than exploring new machines on display.

It may be easier and faster to get through the supermarket if we don't discuss every item on each shelf. However, when time allows, grocery shopping certainly can be a fascinating opportunity. We've found a lot to explore in the produce section--that's one part of the store where most of the products are out in the open, not encased in plastic wrappings or cardboard boxes.

## Up on the Roof

When Kendra was six years old, we took her with us to pick out a Christmas tree. Kendra helped us make our selection, so she knew what the tree looked like. As we drove home, Kendra wondered aloud where we had put the tree; she knew there was no room for it inside our van. Where did the tree go? How did it fit?

"We put the tree on the roof of the van," I explained. I

showed her the roof from the inside and said the tree was on top of that.

My answer didn't seem to help much. "How can it be outside the car?" Kendra asked.

As soon as we got home, I grabbed a ladder. I invited Kendra to climb up as I stood behind her. Standing on the top rung didn't help a lot either. A sighted person can easily see the entire roof of a van from a ladder, but only a small portion was within Kendra's reach.

Finally I guided Kendra to move from the ladder onto the roof of the van. She sat and explored all she wanted. The tree was still tied to the roof rack, so she could find out



how it stayed on in the wind. I remembered the little pocket camera on my belt and snapped a quick photo. I still smile when I see that picture, thinking of that day and that moment of learning.

Perhaps my daughter is not quite old enough yet, but I think we're not far from a walk on the roof of our house. A model of a house would be a great learning tool, of course. But if she can explore the roof safely, there's nothing like firsthand experience!

Closer to the ground, we've examined a lot of plants over the years. As a gardening enthusiast, I've maintained a sensory garden with interesting plants that have distinctive textures and scents. When she was quite young, Kendra enjoyed having a number of interesting (and relatively safe) plants to explore. They were all within reach from one location that she thought of as hers.

## Surprises from Santa

Since Kendra came into our lives, Santa seems to bring us more things to explore, such as extra musical instruments. We have acquired a variety of ukuleles, guitars, keyboards, synthesizers, a small harp, and even a drum set. We also have some unusual pieces, such as a Native American flute; a jaw harp; and a kalimba, or African thumb piano. We even have a Theremin, the only electronic instrument you play without touching it. You vary the sounds by moving your hands closer or further from a pair of antennae.

I've bought these instruments because nothing beats unlimited exploration time. We've also taken quite a few trips to large music stores such as Guitar Center, where we can roam the aisles for free. In a music store you can explore hundreds of instruments under one roof. They also have plenty of recording gear and PA equipment, always a great fascination to my child. She especially loves all the faders

and knobs on audio consoles.

Last summer, on the way to the NFB convention in Dallas, we stopped overnight in Vicksburg, Mississippi. As we headed out in the morning, I saw some Civil War cannons in front of the hotel. Kendra was curious. We didn't hesitate to delay our departure. She got out of the car and felt all the parts of a cannon or two.

## Close to Home

Chances to supply missing information are almost everywhere. We've found many of them close to home. Not long ago Kendra's cane bumped into a guy wire at the edge of our front yard. We had passed within inches of that wire hundreds of times. Actually, we made a pointed effort to avoid it. It was a trip hazard, after all. Kendra had no idea that the wire was there, but one day she found it with her cane. What was it for? "It helps hold up the phone pole," I explained. I anticipated the next question, "What's a phone pole?" There it was again, information that Kendra's sighted peers took for granted. My explanation led to details about how electricity and cable TV, phone service and the Internet get into our home. "What about water?" No, water comes through pipes underground. In some places, power and phone lines also run underground, and there are no poles.

On a drive soon after this discussion, I spent several minutes telling Kendra every time we passed a phone pole. She couldn't believe there were so many of them. I realized how many other things we passed while she was unaware. From time to time I'd pick something else to tell her about in quantity as well as specific details--houses and traffic lights, for example.

Some things, such as traffic lights, are hard to explore hands-on. I've bought some decommissioned traffic lights for a playhouse I built, so they were available for Kendra to touch. As parents we've had to be creative and proactive to provide Kendra with opportunities to examine things tactilely. Still, hands-on exploration is so valuable that it is truly worth the effort. We have learned a lot together, but a great deal remains for us to explore. This learning process is never really finished.

What, you may ask, does Kendra consider the most meaningful of all these adventures? Home Depot, she will say, without a doubt. At the end of that first adventure she talked me into buying her--you guessed it--her very own plunger! It is a joy to watch our daughter discover the world in her own unique style! ■

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*Reprinted with permission from the Summer 2011 issue of Future Reflections, a National Federation of the Blind (NFB) Jernigan Institute publication. [www.nfb.org/nfb/Future\\_Reflections.asp?SnID=1143418651](http://www.nfb.org/nfb/Future_Reflections.asp?SnID=1143418651)*

## Conferences & Workshops

### Alaska

#### ■ Alaska Statewide Special Education Conference

The 21st Annual Alaska Statewide Special Education Conference  
February 18-24, 2012  
Sheraton Anchorage Hotel  
<http://www.assec.org/>

#### ■ Alaska Society for Technology in Education

February 25-28, 2012  
Captain Cook Hotel  
<http://www.aste.org/>

### National

#### ■ National Association of African American Studies & Affiliates

20th Annual National Conference  
February 13-18, 2012  
Crowne Plaza Executive Center, Baton Rouge, Louisiana  
Contact  
<http://www.naaas.org>

#### ■ Assistive Technology Industry Association 2012 Conference

January 25-28, 2012  
Caribe Royale All-Suites Hotel and Convention Center  
Orlando, Florida  
<http://www.atia.org/>

#### ■ National Association for Bilingual Education

40th Annual Conference  
February, 15-17, 2012  
Hilton Anatole Hotel  
Dallas, Texas  
<http://www.nabe.org/>

#### ■ National Association of School Psychologists

Annual Convention  
February 21-24, 2012  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
<http://www.nasponline.org/>

#### ■ United Cerebral Palsy Conference

April 25-28, 2012  
Grand Hyatt  
Washington DC.  
<http://www.ucp.org/get-involved/events/2012-annual-conference>

#### ■ Council for Exceptional Children 2012 Convention and Expo

April 11-14, 2012  
Colorado Convention Center  
Denver, Colorado  
<http://www.cec.sped.org/content/navigationmenu/professionaldevelopmentconvention-expo/registernow/default.htm>

#### ■ 2012 Autism Society National Conference and Expo

July 25-28, 2012  
Town and Country Resort and Convention Center  
San Diego, California  
<http://www.autism-society.org/>

#### ■ 2012 Disability Policy Seminar

April 23-25, 2012  
Washington, D.C.  
[www.disabilityseminar.org](http://www.disabilityseminar.org)

#### ■ American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

June 19-20, 2012  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
[www.aaid.org](http://www.aaid.org)

#### ■ National Alliance on Mental Illness

June 22-30, 2012  
Seattle, Washington  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

#### ■ 9th International Conference on Positive Behavior Support

March 15-17, 2012  
Hyatt Regency Atlanta  
Atlanta, Georgia  
<http://www.apbs.org/conference/atlanta/index.aspx>

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*Arnaucug* was know as the “Yup’ik Dance Diva” of Scammon Bay, Alaska.

Read more: <http://www.adn.com/2011/10/27/2141661/yupik-dance-diva-mary-ann-sundown.html#ixzz1ctKIkdYV>

*This newsletter was prepared by:*

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## The Reference Shelf

FALL 2011

### Can You Picture This?

—by Dr. Patricia McDaid, SESA Autism/PBIS Specialist

**H**ave you ever lost your datebook? Wanted to cook a favorite meal and misplaced the recipe? Made a “to-do” list and felt great satisfaction at crossing off your last item for the day? If you replied yes to any of these questions, you use visual supports. The phrase “visual supports” refers to pictures, signs, and symbols that provide important information, serve as task reminders, or serve as a way to organize tasks and/or time. When we use items such as calendars, checklists, or sticky notes, we are using visual support strategies.

Visual supports are useful ways to provide information because they are not dependent on written language to convey a message. Although some visual supports may include text, for example a sign with a “no smoking” symbol might also include the words “no smoking,” the message is clearly understood whether or not the text is understood. Below are examples of the types of visual supports we see all around us.

If you are looking for other examples of community-based visual supports, you need go no further than the closest large international airport. In this environment, visual supports (symbols) allow important information to be communicated clearly regardless of the language spoken by the individual. As someone who has traveled extensively, I know how much I depend on these “language free” supports to successfully meet my needs when I am in a non-English speaking environment. For example, on a trip to Poland I visited a town where very few people spoke English. After a morning of sight seeing, I sat down in a lovely restaurant to have some lunch. Then I was presented with a menu written in Polish by a waiter who spoke only Polish. After several attempts to communicate, the waiter excused himself and returned with a picture menu. We were both very relieved that we could communicate effectively using pictures!



Visual supports are also a very effective educational tool. Teachers across Alaska, and the rest of the nation, are harnessing the power of visuals in their schools and classrooms. Several SESA programs and grants provide training to Alaskan teachers and community members about the use of visual supports.

SESA’s Alaska GAINS grant provides training and technical assistance to pre-school teachers and support staff in school district-operated programs across Alaska. The focus of the training and follow-up coaching is early childhood positive behavioral interventions and supports. In GAINS pre-school classrooms, teachers use visual supports to teach behavioral expectations and classroom routines, give choices, and provide the daily schedule.

The Alaska GAINS training curriculum is based on the Teaching Pyramid (a visual support in and of itself!) designed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL) located at Vanderbilt University. CSEFEL is a national technical assistance program that develops and provides training and technical assistance materials that reflect evidence-based practices for promoting children’s social and emotional development and preventing challenging behaviors. The CSEFEL materials include many visual supports for use in pre-school classrooms as tools for teaching appropriate behavior and addressing challenging behavior.

Two of the most important goals of the Alaska GAINS project are directly related to the use of visual supports. The primary goal of Alaska GAINS is to increase the number of evidence-based “best practices” in the area of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) in Alaskan pre-school classrooms. The second goal of the project is to increase the number of culturally appropriate and culturally relevant early childhood PBIS interventions used in Alaska pre-schools.

One of the primary goals of any PBIS approach, regard-



less of the age of the students, is to prevent challenging behavior before it happens. A key component of preventing challenging behavior is to ensure that students know exactly what they should be doing, and how to do it. When working with preschoolers, many of them are learning the “rules of school” (i.e. how to stand in line, how to wait their turn, etc.) for the first time. Imagine the challenge of teaching twenty 3-year-olds to stand in line. Now imagine how much easier the task would be if there were a line of “footprints” on the floor for the children to stand upon. That is just one example of the strategies put in place in many Alaska GAINS classrooms.

Visual supports can also be used to help teach preschool children higher level thinking skills such as problem-solving. Although it is not developmentally appropriate to expect 3 and 4-year-old children to independently solve their own social problems (i.e. if one child takes a toy another is playing with, preschoolers can be expected to begin to generate solutions other than the use of challenging behavior to solve problems. The CSEFEL training materials include a tool called the “Solutions Kit” which is designed to support young children in learning to generate alternate solutions, which is the first step on the more complex process of problem-solving. The CSEFEL “Solutions Kit” uses visual supports (drawings) to teach and prompt such alternate solutions as: sharing a toy, using words, asking nicely, saying “please stop,” and getting a teacher. However, this wonderful tool does not match the cultural context or life experience of preschoolers living in Alaska Native communities.

Research in early childhood education tells us that young children learn best when there is a relationship between classroom activities and the children’s daily life

experiences. Additionally, in many Alaskan school districts there is a growing emphasis on teaching Alaska Native language and culture in the schools. In an attempt to address both of these facts, Alaska GAINS staff has developed culturally appropriate versions of the CSEFEL “Solutions Kit” for use in Yu’pik and Gwich’en communities. An Iñupiaq version of the kit is currently in development.

The PBIS Center of Alaska, which is housed at SESA and staffed by SESA specialists, also includes the use of visual supports in its trainings. In fact, the entire model for school-wide PBIS programs is captured in a single visual, the PBIS triangle. Also, one of the first tasks schools complete, once they have finished their preliminary training, is to create and hang posters all around the school as reminders of their school-wide behavioral expectations. This strategy reminds both students and staff of the behavior that is expected in all the areas of the school building.

Perhaps the best-known application of visual supports in the field of education is with individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (and other brain-based learning challenges such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder) can experience a significant increase in their communication, independence, and behavioral self-management through the use of visual supports. There is a growing body of research that promotes the use of visual supports as an evidence-based practice for individuals with autism across the age range. This includes using visual supports to: increase spontaneous communication, replace challenging behavior with communication, increase task engagement, encourage social interactions, increase problem solving, decrease difficulty with transitions, complete self-help routines independently, and increase on-task behavior.

It is not surprising then to find that the most frequent users of visual supports are SESA’s Autism Specialists and the staff of the Alaska Autism Resource Center (AARC, which is housed at SESA). The AARC includes information on the use of visual supports in a variety of its trainings and has hosted a distance class on creating visual supports. The AARC staff sent materials to make the supports in advance to the participants and then hosted, via video-teleconference, a “Make ‘n Take” for a variety of different visual supports. SESA Autism Specialists use visual supports so frequently on their student service trips that they often carry extra supports with them to leave with the school, or create





the supports on site with the help of the teacher or para-professional who serves the student with ASD.

Maci Brown-Spica, a SESA Autism Specialist who recently relocated from Minnesota, describes the power of using visuals with a student with ASD like this:

One of my favorite visual strategy triumph stories takes place in Maplewood, Minnesota. I had a student who came to me with no schedule, no functional communication system, high sensory needs, and many challenging behaviors. To begin, I started an object schedule to help him transition from tasks inside his room to activities in other parts of the building. A ball was used for gym, a piece of silk for sensory time, and a cup for lunchtime. With time, consistency, and persistence we were able to teach the student how to follow a schedule. Simultaneously we began teaching the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and magical things started to happen. My student’s challenging behaviors decreased significantly, his vocabulary and environmental awareness increased, and before I knew it he was utilizing a more complex schedule using symbolic pictures. Later in the year, we were able to introduce task schedules within activities, duration maps to track time, and reinforcement boards to act as an individualized token economy. Visuals are great for teaching staff too. With more visuals to support my student, his independence increased and I felt more comfortable taking a sick day if I needed to. I knew that any adult could come into my classroom and navigate through the day (just like my student) utilizing visual strategies.

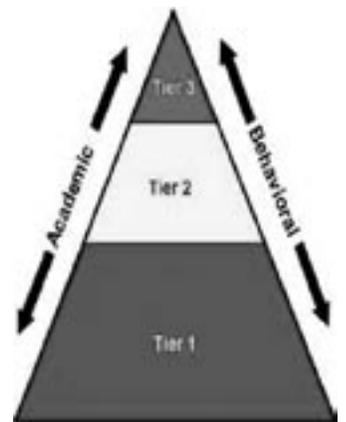
Individuals with ASD are known to be strong visual learners. Temple Grandin (a scientist, author, and self-advocate with ASD) actually entitled her first book, “Thinking in Pictures.” In addition to being strong visual learners, many individuals with ASD have great difficulty using and understanding spoken language. In fact, one of the three primary diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder is impairment in communication. This is further defined as a delay in or total lack of spoken language or (for those

individuals with speech) significant difficulty initiating or maintaining conversation with others. Some individuals with ASD actually possess clearly articulated speech, but cannot use this speech to communicate a clear message to others. One reason this may occur is the presence of delayed and/or spontaneous echolalia. With spontaneous echolalia, the individual with ASD repeats the words spoken to them while with delayed echolalia the individual repeats words and phrases heard at another time. Delayed echolalia frequently manifests as repetition of dialog from favorite movies or lines from favorite songs.

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is one example of an evidence-based intervention that utilizes visuals as a tool to support communication. PECS is a six-phased program that enables individuals with ASD (and related developmental disabilities) to use pictures to spontaneously communicate with others.

Individuals begin the program learning to exchange a single picture of a preferred object for that object. Then, using a systematic approach over time, the individual learns to request using short phrases and eventually, full sentences (see above, pictures created using Mayer-Johnson’s “Boardmaker” software). As individuals with ASD move through the program they learn to expand vocabulary, answer questions, and comment on their environment and activities. One of the primary functions of the challenging behavior of individuals with ASD is communication. Therefore, although not specifically described in the PECS protocol, giving individuals with ASD a way to appropriately refuse an activity and make choices across all environments and activities is generally a very important aspect of their communication program.

In addition to serving as a communication tool for individuals with ASD, visual supports can also help the



individual to gather meaningful and relevant information from the environment and thus be able to navigate that environment more successfully and more independently. Visual schedules are a powerful way to represent time and transitions to students with ASD and related brain-based disabilities. Visual schedules help teachers and their students to establish routines, anticipate transitions, establish the concept of “finished,” and clarify behavioral and academic expectations. Using a visual schedule is a very effective way in which to decrease the transition-related challenging behavior in individuals with ASD. It is even more beneficial when paired with other visual supports

such as a visual timer.

Due to the effectiveness of visual supports with individuals with ASD and other related brain-based disabilities, it is important to maximize their use with this group of learners. However, it is also important to remember that visual supports exist all around us. The use of pointing, gestures, pantomiming, and simple sign language can also provide visual support to communication. Teaching an individual to observe the other people in an environment and match his or her behavior to that of others (i.e. “do what the other kids are doing”) is an important life skill, especially for the overall success of individuals with ASD.

To conclude, visual supports are all around us and can be used as an effective, evidence-based practice in a variety of educational settings. Visual supports serve as a source of information that is a permanent product that is always available for reference. Visual supports also cross language barriers and provided specialized support for individuals with communication challenges. They can be individualized for use by non-disabled children and adults or by students with intensive needs. For individuals with ASD who are unable to communicate their needs and wants in any other way, a picture may truly be worth a thousand words. ■

## PECS

### Picture Exchange Communication System —by Maci Spica

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an evidence-based practice used to systematically teach individuals who are nonverbal or nonfunctional communicators the purpose of communication and provides them with a low technological, functional communication tool. PECS was developed in 1985 by Linda Frost, a speech pathologist and Andy Bondy, a clinical psychologist at the Delaware Autistic Program (Bondy & Frost, 1994; Collet-Klingenberg, 2008). PECS is broken into six phases which scaffold the skills needed to be a functional communicator. In phase one, the student learns to physically exchange a visual picture for a preferred item. The second phase consists of the student searching through their environment for the desired visual picture and appropriate communication partner. In phase three, the student will learn picture discrimination, followed by a correspondence check. Phase four requires the student to build sentences using a sentence strip and an “I want” and visual picture symbol. In phase five, the student complete phases one through four after given the verbal cue, “What do you want?” Finally, in phase

six the student will learn to comment using attributes and new symbols, such as “I see,” “I hear,” “I smell,” and “I feel.” After the completion of phase six the student should be able to request and comment with multiple communication partners in varying environments (Frost & Bondy, 2002; Collet-Klingenberg, 2008). ■



Reyna Sigurdson and Maci Spica demonstrate phase 4 PECS.

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# Visual Strategies: Valuable Support At Any Age

Linda Hodgdon  
M.ED., CCC-SLP

**C**an you imagine life without your calendar, your Blackberry or iPhone? Are you a person who would have difficulty surviving without those yellow sticky notes hanging in strategic places to remind you of important things? What about menus, shopping lists, recipes and traffic signs? Don't forget those "easy-to-assemble step-by-step" instructions that come with lots of purchases.

You and I use visual strategies to help us manage our life routines successfully. They help us organize our thinking and remember what to do.

Visual supports help us accomplish activities and obligations more completely and with less stress. We just don't call them "visual strategies" when we use them.

## Understanding the Learning Strengths of Individuals with ASD

Most individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, PDD and more) demonstrate strength in understanding visual information.

The majority of individuals with

ASD understand what they SEE better than what they HEAR.

They tend to be visual learners. Visual strategies provide information in a form that many of these individuals understand more easily than auditory information.

Here's just one important concept to understand. Speech is transient. That means after it is spoken it disappears. Now imagine the student who takes a bit longer than others to pay attention when you are talking to him. Or think about the individual who gets distracted by something else in the environment. If he is not "tuned

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in,” the spoken message can be gone before he even realizes someone is talking to him...IF he realizes someone is talking to him. It’s very likely that information will be missed.

This is just one example of why these students can experience difficulty understanding. There can be many more.

**As a *communication partner*, it is critically important for YOU to understand that these individuals generally understand less than we think they do.**

Communication confusions will affect how they are able to participate in social situations and other life activities.

## More About Visual Strategies

Visual strategies are things we see that enhance communication or give us information. Sometimes we call them visual tools or visual supports. It’s important to realize that visual strategies accomplish many purposes. They provide a way for students to comprehend more about what is happening in their lives.

Visual tools help preschoolers acquire new skills. They provide support for students in elementary through high school to manage everything from transitions to grasping confusing social events. Visual tools give information, support memory and help organize thinking. Adults benefit from visual supports to help them achieve independence and successfully participate in their life opportunities.

## A Preference for Visual Information

You and I use visual tools for organizing our own lives. Our students with communication and learning challenges can benefit from the same tools we use, however, they need more visual supports than we do.

That’s why we create specially

designed tools for establishing a schedule, providing choices, sharing information, giving directions, posting rules, teaching skills, supporting social situations and lots more. There are endless opportunities to use visual tools to help individuals of all ages with ASD to achieve personal success and greater independence.

Photographs, line drawings, computer clip art, pictures from magazines, food labels, signs, logos, real objects and written language can be used to support communication. Visual strategies are not all pictures. Anything you SEE can be a useful communication tool. The goal is to use any kind of visual supports that our students will understand.

Currently, there has been an explosion of applications (APPS) for iPhones, iPads, and similar electronic tools that expand the options for visual support. In addition, video has emerged as a powerful alternative mode to provide visual learning opportunities.

## Aren’t Visual Strategies Just for Young Children?

Definitely NO. This is one of the most common misunderstandings about using visual strategies. Visual supports are appropriate for individuals of all ages.

The visual tools we use for younger children may look different or be used for different purposes than those for older students or adults. But visual tools can benefit adults for the same reasons they benefit younger children.

Schedules and calendars are a good example. They give information about what is happening in the student’s life by helping him manage transitions and anticipate activities. That kind of information is important for any age. But what is really important to understand is that a schedule is just one tool in a giant toolbox of visual

strategies that can help individuals of any age achieve success.

## Modifying Visual Supports as Young Children Grow Older

Some people understand the value of visual strategies for younger children, but they are concerned about continuing to use them as children grow older. They ask, “When do you start to eliminate the visuals?” “Won’t he look handicapped if he uses visual strategies?” In other words, people see that the visual supports are helpful but they have concerns that those visual tools will not be appropriate when the student matures.

It’s really hard to answer that question. Perhaps this should be the question instead: “How do you adjust visual supports so they continue to be valuable for students as they grow older?” Our goal is not to eliminate visual supports, but modify visual tools so they continue to be useful and meet the individual’s changing needs.

Here’s an example. Going to the grocery store is a typical family activity.

Arthur, age 4, has a little picture card in his pocket that Mom gives him before they go grocery shopping. She told him he would get some cookies at the end of the trip. When they walk down the cookie aisle, Mom has Arthur take the cookie picture out of his pocket. She tells him he gets to choose a box of cookies to put in the shopping basket. This little strategy helps Arthur manage his behavior in the store because he knows he will earn a treat.

Lisa is twelve. She uses a picture shopping list so she can help Mom find the groceries to put in the cart.

Tom is an adult who shops by himself. He prepares his shopping list on his iPhone. (Did you know there’s an APP for that?) The shopping list on his phone helps him complete his errand independently.

# Our goal is not to eliminate visual supports, but modify visual tools so they continue to be useful.

## Other Ways Visual Tools have been Used for All Ages

Individuals can learn and understand much better when visual strategies are integrated into situations. The use of visual supports is determined by purpose, not by age. Here are some examples.



<http://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/needfood-the-visual-grocery/id408216610?mt=8>

## Following directions

Giving directions visually can work really well for any age. Here is what one Mom wrote:

*I attended one of your visual strategies conferences. Your presentation was amazing. A few days after attending the conference I was at my wits end with trying to get my son with Asperger's Syndrome to get his pajamas on to go to bed.*

*I was frustrated because I was having to "tell" him (yes, I know) over and over again to get them on. This had been going on for a long, long time (years) and it was getting pretty old.*

*All of a sudden your conference came to mind and I realized the problem was with me. I was only talking and that is not how he works. Instead of feeling frustrated, I wrote on a card, "Get your pajamas on NOW!" and calmly handed it to him.*

*I was totally surprised when his eyes bugged out. He got up and said, "Okay." He promptly got his pajamas on. After I recovered from total shock at how well that worked, I wrote on the card, "Thank you. I love you" and got a big smile from him.*

*I don't always remember to use visuals, but what a difference it makes when I do!*

*Michelle, Mom*

## Handling a significant life change

Some life events are difficult to understand because everything is new or unfamiliar. Pam, a member of a student's treatment team wrote:

*I had a student whose life was about to change in a major way. His grandfather, who was his favorite person in the whole wide world, was diagnosed*

*with cancer. This boy's family was concerned about how they would explain what was happening and wondered if he would understand why he didn't see his grandfather anymore.*

*We decided that we would use story books to explain what was happening to his grandfather. We created stories showing the relationship between this child and his grandfather, what was happening to his grandfather, and how the relationship was changing.*

*We covered the time of his grandfather's diagnosis, hospitalization, hospice, his death, funeral, and burial. This was a Christian family who also wanted their son to know that his grandfather had gone to live with Jesus, so we incorporated that into the story too.*

*After his grandfather's death, the young man's mother reported that prior to grandfather's illness, the boy would frequently run to the window, anxiously awaiting the visits from his grandfather.*

*After his grandfather's death, he no longer did this. The visual strategies worked.*

## Teaching new skills and delicate topics

Teens are faced with learning about body changes in themselves and others. Marianne, Caity's mom, wrote about how she created a visual tool to help her daughter handle a personal situation.

*I wanted Caity to be ready to handle the hygiene aspects of having her period. I made a step-by-step visual tool and put it into a folder titled "Caity's Health Folder." She kept it at school with her binders*

# The use of visual supports is determined by purpose, not age.

and other folders. She was the only one who knew the contents. I added an envelope on the inside of the folder for “supplies” so she would be prepared.

## Making social decisions

Social decisions can be difficult to think through and understand. Putting the information in a concrete visual format can help individuals make better choices and respond appropriately. A visual support like *Doing the Right Thing* puts the information on paper to help an individual sort through the options and their implications.

## Handling difficult situations

Giving information about potentially difficult situations can help individuals manage them better. Events Can Change is a tool to prepare individuals for situations where something unexpected happens. If they know what to do, they can usually handle the event better than if something is a huge surprise.

## Important Points to Remember

Our goal is to identify when someone is having difficulty or needs some extra support to become successful. When you target a need, consider what kind of visual tool or strategy can give the information or support necessary. It’s not a question of “if” but rather a question of “how.”

**The use of visual strategies is determined by need, not by the person’s age.**

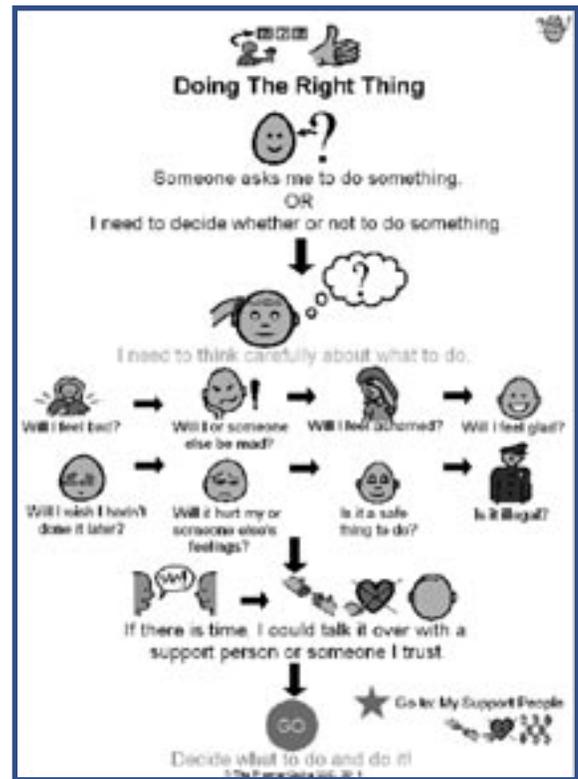
As our students get older, those electronic tools become socially desirable options to accomplish many goals. Just keep focused on the reasons to use visual tools. And by now, there’s probably an APP for that. ■

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