

AYCES Program Review

Asperger's Youth for Community, Engagement and Socialization (AYCES) is a program for youth with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome (AS) who require the experience of a peer group to aid them in the enhancement and development skills related to daily living. The program builds in considerable flexibility, offering after school, Saturday and school break programming. The objectives are social and life skill development, volunteerism, development of peer relations, increasing self esteem, understanding their diagnosis and advocacy skills.

The program serves adolescents ranging in age from 12 to 18. The common element for the clients of this program is the degree to which they isolate themselves socially. By definition, people with AS have a normal or above normal I.Q. and exceptional skills and talents in specific areas of interest. However subtle social cues by others can be difficult for them to interpret, which can make it difficult for these young people to engage with their peers and develop positive healthy relationships. Given these social challenges, many of these youth are victims of bullying and are viewed as "strange" or "awkward" by their peers. Therefore, it is important to be able to provide a safe, consistent, structured, and fun environment in which the clients can feel a sense of belonging while learning the kinds of social and life skills necessary for promoting healthy relationships.

Activities, outings, and a democratic approach to group decision making help the youth develop a sense of cooperation, responsibility, interdependence and achievement in working together in a group setting. Life skill topic areas such as cooking, leisure planning, street proofing, sexuality, and relationships are addressed and geared to the developmental functioning of the group. The desired outcome for the AYCES socialization program is for the youth to understand their diagnosis, recognized their strengths and abilities along with some challenges they may face, and learn skills to adapt to social environments and to ultimately build and sustain healthy positive peer relationships.

Program Successes

Given that this program is still relatively new, there have been many efforts directed towards outreach and program promotion, which have resulted in success in various areas. The AYCES program staff were invited to speak with TDSB Social Work Team outlining the agencies services and the referral process. Flyers on ACYES after school program, Saturday Program, March Break Program and School Break Program were mailed and distributed to the School within the TDSB and TCDSB. Our outreach strategy included a "Fun Day." Students with AS from specialized classrooms in a variety of schools attended the "Fun Day" during school hours. Activities included

icebreakers, preparing and cooking lunch supporting life skills development, group social skill program and interactive games such as billiards, the Wii and board games. Due to the successful outreach strategies, the program has received numerous referrals from school social workers, psychologists, teachers and guidance counselors, in addition to parents. The partnerships with the school staff have been positive and we will continue to nurture this partnership.

Another major success this year is the integration of the AYCES clients with the participants on Level 3. This is an accomplishment not only because of the social challenges these clients face, but also because the youth accessing Level 3 often come with very different challenges or goals. The AYCES youth clearly feel very positive about this integration and it supports the overall program goals.

Program Challenges and Changes

The main challenge of AYCES is the age limitation. Many inquiries are made for youth over the age limit. Another challenge the program has faced is the anxiety experienced by AS youth once they have been absent from the program due to exams, school holidays etc. The staff team works hard to engage the youth and keep the communication constant so that there is a support system in place to reengage them after being away from the program.

A major change from last year is the scheduling of the Friday programming. Last year AYCES would run every Friday from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 pm. The attendance rate was very low. As a result, the program was changed to one Friday a month from 7:00 to 9:00 pm and the attendance has improved.

Client Statistics

Youth who attend the program have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, all and range from age 12 – 18.

Total Clients Served in AYCES after School Program:

- 33
- 6 female
- 29 male
- 2 clients age 12, 7 clients age 13, 8 clients age 14, 7 clients age 15, 2 clients age 16, 4 clients age 17, and 2 clients age 18

Total Clients Served in AYCES Saturday Respite:

- 9
- 4 female
- 5 male

- 1 client age 12, 4 clients age 13, 1 client age 14, 1 client age 15, 1 client age 16, 1 client age 17

Total Clients Served in AYCES School Break Program:

- 16
- 5 female
- 9 male
- 1 client age 12, 4 clients age 13, 2 clients age 14, 3 clients age 15, 2 clients age 16, 2 clients age 17

The referrals have been made by parents, school professionals, YouthLink, and Respite Services. Com, internal referrals, In addition, an article was published in the Scarborough Mirror and many calls were placed by parents after reading the article in the newspaper.

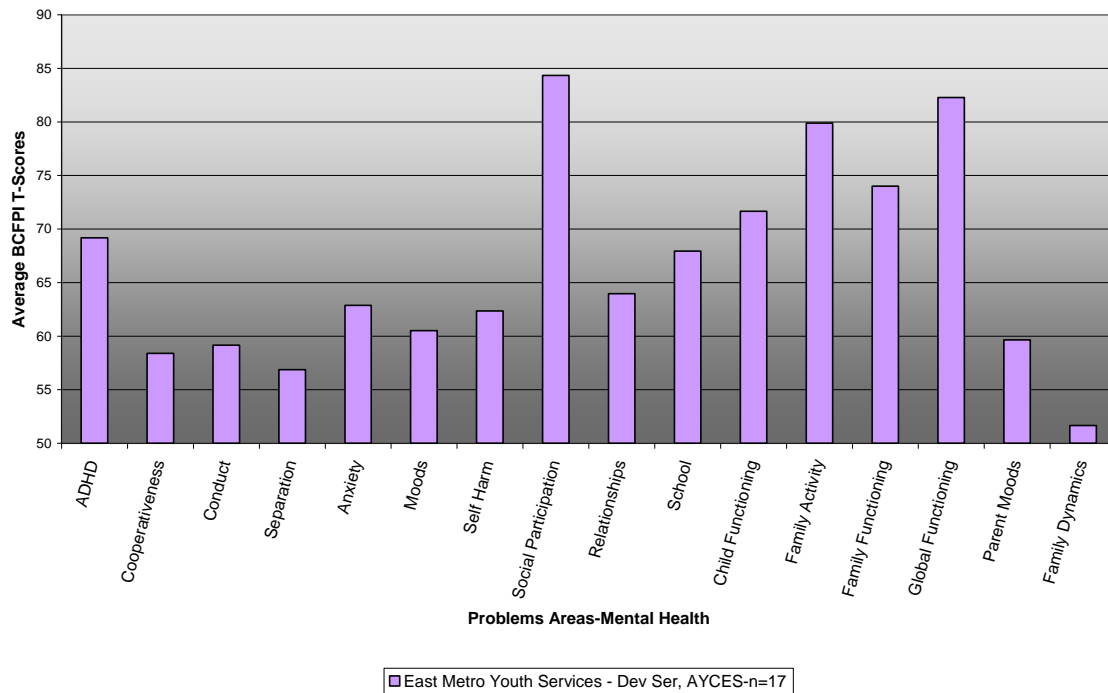
Clients are served until they turn 18 and the program is voluntary. If the client decides that they no longer want to attend or want to leave program, they are made aware that they can access the program again in the future. They can also access ACYES weekend and school break programs at any time.

Aggregate Data

The BCFPI clearly highlights areas of concern in Social Participation which is representative of the presenting behaviours of person with Asperger's Syndrome. Similarly, concerns around Family Activity, Family Functioning and Global Functioning are also elevated. These findings highlight the need for the development of social networks for youth in the AYCES program.

Surprisingly, given the challenged with social anxiety AS clients face, t-scores for anxiety are not particularly elevated. However since many of the BCFPI assessments were completed by the youth themselves, it is possible that the self-reporting was not fully accurate.

Average BCFPI Scores-AYCES Program



Supporting Information

Sick Kids Hospital contacted the AYCES Summer Program, as they were doing a research study on Asperger’s Syndrome. They wanted to interview the youth to gain an insight on their views and experiences. We have yet to receive feedback on their research.

Future Directions

As we move forward into our second year of the ACYES Program, we continue to provide youth with the opportunity to enhance their ability to socialize with peers, develop friendships and increase their sense of self worth. The team’s strength is their ability to engage the youth, thus providing a safe, secure and trusting environment.

The anxiety amongst the youth, mentioned earlier and the correlation with absences is being addressed and discussed during team meetings. One resolution is to maintain regular contact during extended breaks, via one to one work in the community and pay particular attention just before the program restarts to support successful reconnection.

Continued collaboration with the families and schools are key as they have been a valuable resource in supporting the program.

Future goals of the AYCES Program are solidifying the Summer Program, maintaining our number of clients, holding focus groups for our families and youth to get a better assessment of their needs and desired programming, and to research the existence of evidence based practices for youth with Aspergers Syndrome.