

# CREATIVE LEARNING THROUGH MAGIC TRICKS

# HOCUS FOCUS

## *MAGIC AND HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM (HFA)*

There are clear differences between children with Asperger's Syndrome and others on the autism spectrum in regards to social interaction, language, motor coordination, and long-term development. There have been numerous studies (Eisenmajer *et al*, 1996; Kerbeshian, Burd, and Fisher, 1990; Manjiviona and Prior, 1995; Ozonoff, Rogers, and Pennington, 1991; Szatmari, Burtolucci, and Bremner, 1989) that have attempted to determine if there is a distinction between High Functioning Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. This research has concluded that, at the moment, the two are more the same than they are different. Some clinicians use the term High Functioning Autism as their preferred diagnostic label.

In his book *ASPERGER'S SYNDROME*, Tony Attwood writes, "The way [individuals with Asperger's Syndrome] perceive the world makes sense to them and has some aspects that are admirable, but it often brings them into conflict with conventional (that is, majority) ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. They cannot change and many do not want to. However, they do need help in finding ways of adapting to the world as it is in order to use their special skills constructively, to engage in their special interests without coming into conflict with others, and to achieve, as far as possible, some degree of independence in adult life and some positive social relationships."

Children with HFA have many positive and endearing qualities in their personalities and their abilities. It is important to stress that HFA is not something that should embarrass them or something they should be ashamed of. And it is important to

encourage them, to provide them with growth opportunities, and to model to them just as you would any other child.

*Hocus Focus*<sup>™</sup> addresses two specific needs: (1) to provide hands on professional development training and continuing education to those who work with individuals with autism (children and adults) and (2) to produce and make available a functional and academic curriculum that will assist individuals with autism to experience improvement in their learning process, achieve academic successes, and provide opportunities for the development of social skills, self-determination skills, and self-efficacy.

*Hocus Focus*<sup>™</sup> is a research-based program that has the potential to engage individuals with ASD and address many of the challenges they face: challenges in behavior, social cognition, linguistics, motor coordinator, and sensory abilities. Applied Behavior Analysis research has demonstrated that certain activities, like the learning of a magic trick, in an organized, systematic program will:

- Encourage individuals to be sociable, flexible, and cooperative when playing and/or studying with others
- Help individuals recognize and implement the codes of social conduct, including the unwritten social rules and expectations of behavior that we all seem to know, but were never taught (the hidden curriculum).
- Encourage individuals to have meaningful conversation, recognize and respond to facial expressions, and improve the understanding and expression of emotion
- Encourage individuals to understand different perspectives and the thoughts and feelings of others
- Provide positive social experiences
- Educate individuals on the value of listening, giving and receiving compliments, giving appropriate criticism, and acknowledging they are “wrong” and learning from mistakes
- Improve an individual’s gross and fine motor skills
- Improve movement, balance, coordination, responsibility, and self-esteem.

The concepts of *Hocus Focus*™ also provide opportunities for individuals with autism to synthesize and respond appropriately to different stimuli. The goal is to improve the ability of the brain to process sensory information so that the individual will function better in his daily activities. Magic tricks are an excellent activity for this type of therapy because it provides opportunities for the individual to: (1) successfully meet the challenge that is presented through the playful activity; (2) adapt behavior with new and useful strategies in response to the challenge; (3) participate because the activity is fun and engaging; and (4) use their interests and preferences to initiate the experience (Sensory Integration Therapy for Children with Autism, Published Nov 6, 2009, last updated Dec 21, 2009)

The ultimate objective to be achieved through the *Hocus Focus*™ Project is to provide information to educators, parents, family members, support organizations, and therapists so that they may better understand the concepts of this program. Once the concepts are understood, the learning of simple magic tricks can be included as a part of therapy sessions, play activities and social skills groups, and the IEP of individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

Our organization is currently engaged in several research projects with children and adults on the autism spectrum. The data that is being collected is exciting. We are receiving feedback from educators and therapists who are experiencing amazing results with their students and clients.

*“Hocus Focus™ is a great program for students with varying degrees of educational challenges and abilities. It is a creative instruction tool to support the learning of autistic, cognitively delayed, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled students. The activities are motivational, promote positive self-expressions, and reinforce so many key skills needed for student success.”*

Carol Gruben is the Director of Special Education for the Broken Arrow Public Schools (OK).