



Fall 10-31-2002

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Recommended Citation

Deters, Anna, "IWU Peri-Normal Social Group Brings Together Students and Autistic Teens" (2002). *News and Events*. 5395.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/5395>

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October 31, 2002

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IWU Peri-Normal Social Group Brings Together Students and Autistic Teens

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Going to the mall is not a big deal for most teenagers. They chat, mingle, try on clothes, and occasionally stop for an ice-cream cone as they leisurely stroll from store to store. For teenagers with autism, though, making it through a busy shopping center can be a daunting experience. Normal sights and sounds of a mall, even constant human traffic, can be overwhelming.

With the empathy, acceptance, and assistance of the Illinois Wesleyan Peri-Normal Social Group, however, a trip to the mall for autistic teens can be more than rewarding. To facilitate such positive experiences, several Illinois Wesleyan students dedicate themselves to this autism social group, which was founded four years ago by Illinois Wesleyan Assistant Professor of psychology Linda Kunce and Virginia Moody, a local psychiatrist. The first of its kind in the Bloomington-Normal area, the group brings autistic teenagers and college students together in a social environment.

Moody, mother of an autistic child, and Kunce participated in autism focus groups prior to living in Bloomington-Normal and, said Kunce, knew how valuable and delightful this type of interaction could be.

The group, which meets on alternate Thursdays throughout the academic year, performs a variety of activities, from highly structured therapy sessions to purely recreational events.

We'll go swimming or bowling or out for dinner and just hang out. It really helps them just be

normal, be accepted in a social environment, said Erin O'Neill, a senior psychology major from Crystal Lake, Ill., who has been active in the group for the past two years.

More common than Down Syndrome, autism is a developmental disorder resulting from an elusive neurological condition. Autism is not a mental illness, nor are there any known psychological factors that contribute to its development. A California study has found that diagnoses of autism more than tripled between 1987 and 1998. Scientists are baffled by this increase.

While autism has a wide spectrum of severity, it is typified by an impaired ability to interact with others and maintain normal contact with the outside world. Language develops slowly, and autistic children show little interest in making friends and respond minimally to social cues. There is no cure, but specialized education has allowed many autistic individuals to compensate for their disabilities and live highly productive, enjoyable lives.

Persons with autism spectrum disorders have deficits in reciprocal social interaction, said Kunce. As a result they often have difficulty forming lasting relationships with same age peers. The primary goal of the Peri-Normal Social Group, therefore, is to create a fun and accepting environment in which the teens and children can make friends and practice social skills.

In addition to its Thursday meetings, the autism social focus group reaches out to the community in an effort to educate the public about this disorder. In April 2002 the Illinois Wesleyan students and autistic teens held a Sport-a-thon at the IWU Shirk Center. The group members received monetary pledges for each sport activity completed, raising almost \$800. The funds were used to purchase 30 books on adolescence and autism, which the group donated to the Normal Public Library.

The social group also educates autistic teenagers, giving them life skills that will help them in a variety of situations. To do this, guest speakers are often invited to the meetings. On

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one occasion, said O'Neill, we had a policeman come in and explain what he would want the teens to do if they were to be stopped. Autistic kids behave in some ways that policemen might see as dangerous, so we're teaching them how to react so as not to get themselves into trouble. They're not doing bad things, but they might get excited in a certain situation.

For the most part, however, the Peri-Normal Social Group is about friendship. They're all autistic kids but they come together and now they have friendships with each other, said Jenny Shult, a sophomore psychology major from Madison, Wis., who became involved with the Peri-Normal Social Group after she volunteered for the Sport-a-Thon.

"I really like the social group because I see them making friends within the group and I see them making plans to meet outside the group," said O'Neill. "These are feats that we wouldn't consider a big deal, but you learn that autistic teens are not used to having any contact outside their families, maybe school or their therapist, and now they have friends."

The Illinois Wesleyan students, too, have new friends. Lauren Sax, a senior psychology major from Naperville, Ill., said Social group has allowed me to get to know a group of wonderful kids, each of whom views the world from a unique perspective. It is an unforgettable and invaluable experience and the memories will be with me forever.