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Volusia county schools

Program helps Volusia parents get early autism diagnosis

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Volusia County children with autism may have a better shot at success in school and life, thanks to a program that allows for an earlier diagnosis of the disorder.

The district is the only school system in the country to have access to a program that allows school staff members to receive training and work with children before they reach the typical school age. Called Autism Navigator, the program also helps health care providers and parents identify the signs of autism in children younger than age 3.

Many parents of children with autism don't realize it until age 4 or later, said Nancy Redmond, the district's director of exceptional student education and student services.

But the online-based Autism Navigator program can help bump up that diagnosis to age 2 or earlier, and allow parents to receive appropriate services for their children. The school system is in the fifth year of a partnership with the Florida State University College of Medicine's Autism Institute, which created Autism Navigator.

"This early identification provides a crucial opportunity for us to provide early interventions that will greatly improve the outcomes of these young children," Redmond said.

Volusia has 735 students with autism, up from 503 in 2012. One in 68 children nationwide has been diagnosed with autism, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Autism affects the ability to learn from people, and young children with autism typically have difficulty listening to speech, looking at faces and responding to gestures.

Last school year, school staff members visited the homes of families with young children with autism and helped the parents learn how to improve their children's social communication skills and behavior, Redmond said. Her staff assisted the families of six children and aims to serve at least 10 this year.

For parents, the district also provides training such as a session called autism basics, which is offered for the first time this year. The program includes child care and is offered on both sides of the county. District staff members also offer a series of classes of seven or eight nights on topics like social communication skills and best parenting practices.

"It has become an incredible opportunity for our district staff who are providing the training to forge ongoing, trusting relationships with these families because they get to know them," said coordinator Jennifer Kelly.

Parents statewide also have access to whyautismnavigator.com.

The website offers side-by-side video examples of typical children and peers with autism so parents can better discern whether their child might have autism.

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