

Assert Program Will Soon Touch Lives in Russia | CEHS

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This month, a new preschool center will open in Russia, modeled after Utah State University's ASSERT. Early childhood educators from Nizhny Novgorod say the skills they learned here will change lives half a world away.

Thomas Higbee, ASSERT's director, has worked with a group in Russia for more than five years, offering autism-specific training. This year, one of the funding sources has agreed to start a program for preschoolers on the autism spectrum in Russia—the first of its kind in that country. Russian early childhood educators came to Logan last month to learn from the ASSERT preschool's methods and staff. It was financed by the Naked Heart Foundation, a Russian charity that will also provide expertise for the new program.

Early intervention programs are needed in Russia, said Svetlana Mitrofanova, a special educator and psychologist who directs the new early intervention program. "We have some support for children, but nobody's working with young children because maybe our science is underdeveloped."

As a result, children are often unable to succeed in school, said Tatiana Morozova, a clinical psychologist who provides expertise for the Naked Heart Foundation. Often, teachers who are faced with students on the autism spectrum do not know what to do with them. The students leave school—or they are asked to leave—and they end up being taught at home by parents.

Private programs also offer services, and some of them are quite expensive, Morozova said. But the quality and expertise of those services are still behind those offered at

USU. When the partners looked for a program they could use as a model, they chose ASSERT.

The new center in Nizhny Novgorod will be the first Russian public preschool for students on the autism spectrum.

ASSERT has already touched many lives in Utah. Future special educators and leaders receive their training there, and 14 Utah school districts have adopted the ASSERT model. The program is offered through the Center for Persons with Disabilities and the Special Education and Rehabilitation department in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. Thanks to its research-based approach, its preschoolers on the autism spectrum have moved on, prepared to succeed in mainstream classrooms, for more than 12 years.

Nadezha Romanova, an early childhood educator from Nizhny Novgorod, said early intervention would have made a difference to Alexander, her 19-year-old son. Alexander lasted for just one week at school. He was screaming a lot, and the teacher said it was bad for the other children. "He probably didn't understand what they wanted from him," Romanova said. "At the time he was nonverbal, so they couldn't tell him anything."

The teacher visited the family at home for a month, but eventually she concluded that there were not enough resources available to teach Alexander. That put the teaching responsibility on Romanova, who had no training in the disability field at the time.

In Russia, school starts at age 7. Mitrofanova said that is too late. "When students [with ASD] start later, they are already having a lot of behavioral problems," said Svetlana. "Those behaviors are reinforced and it's much harder to get rid of them."

Alexander's story had a rough start, but it got better. The center where Romanova works opened three years ago. It offered services that have helped Alexander—and other youths who also were unable to attend school—to learn communication skills and achieve more independence. Since Romanova works there, they can see each other for brief times during the day. Alexander is proud of the responsibilities he has taken on. She can take him anywhere now without behavior problems.

But she wishes more had been available to him during those formative years. "When he was little, I didn't know anything," she said. "I now understand if he had had support when he was young, it would be much better for him now."

Both Romanova and Mitrofanova are hopeful when they look to the future. Their program in Nizhny Novgorod will train its own staff. People there will also be responsible for the supervision of other programs in four other preschools, so they will be helping teachers in those other schools to organize a learning environment and develop their own programs.

Their relationship with the ASSERT program and Higbee means that they will have access to its translated curriculum. And it will be the first government-run early intervention program for children with autism in Russia, co-financed by the state and the foundation. The partnership means more than that, though. The new program's founders will also know more about evaluating students, assessing the performance of staff members and setting goals. When they visited the ASSERT preschool, they were able to learn from its staff and try some methods for themselves.

For now, Mitrofanova said the training efforts in the new program will focus only on people who already staff preschools. Her own university training was almost all theoretical, without much hands-on experience with students with disabilities. All the people interviewed for this article agreed that special education in Russia includes very little practical experience with children with disabilities.

"Unfortunately all those things that we are trying to bring to our centers, there is not understanding of the state of their importance," she said. "I think my city is lucky. We have the support and financial support from the foundation, and the possibility of learning new and effective methods."

Parents will be glad to know that their children can be together with their typical peers, she said, taking part in activities and being involved in society like everybody else.

The partnership between the Nizhny Novgorod program and ASSERT will continue. ASSERT officials will visit the new program and provide expertise as its founders try to replicate its structure and results.

You can read more about the partnership in The Herald Journal "[Russian educators want to replicate USU autism program](#)".

Contact: Thomas Higbee: tom.higbee@usu.edu