

ASSERT Autism Program Celebrates 20 Years of Service and Outreach

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ASSERT leaders Lyndsay Nix, Tom Higbee, and Kassidy Reinert at the program's 20-year celebration

Families and friends of the ASSERT Autism Program flooded the the Edith Bowen Laboratory School courtyard on Saturday, June 24 to celebrate the program's 20th anniversary.

More than 300 current and former students and families, staff, and volunteers came to the picnic celebration, which featured games, a bounce house, face painting, balloon animals, and a bubble foam machine. Tours of ASSERT's new space were also available for those who wanted to see the program's new location and facilities in the Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence, which opened in 2018.

Lyndsay Nix, ASSERT's Program Director, was overwhelmed by the response from the individuals and families who have interacted with ASSERT over the past two decades. "It was amazing to see so many ASSERT families and staff from over the years all at once," she said. "I was able to have conversations with students I worked with more than 15 years ago, and it was great to talk to several parents and hear how grateful they are for the opportunity they had to participate in the ASSERT program."

Nix was heavily involved in coordinating the 20-year celebration, as was Kassidy Reinert, ASSERT's Clinical Director. Both have been with ASSERT for the past 16 years and have seen firsthand the program's growth and impact on families in the community.

ASSERT (Autism Support Services: Education, Research, and Training) was founded in 2003 by Dr. Tom Higbee, who now serves as the program's Executive Director in addition to his role as head of the Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling department. ASSERT's three-fold mission is to provide research-based support to individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), advance research on behavioral intervention techniques and training methods for parents and professionals, and provide short- and long-term training to teachers and other professionals who work with individuals with ASD.

Over the past 20 years, the program has directly helped more than 150 families in the greater Cache Valley area through its on-campus preschool classroom, and it has reached countless others through its research and training efforts. In addition to the undergraduate and graduate students at Utah State who gain experience working and volunteering with ASSERT, the program has collaborated with eight school districts in Utah over the past 20 years to help current educators at the preschool and elementary school levels learn effective strategies for helping their students with ASD maximize their potential. Through its international outreach program, ASSERT staff have helped teach professionals all over the world to use evidence-based strategies for children on the autism spectrum.



ASSERT's 20-year reunion featured games, face painting, and a bubble foam machine.

According to Higbee, specialized programs for children with ASD were few and far between in Utah when he began his career at Utah State in 2002. His goal in starting ASSERT was to increase direct support for families in the area while creating a setting to train future special education professionals. "ASSERT was something I wanted to build here in Cache Valley to serve a local community need as well as provide an opportunity for my graduate students and undergraduate students," he said. "We have an opportunity to have a direct impact on a few families and a much broader impact through our training and research efforts."

Kim Jacobson, mother of two sons on the autism spectrum, found that despite their very different needs, both of her children were able to develop increased independence and communication skills through ASSERT's individualized approach. She also found more support as a parent than she ever would have expected through the program's monthly training meetings and personalized care, and described how touched she was that the graduate student she worked with checked in on her at home to see what other solutions they could explore. "I felt like I understood my kids on a much deeper level because of what I learned with the ASSERT trainings," Jacobson said, "but then they took it a step beyond that. They really went out of their way to help our family."

Higbee said that a large part of ASSERT's strategy is teaching parents skills to help their children work through challenges and succeed while still allowing them to stay primarily in their parenting role. "Our approach wasn't to turn parents into therapists; that's not their job," he said. "We wanted [families] to know that there was hope. We wanted to instill in them hope that things could get better, that with support, they could learn to help their child learn to communicate more effectively."

Jacobson is well acquainted with the pressure to become an expert and therapist in addition to a parent while raising a child with ASD. After experiencing the huge weight of responsibility for her oldest son's success after he was diagnosed, Jacobson wants other parents in similar situations to know that they don't have to do it alone. "Even if your child doesn't come to the ASSERT program, the parent trainings are open to the entire community," she said. "There are incredible resources out there, and there are people that really want to help your children."

Learn more about the [ASSERT Autism Program](#).