

# Transitions Program and our use of Horticulture Therapy Practice.

Elaine Dobbin Center for Autism

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# What is Autism?

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. With the May 2013 publication of the DSM-5 diagnostic manual, all autism disorders were merged into one umbrella diagnosis of ASD. Previously, they were recognized as distinct subtypes, including autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger syndrome.

# The Transitions Program

- The Transitions Program is an employment readiness program that services adults aged 18 + with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder who are able to sustain a three hour work day, 4 days a week. While our program does not offer one-on-one coaching support, we do offer a low instructor to participant ratio in a structured and positive working environment. Our participants learn to engage actively in their communities by working on bus training skills and working in year long community based volunteer jobs. Center based work includes job shadowing employees with ASD of the Autism Society in a variety of roles (custodian, property team, kitchen team), carpentry and grounds work. Following nine months of volunteering and centre based learning, participants are hired on seasonally as part of our grounds and maintenance crew and work for pay for three months.

Some of our recent harvest...Community Gardens,  
Employment Opportunities, Feeding our supporters





# Front Garden of the Elaine Dobbins Centre...greeting our participants, staff and the public with greenspaces



# Our Greenspace, Our Classroom, Our Office

- Over the last number of years, the Transitions Program has shifted its focus to learning and working in the outdoors. As our centre is located within the grounds of Pippy Park 9 (almost 8 acres of land), it makes sense to construct and provide learning and employment opportunities by utilizing that space. Our learning focus has turned to gardening, carpentry and farming as a way to teach functional employment readiness skills. We have discovered that the social, communicative and therapeutic benefits of learning in greenspaces has been life changing for the people we support. The majority of the skills taught are skills that can be transferred to different employment paths – basic math/carpentry, measuring/cleaning, team work/independence.

Carpentry Class-we build fence posts and pickets,  
window boxes and bird houses...generalized skills (programming,  
home, volunteering and employment





# Mobile Garden Crew at work...

we secure both private and business contracts to do planting, general yard clean up, Spring and Fall clean and general maintenance. We bring our skills to the community.





# Bridges to Hope Potato Garden...

Transitions has volunteered at the food bank 2 x weekly for three years. Last fall we constructed and grew upwards of 150 pound of potatoes to help feed their clients. This year we reached the same numbers. Partnered with Gaze Seeds, who donate seed potatoes, we are giving back to our community.



# Therapeutic Practices

- We are not trained practitioners of Therapeutic Gardening. Our expertise lies in supporting and educating those with ASD. Our (continuing development) of skills in gardening and farming allow us to utilize some techniques of Therapeutic Gardening as we teach our participants the skills associated with planning, planting, tending to and harvesting the food we grow onsite. Most individuals with ASD experience some need in terms of sensory sensitivity. A number of the unexpected social behaviours by some people with ASD may be attributed to sensory issues. Hypo or Hyper sensitivity may contribute to behaviours. Gardening allow us to teach to these needs.

# Scent, Touch and Taste

- Gardens are abundant in scent – good and bad. We literally teach people to stop and smell the roses. This allows for discussion, comparison, and stories to be told.
- As we are working at maintaining the gardens, we teach participants to use touch that is appropriate for what we are doing – harvesting potatoes, planting tiny seeds. We teach that dirty fingernails are a sign of a good days work.
- Many people with ASD had various food aversions. We teach that all farmers and gardeners taste their food – quality control. Our participants are more willing to try new things when they had such a big role in making it grow.

# Sight, Hearing

- A garden is visually stimulating. We talk about colours and patterns.
- Being in a windy part of the country, we talk a lot about the sounds in a garden and the calming effect the sounds of the leaves and trees can make as you work.
- Inevitably, the behaviour of our participants changes – working outdoors allows for both space and connectivity – room to move around safely in greenspace while working toward a common goal to planting and eating well.

# Learning Outcomes

- We implement learning opportunities by working in small groups whereby the person's interests, strengths and needs are considered in every aspect of goal setting and program planning. With the participant, we set small and achievable goals and teach participants that the skills learned and used in gardening can and should be generalized into other areas of their lives, for example, raking the yard at home is like sweeping the floor at work, and filling a watering can requires similar skills to filling a sink to wash dishes. We teach participants to take accountability for time management and use gardening with a group as a way to further develop the social skills required for successful future employment.



Coming soon...our Sensory Garden...we believe this will be the first garden of this kind in the province. This is a long term project that will eventually benefit our clients and their families in addition to the general public.



# The Magic That Happens

- Laughing (weird carrots)...radio in the car, drive-throughs, the weather (!),
- With our teamwork approach and our belief that FAIL means nothing more than FIRST ATTEMPT IN LEARNING, our participants feel comfortable in trying and improving upon a variety of employment based learning opportunities (successes post program – Costco, Sobeys, SPCA, Eastern Health)
- The nature of the program allows for communication and socialization goals to be as important as the work skills we teach

Thanks for listening. Any questions or comments?

