

# **ASD Nest Program Family Handbook**

## **September 2012**

# Welcome!

This handbook is for families of students attending the ASD Nest program and provides specific information about the ASD Nest program. We believe that families are crucial to their children's success; therefore, our school is committed to working closely with you to maximize your child's success. There will be many opportunities in the coming weeks and months to learn about the program and how to work with the school team to help your child.

## **What is the ASD Nest Program?**

The ASD Nest program is a New York City Department of Education (DOE) inclusive program for higher functioning children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Nestled within supportive neighborhood schools, the ASD Nest Program is designed to help children learn how to function well – academically, behaviorally and socially – in their school and community.

In the ASD Nest program, the ASD Nest team, not just your child's teacher, is responsible for your child's educational experience. The team consists of the school principal and/or assistant principal, the teachers, a social worker/guidance counselor, a speech and language provider, and an occupational therapist.

The school's social worker (or guidance counselor) is usually your liaison to the ASD Nest team, and the person to contact to discuss questions and concerns. At this school, you may contact:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email address \_\_\_\_\_

“Educating Children with Autism”, a milestone 2001 National Research Council study, states that while there is no “cure” for autism, these experts conclude:

***“The school environment should and can be the major vehicle for therapeutic change.”***

## **The school environment:**

The ASD Nest Program aims to transform neighborhood public schools into “the major vehicle for therapeutic change” that our children need. Our four therapeutic goals are to:

- **improve interpersonal relationships**
- **develop social and communicative competence**
- **increase self-regulation skills**
- **reduce and replace interfering behaviors.**

ASD Nest Program staff receives training on strategies to accomplish these goals.

### **The ASD Nest Program Model:**

The ASD Nest classroom is fully inclusive, with grade-appropriate academic curricula, integrated therapeutic services, specialized curricula and instructional strategies in socialization, adaptive skills, language and communication, and reduction of problem behaviors. The ASD Nest classroom is an integrated co-teaching (ICT) classroom, a model that is used to integrate students with and without disabilities and includes 2 full time teachers. One difference between a regular ICT class and an ASD Nest ICT class is that all of the students with disabilities in the ASD Nest ICT class are on the autism spectrum. Another difference is that the number of children in each class is usually smaller than in a regular ICT class.

The sizes of Nest classes are currently:

<b>Grade level</b>	<b># children with ASDs</b>	<b>Recommended # of "typically developing" children</b>
K	4	8
1 – 3	4	12
4 – 5	4-5	16
6 – 8	5	20
9 – 12	No more than 6	25

### **Family Meetings:**

The school social worker (or guidance counselor) organizes meetings on topics of interest to families of ASD Nest students. Family meetings may include workshops by outside experts and may be conducted at the school or other site. These meetings provide an opportunity for families to share information and learn about supports and activities available within and outside the school.

### **Social Development Intervention (SDI):**

Social Development Intervention (SDI), a social/language development curriculum created by and for the ASD Nest Program, is a therapeutic curriculum taught in tandem with academics. It is based on relationship development and social cognitive theories, and is used to remediate the social and pragmatic language skills of children with ASD. We believe SDI is a “major vehicle for therapeutic change.” Kindergarten children receive five periods per week of focused SDI time (three periods for other grades) to improve social/relational development, develop pragmatic language skills, and learn how to problem-solve. ASD staff, including all teachers, receives training in social development strategies and use SDI concepts and strategies throughout the school day.

### **Parent/Teacher Conferences:**

Your family has opportunities to meet with school staff to discuss your child at least three times per year. Two of these are “parent/teacher” conferences that occur in October/November and March/April. The third is an annual meeting to update your child’s IEP, usually held in the spring. In addition, at any time during the year, you may ask the social worker to arrange a meeting with staff to discuss any questions or concerns you may have.

### **The ASD Nest Team:**

The team meets once a week for 90 minutes to better understand every child's strengths and challenges, and to discuss instructional and therapeutic strategies to improve your child's educational experience. ASD Nest program staff receives extensive on-site support from colleagues, staff developers/coaches, and outside experts. The ASD Nest team members include:

- a) Principal and/or Assistant Principal: The principal and/or assistant principal takes an active role in the program and often participates in team meetings.
- b) The Social Worker (or guidance counselor): The social worker is the liaison between families and the school. They organize group meetings with families to facilitate communication between individual parents/guardians and the team, which in turn helps the team to understand each child through their parents' eyes. The social worker provides helpful information, such as workshops and expert presentations geared toward helping children with ASD. While the DOE does not release personal information without your explicit permission, in order to facilitate communication, the social worker maintains a list of parent/child names, phone numbers and email addresses to provide to families who wish to share this information with each other.
- c) Teachers: Your child's classroom has two teachers, both trained in effective instructional and behavioral strategies for children with ASD. In addition, an "ASD Cluster Teacher" facilitates your child's adaptation to the non-classroom parts of the day – lunch, recess, and "specials" like art, music, and science. Your child is always with at least one trained ASD Nest Program professional – a teacher and/or therapist.
- d) Speech and Language Providers: Your child's speech teacher is a trained speech and language teacher who has had the requisite pre-service training, with in-service training throughout the year. The speech teacher works with your child's teachers to provide focused SDI time in small groups.
- e) Occupational Therapists (OTs): Occupational therapists are critical members of the ASD Nest team and are offered the same pre-service training as other ASD Nest professionals. In addition, they receive in-service training and support from colleagues who are expert in working with students with ASD.
- f) Strategic Support: The DOE provides targeted ASD training to all staff working in the program. The Department's Division of Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners provides ongoing support via DOE staff and outside consultants.

### **Summer Services:**

The ASD Nest Program is a ten- month program, running from September through June. However, the DOE will arrange for special education services for the summer on a case-by-case, year-by-year basis when needed.