

UNH Awarded \$900,000 Federal Grant to Prepare Students to Work with Children with PDD/Autism

By [Sharon Keeler](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- The University of New Hampshire has been awarded a \$900,000 federal grant to prepare students to work with preschool and kindergarten children with pervasive developmental disorder (PDD)/autism and their families.

The money, granted over a three-year period by the U.S. Office of Special Education Rehabilitation Services, enables the university this fall to establish a program called Project TEAM (Transdisciplinary Education and Mentoring). Combining specialized courses from the departments of occupational therapy, therapeutic recreation, early childhood education and communication disorders, the program provides education and training for 40 undergraduate and graduate students. They will be supervised by faculty from UNH's School of Health and Human Services and education department.

As part of the grant, \$600,000 is earmarked for student funding -- a \$15,000 stipend for each student. For each year of support, students must commit to working for two years after graduation with children with disabilities.

According to project director Lou Powell, UNH has long offered discipline-specific curricula for students interested in working with children with disabilities. However, each program individually does not provide all the skills necessary to meet the needs of young children with PDD/autism.

PDD/autism is a severely incapacitating lifelong developmental disability that occurs in approximately 15 out of every 10,000 births, and is four times more common in boys than girls. It impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction and communication skills.

"Project TEAM follows the model of practice in health care agencies," says Powell, associate professor of

therapeutic recreation. "While health care providers are educated in different disciplines, they are working together as teams, sharing skills and knowledge. This allows them to work with the child from a more holistic approach, and this is the goal for our students."

Powell, who co-wrote the federal grant application with Janet Sable, associate professor of recreation management and policy, is working with Stephen Calculator, professor of communication disorders, Lou Ann Griswold, associate professor of occupational therapy, Georgia Kerns, associate professor of education. Student participants will take a 20-credit core curriculum of courses from across the four disciplines, and will have the opportunity to gain practical experience working with autistic children and their families through in-home respite care in the first year, and in an elementary school practicum the second year.

Calculator notes that, while PDD/autism was chosen as the focus for this program, UNH students will receive training for cooperative care for children with a wide range of disabilities. Each student will receive guidance from the families of the children with whom they work, as well as from a faculty mentor.

"In the past, classroom teachers were left on their own in trying to meet the needs of students with PDD/autism," says Calculator. "Through this program, we are trying to turn out graduates who understand several areas -- students who know how to work cooperatively with others as well as classroom teachers. And they need to recognize the tremendous importance of family input."

Cathy Booth knows just how important it is for children with PDD/autism to be treated with a comprehensive program. Booth's 5-year-old son Tyler has PDD/autism.

"It's important to recognize that these children have a cluster of symptoms, including social, communication and learning issues," says Booth. "All of their care providers need to work together to develop ways of approaching and teaching that child to really maximize their potential -- no one discipline is effective by itself. And that team of providers needs to include parents. I recognize that care providers may have expertise that I don't have, but I am an expert with my child."

Project TEAM, says Powell, will have lasting effects on UNH's faculty, as well as its students.

"We are looking at more ways we can be transdisciplinary. It's happening out in the world, and

we have faculty who are really excited to work in that way," she says. "I think this program will establish for us a model for transdisciplinary education, and will act as a catalyst for doing more of that at the university."

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