

**TASN Spotlight**

**Tips from a Kansas Consultant**

**Helen J. Miller, M.A., CCC-SLP, BCBA, Autism Coordinator**

Mrs. Miller is the Autism Spectrum Coordinator for USD 383, Manhattan-Ogden. In this capacity she encourages research-based programming and provides training and consultation services to staff and parents working with students with autism spectrum disorders. She has a master's degree in speech-language pathology from Kansas State University, a master's degree in educational leadership, extensive training in autism from the University of Kansas, and is also a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst. Mrs. Miller has worked for over 20 years with students on the autism spectrum. She collaborated with Josefa Ben-Arieh to co-author the Educator’s Guide to Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Corwin Press, 2009) and was involved in writing the Kansas standards for autism. As part of the State of Kansas Regional Autism Leadership Community, she is available to other school districts for consultation. This month we are honored to have Mrs. Miller share her consulting tips with us:

1. **Vision**: Have and share a strong vision for the growth students with autism can make. This has been a driving force for me personally. I know that intensive, data driven, evidence-based practices over time bring about change, sometimes remarkable change, and each student deserves our best efforts.
2. **Hope and Encouragement:** Offer hope to parents, teachers and students. Do this by understanding and appreciating the student’s unique characteristics, and then by communicating the appropriate interventions. This approach helps objectify the difficulties while having respect for the student in their struggles. (Ex: If the unwanted behavior is the only way a student knows to communicate a need, we then know we need to teach him a better way.)

It is also critical to encourage teams, validate them, listen and care for them as individuals, while also helping them catch the vision of what might seem impossible. When life gets difficult, I want teams to know they can talk to me and that I do understand. Then together we can come up with the needed solutions.

1. **Systematic Implementation**: It is important to have a guide to implementation and some common systems in place. Starting at the Early Childhood level, I have the expectation that missing skills are taught through discrete trial teaching, visual supports, and reinforcement systems throughout the day to build academic, social and self-help skills. We typically use the Catherine Maurice Curriculum and Teach Me Language program with our early learners, or we develop programing based on the ABLLS or VB-MAPP assessments. My goal is to have the students learning alongside their peers as much as possible as soon as possible. I have made checklists for the different levels to remind teachers to monitor the basic requirements for a robust program on a monthly basis (ex: check the need for visual schedules for transition, work and play; social/friendship opportunities (ex: Circle of Friends); sensory breaks; effective reinforcement; when needed a Ziggurat or a CAPS). I advocated for dedicated Autism Resource Rooms from middle school through high school to meet the academic, behavior and social needs of our students across the spectrum. These teachers are then able to prioritize the teaching of organizational and life skills, and also encourage emotional and social maturation. Basically, it has been important to be systematic in the details of intervention as well as the overall big picture.
2. **Knowledge:** Keep growing as a professional! Make it a priority to examine your current knowledge base and share this enthusiasm for obtaining new knowledge. It is a pleasure for me to learn from others and gain new information – whether it be a better understanding of girls on the spectrum or new tools for assessing social skills. We are very fortunate to have a wealth of opportunities to gain knowledge: books and articles, the TASN-ATBS trainings, and reputable websites. Learning is fun!
3. **Resources**: Gather as many resources as possible to loan out. Over the years I have collected a library of books, curriculum, and materials for teaching and sensory activities and made them easily available through an online app: <https://usd383asd.libib.com/>. I support teachers and parents by writing customized social stories, power cards, and other visual supports. Parents and teachers can also access valuable information we have assembled on our district website autism page: [www.usd383.org](http://www.usd383.org) (search for Special Education/Autism).

1. **Reinforce paraprofessionals:** I encourage paras to complete the online RBT (Registered Behavior Technician)training offered by TASN-ATBS and then reward this dedication with a resulting increase in pay once training is completed (our district has added an extra dollar to the hourly pay for those who have completed the training and pass the assessment); all paras working with students with autism are asked to participate in a minimum of 6 hours of autism training.
2. **Training:** This is crucial! Provide both theoretical and (when possible) hands-on training to teachers and paras. This includes opportunities to practice and be observed as they implement new strategies. I model ongoing learning by delving into new evidence-based strategies as they come up and I encourage my team of ASD teachers to join me in the learning process. I also provide professional development on an ongoing basis. Each school has received a binder with succinct descriptions of the most used interventions for students with autism. This reference guide allows me to discuss a specific intervention over the phone while they access the written details.
3. **Support:** Parents must feel included and supported. If we put ourselves in their shoes then we may become the beacon of hope they need. Our district Autism Support Group has provided a safe place to meet, share concerns and learn together. I gain so much from listening to parents! I also provide book study groups for parents and teachers (both at a coffee shop and on-line). When time allows, we put out a newsletter highlighting a strategy, a book or two, and recent research on autism. We also have a Facebook page where parents can reach out with ideas and for guidance. Parents help each other with insurance and waiver questions, with finding dentists and doctors, and building connections for after school activities.

1. **Social and Summer Opportunities:** The importance of social connection is huge! In collaboration with the Drama Therapy program at KSU, we offer three to four after-school clubs for students on the spectrum and their typical peers. These clubs (grades 3 -12) have allowed students to develop strong friendships, which have benefited them greatly. I strongly suspect that those who participate in the High School club are much less likely to drop out of school or feel isolated. Additionally, in the summers we offer camps for our students with autism and their typical peers. The elementary Flint Hills Summer Fun camp meets every day, all day, for eight weeks. We also have afternoon camps for the secondary grades in the afternoons for six weeks in the summer. I have been told by parents that these camps are a life saver and we have certainly seen the progress in school the following year. These camps are also open to non-USD 383 students ([www.flinthillssummerfuncamp.com](http://www.flinthillssummerfuncamp.com)).
2. **Enjoyment:** Most importantly, I love what I do. I love the challenges of difficult situations and finding ways to problem-solve with others for the good of the students we serve. I love seeing the student progress and growth from year to year. I love these wonderful students. I love the humorous things they do and say – don’t you?! I love the dedication of strong, caring teachers and I also want them to love what they do. This is what makes my work as a consultant an enormous privilege and pleasure!

Picture of Helen at her desk
 **Helen’s Journey**

Helen was born in Lima, Peru to Scottish parents and is one of 5 siblings. She completed high school in Edinburgh, Scotland and earned her first degree from Edinburgh University. She met her husband, Forrest, in Switzerland while both were working in Geneva. They married in 1974 and have lived in Manhattan where Forrest was a professor of Mathematics at KSU. They have three grown children and the added blessing of four beautiful grandchildren. Helen earned her MA in Speech Language Pathology from KSU in 1977 and then worked for a while for KSU in the Communication Science Disorders Department. She started working for the school district when her youngest child entered first grade in 1990, primarily as the Head Start preschool SLP. After working with a couple of students with autism, she began her quest to gain knowledge in autism and effective interventions. She attended as many conferences as she could and took all the course work KU offered on autism. In 1999 she became part time autism coordinator for the Manhattan-Ogden district and then a few years later she became a full-time autism coordinator. Helen then obtained a master’s degree in Teaching and Leadership from KU. She collaborated with Josefa Ben-Arieh to co-author The Educator’s Guide to Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Corwin Press, 2009) and in 2014 she became a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst. Helen has appreciated all the learning that comes from collaboration with colleagues throughout Kansas and the strong commitment from her community to support children with autism. She has also been a regional autism consultant for the TASN ATBS project for nearly 15 years and has loved every minute working with kids with autism, their families, and teachers.

**Tributes to Helen’s work**

**Barb Kephart is a parent, an educator, and a former autism consultant. She is currently a part time special education teacher who works tirelessly as a community volunteer for special needs ministries. Barb moved to Manhattan in 2015 and is the parent of Caeden, 15, who has diagnoses of Autism and Epilepsy. Barb has this to share about Helen’s impact:**

“I met Helen when she was interviewing schools for my children. Helen immediately put me at ease. I just can’t say enough about Helen. She is a solution finder and excellent problem solver. Helen is dedicated to families, can manage teams and goes above and beyond. She is the one person everyone looks to in the district. Helen is incredibly humble, positive, and works tirelessly to support children and families. I would call her a connector and an awesome collaborator. She amazes me with her dedication to the Autism Support Group and her leadership in the Flint Hills Summer Fun Camp. Not to mention my son loves her Scottish accent.”

**Wendy Condra is an autism administrative assistant who has known Helen for 7 years and works closely with her every day. Wendy says:**

“All of Helen’s work flows out of who she is as a person. She is one you can always count on to be attentive and fully present. The care and support she offers to people with autism, families and those who work for her is fueled by a deep and selfless love for others. She has effortlessly mentored the women who have worked for her as an example of humility, perseverance and pervasive joy. She brings light and perspective to every situation and is an absolute joy to work with!”

**Kimberly Rieckmann is the assistant to the autism coordinator and. She knows Helen through her interactions as a parent of a child on the autism spectrum and also as a mentee through her work in the autism office. She shares the following:**

“The school district once held a meeting to consider whether the position of autism coordinator was truly needed. It was because of the many ways that Helen Miller touched the lives of the families and children with autism in the USD 383 area, that there were plenty of voices loudly proclaiming their need to keep the position and specifically with Helen in it. She was kept in her position and then went on to change the lives of many. Through advocation, education, and motivation, she has pushed for children with autism to live the very best lives they could. She always does this with a smile on her face and a “yes, we can” attitude. I have never seen her just say that a child was unable to be helped. She goes headlong into the situation with an open mind on how that help needs to look. In addition, she pioneered camps and clubs for these kids to give them experiences and friendships that were not possible for them before. Lives have been nurtured and courses have been altered, all because of the dedication of one woman who would not give up on them.”

**Helen, I wanted to personally thank you for letting me visit your programs, sharing your wisdom and being a dedicated professional to our Kansas students, teachers and families. I am grateful for your time and friendship ~Dixie**

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