

Children with autism have different social, language and communication skills than neurotypical children, requiring teachers to try innovative approaches in their classrooms, said Gast.

“There’s a need for specialized training on how to structure the classroom, how to respond to these kids when they behave inappropriately, and how to design instruction that will facilitate the learning of new skills,” he said.

It was not until the middle of the 20th century that there was even a name for the disorder that disrupts families and presents lifelong challenges for thousands of children. But today, autism affects an estimated 3.4 of every 1,000 children ages 3 to 10 years across America, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

In 1943, Leo Kanner of The Johns Hopkins Hospital studied a group of 11 children and introduced the label “early infantile autism” into the English language. At the same time a German scientist, Hans Asperger, described a milder form of the disorder that became known as Asperger’s syndrome. These two are today listed as two of the five pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), more often referred to as ASD. All of these disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills, social interactions and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior.

Despite the alarming rise in ASDs, the COPPA Project is one of only a few university programs in the Southeast designed to prepare teachers for such a classroom challenge. Many COPPA students are certified teachers who have returned to the university for graduate studies to undertake a specialization in ASDs.

“Teachers are often faced with learning about autism after they have already been hired to work in classrooms and are not always using correct methods to positively impact students,” said Luscre, who was once responsible for overseeing 90 classes for students with autism in Gwinnett schools. “Nothing exceeds the power of research-based educational instruction for its effects on teaching needed skills to children with autism.”

College of Education students won’t be the only ones filling seats in COPPA classes this time around. Families of children with autism, students at other universities, teachers working in other school systems and non-education majors at UGA are all encouraged to take advantage of the courses. Graduate



PHOTO BY STEVE BISHMAN

and undergraduate classes are offered, and many will be held in the Gwinnett area.

In addition, COPPA organizers plan to use the teachers who have completed the program as an important resource for training future groups.

“The hope is that those teachers have gone out, restructured their classrooms, and are making a difference in the lives of those kids as well as their parents,” said Gast. “Our new students are going to get to see classrooms that really approach model classrooms in these various school systems.”

All graduate students funded by the COPPA Project must complete intensive research projects. The finished projects are already being applied to real-life situations, and some will be published in academic journals.

“By the time COPPA students have completed the didactic program and are interns, their confidence is soaring, and they have learned a wealth of information which assures them that they have a lot to offer their students with autism,” said Luscre.

Full-time students usually take two years to complete the 41-hour program, while part-time students finish in three years.

“We encourage students to attend the program full-time the first year, and we help them secure employment in their second year when they do their internship and applied research project. Of course we permit students to move at a slower pace through the

program if necessary,” said Gast.

The COPPA program leads to a master’s degree in special education with certification in either the special education adapted curriculum or special education general curriculum with an emphasis in ASD. Students may also pursue a specialist degree with an emphasis in ASD through a 31-hour program.

Luscre emphasizes the importance of building a strong connection between family members and teachers. Teacher students in the program learn how to assist parents in creating goal plans for children to follow when they are at home. They can also help parents determine the best ways to respond when a child with autism misbehaves and can act as an autism resource for other teachers in their school system.

“I would like to see our graduates assume leadership roles in their schools, so they can share their training with others who have not had the opportunity for autism education,” she said.

Over the next few years, Gast hopes to expand COPPA training to include middle and high school teachers, eventually providing a continuum of support for students with autism throughout their time in school.

For more information, email [dlgast@uga.edu](mailto:dlgast@uga.edu) or visit [www.coe.uga.edu/csse/spe/coppa\\_degree.html](http://www.coe.uga.edu/csse/spe/coppa_degree.html)

*Catharin Shepard is a COE graduate assistant and master’s student in journalism.*