

## VR clients with a Neurodiversity Diagnosis and Sensory Issues: Strategies to Enhance Client Vocational Performance Outcomes

**Issue:** A growing number of young clients served by the Virginia DARS (Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services) are youth with a neurodiversity diagnosis. Youth on the autism spectrum, with ADHD and or anxiety make up an increasing portion of the population of students at Virginia Colleges, with anxiety the number one diagnosis. Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center (WWRC), a DARS vocational residential campus and that performed as a pilot site for the CPID project, reported behavioral issues with this population. Through the CPID project, the AT Specialist identified issues of unmet sensory needs as impediments to achieving performance outcomes in training and on the job.<sup>i</sup>

**Strategies to Address Sensory Needs:** The CPID AT Specialist collaborated with DARS' AT team to develop and deploy sensory kits through the loaner library. DARS AT Specialists (licensed Occupational Therapists) employed strategies, along with equipment in the kits, to help DARS clients self-regulate and remain focused. As the program expanded, AT Specialists developed Sensory Academies for clients that focused on self-regulation using behavior modification techniques and AT devices.

1. **Training and Coordination of AT Field Specialists:** Field AT/OTs had begun addressing the sensory needs of agency clients. In 2017 with the advent of the CPID grant, the CPID AT coordinated and supported initial sensory training for WWRC and DARS OTs. Previously, OTs at WWRC had operated solely through a medical model. The collaboration between WWRC and field AT/OTs has continued with additional courses paid for through the DARS Virginia Rehabilitation Technology Services (VATS) budget. The additional focus and support from AT/OTs has introduced counselors to innovative techniques that help clients maintain focus and be more productive.
2. **Classroom Screening:** The CPID AT initiated AT screening for the Manufacturing Technology (MTT) classes. The AT/OT contracted the client's counselor for a referral to the AT/OT if needed. This has become routine for the AT/OT staff at WWRC. Also used in the field with clients are *Sensory Profile Evaluations*, which gives detailed information about sensory needs and preferences. A cloud-based computerized evaluation version is available for virtual interactions.
3. **Sensory Kits:** Sensory Kits were initially given to WWRC and field AT Specialists to support loan and evaluation activities.<sup>ii</sup> Kits were located at AT labs centrally located in each region served by DARS. Occupational Therapy doctoral students provided initial documentation for the assistive technology devices. The items were taken to the classroom, academies and on tours to help the students with focus and attention.

4. **Alert 4 Work Academies:** Following the success of the sensory kits, DRS ATs initiated the *Alert 4 Work Academy* and made referrals for self-regulation. The ATs also piloted 'Calm Connect' videos with clients to help with focus and anxiety reduction, a strategy for remote use with clients during the Covid-19 pandemic.
5. **Post Training - At Home, Additional Training and At Work:** The CPID AT Specialist incorporated OT / AT specialists in the Next Steps meetings<sup>iii</sup> to discuss strategies the client had been working on while at WWRC which the field staff could continue as indicated. The OT/ATs in the field have added a section on self-regulation to their college prep courses, offered every summer.

### **Sustainability:**

1. **Community of Practice:** The statewide AT/OT Team created a monthly sensory processing community of practice to continue collaboration, education, program development, and case study discussion; this increased to a weekly meeting during quarantine. The Team also created a discussion board to share articles, trainings and ideas.
2. **VATS (Virginia Assistive Technology System)** continues to purchase items for self-regulation. VATS also provided some simple devices in some of the training areas at WWRC including PERT.

**Future Research:** Sensory Therapy and interventions is a promising area of further research. To date, there is little research about interventions for adults with self-regulation issues outside of mental health institutions. From another data standpoint, sensory items are reported as the most used AT in our VATS - NATAD's data reporting system.

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<sup>i</sup>A *Fully Accessible Approach* is a webinar / presentation through which AT/OTs discuss the pressing need AT and Sensory treatment for many clients and strategies that Virginia VR, through the CPID project, developed in response. Please see: VR AT/OTs discuss assistive technology and how it can improve credential attainment and employment outcomes for participants. <https://gwcrcre.org/event-virginia-cpid-a-fully-accessible-approach/>

<sup>ii</sup> See CPID Document *Sensory Kits* for a description of products commonly used by Virginia AT/OTs for clients needing help with sensory self-regulation.

<sup>iii</sup> *Next Steps Meetings* were developed through the CPID project for students completing training. The client, counselor, business development manager, and other clients supports such as an AT/OT and family participate in a process that helps clients determine how best to move forward. See Template:

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