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FACT SHEET

School Playground Program Helps Students Acquire Social Skills

WHAT: Touchstone Behavioral Health has partnered with school districts in the metropolitan Phoenix area on a special social program to benefit students on the autism spectrum, or those who may just need additional assistance gaining necessary social skills. Playground Partners fosters and promotes healthy social interactions among students age 6 to 12. Activities on the playground are designed to initiate play, team work, and conversations during school hours at recess. Masters level therapists from Touchstone Behavioral Health collaborate with the schools and facilitate the program.

WHERE: Currently, North Ranch Elementary School (16406 North 61st Place, Scottsdale, Arizona 85254) in the Paradise Valley School District and Catalina Ventura Elementary School (6331 W. 39th Ave. Phoenix, AZ 85019) in the Alhambra School District are participating in the program. Officials at Touchstone Behavioral Health are open to more schools and districts participating.

WHY: Children on the autism spectrum often have difficulty communicating and interacting with others. The Family Centered Autism Program also recognizes that social obstacles are not limited to those with a diagnosis on the spectrum. The purpose of the Playground Partners program is to give students with social challenges a fun opportunity to practice and improve their communication skills in their natural environment. It also helps improve their socialization skills among their peers and confidence is also gained.

HOW: Through play the students learn by example in a non-threatening, natural, and fun atmosphere.

WHO: For children 6-12 years old who need support gaining additional social skills to interact with peers appropriately and foster meaningful relationships with others.

COMMENTS IN GENERAL ABOUT THE PROGRAM: Development of appropriate social interactions is a critical success factor for high functioning autistic children. For these students, social engagement does not come easily. Through the use of inclusive age-appropriate skill sharing activities, the staff at Touchstone successfully engages students in games they enjoy. Students are “included” rather than “excluded”.

COMMENTS FROM PARENTS:

Diana Anderson: “As the mother of two boys with autism, I know more than most the importance of navigating the social world. Most kids take for granted reading social cues and asking someone to play. But this can be extremely difficult for someone with autism. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of help in this important area of development within the school system. There is minimal help during class time, but during recess it is needed most. My boys love the structured play and facilitated social interaction during recess with Playground Partners. This much needed help will give them the tools they need to shorten the social gap instead of making it wider.”

Suzan and Lance Ziegler: “Ethan is 6-1/2 years old and has been actively involved in Touchstone Behavioral Health’s Playground Partners program since its inception at North

Ranch Elementary School in Paradise Valley. We are grateful for this program which supplements and supports the other therapies that Ethan receives. We appreciate the therapeutic and safe environment provided for Ethan to learn and expand upon the social skills he needs to be successful in life.”

Jody Hanover: “My son Ryan has been bugging me to join the Playground Partners for a couple of months because several of his classmates were involved and he said ‘all the kids have fun and anyone who wants to play is welcome there’. I thought Ryan might be a good fit because he has trouble making friends and playing with his peers since he lacks normal social skills. Playground Partners has offered him a comfortable place to belong during recess. He is able to play with his current friends while learning how to play with new friends. Since Ryan joined the group he has come home with new terminology which helps him understand the emotions he is feeling in social settings. He is better able to communicate how he is feeling which is a great benefit to us all. So far, our experience has been nothing but positive.”

Anonymous: *We were originally approached by the Playground Partners social skills group through our child's Twice Gifted program at school. Appreciating that the development of appropriate social interactions is a critical success factor for high functioning autistic children, we enrolled our son and adopted an optimistic wait-and-see attitude.*

Through their use of inclusive age-appropriate skill sharing activities, the staff at Touchstone is successfully engaging our child in games he enjoys. Instead of occupying his time at a physical and emotional distance from his peers, he is slowly including others in his circle and cooperating more. When the initial eight-week program concluded, we elected to continue our participation through the end of the school year based on our child's expressed interest.

For our son, social engagement doesn't come easily. It is a day-by-day challenge for us as parents to teach appropriate skills. Playground Partners is a program that reinforces these skills within the context of the school yard. It further emphasizes the lessons he learns at home and represents a tremendous value to us. The empathy, compassion, and patience of the staff at Touchstone reflect the empathy, compassion, and patience our son experiences with us.

Thank you!

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