Horticultural Therapy for Special Education Students

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Horticultural Therapy (HT) is a dynamic and expanding profession (3) using plants during the training or rehabilitation of persons with mental or physical disabilities (1, 4). Although it is an old concept (5), only recently has horticulture become recognized as a therapeutic treatment for patients (7). The special feature of HT is adapting horticultural activities to therapeutic goals (2). Traditional horticulture strives to produce healthy plants, whereas, in HT, plants may be allowed to die if this meets a client's needs. This Note describes the structure of one HT program that was used with very positive results.

A horticultural therapy program (HTP) was developed at the Univ. of Massachusetts in cooperation with a pre-vocational school for students with developmental disabilities. Selected students capable of functioning outside the classroom volunteered as clients in a greenhouse conservatory program. Instruction included greenhouse management and horticultural activities and practices. Training also included activities as riding public transportation, following work routines, and interacting with age-appropriate peers. University HT students provided one-to-one interactive instruction.

A complete summary profile of each client was provided by the pre-vocational school prior to enrollment. It included assessment of disabilities, personal interests, work experience, family background, and general comments. HTP personnel reviewed this material to evaluate each individual's needs. During the first two weeks, school advisors determined client compatibility to the HTP and then developed a work plan of activities for each client.

The HTP provided a structural format for client work tasks, with an assigned timetable that allowed for one rest break per period. Permission was required to leave the work site. Timeslips were signed daily to document successful completion of the work tasks. After clients returned home, cooperating parents exchanged timeslips for token payment to reinforce good work habits with monetary reward. Each week's program completed successfully was rewarded with a self-made item for the proud client to carry home.

Clients required clear statements breaking work tasks into defined steps. Without them, clients' development of confidence and independence was delayed and reluctance to master skills or assume responsibilities occurred. Frequent demonstrations while working side by side with clients was the most effective aid for task comprehension. Verbal instructions to teach a skill were kept short and direct and were repeated as needed. Repeated prompts were reduced to intermittent cues as skills improved, which was reinforced with generous praise. Encouraging skilled clients to instruct or assist new clients built self-reliance and pride.

Not every client chose to remain with the program, but those that did gained employable skills. The greenhouse provided a unique setting, a nonthreatening environment with laboratory conditions, where clients learned new job skills, practiced their dependability, and learned to identify and care for plants, which bolstered their self-esteem. The pre-vocational school determined client improvement levels, and continued to refer clients. Many of them requested to return to the HTP for further training. For them, an improved degree of self-sufficiency in adult society was a worthy achievement.

Literature Cited


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