

Co-op opens new autism clinic in Pipestone

By Kyle Kuphal / on January 18, 2021



This is part of the new autism clinic that the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative has opened up at Minnesota West Community and Technical College in Pipestone. The clinic provides therapy for children diagnosed with autism and other developmental disorders and helps prepare them for school. Contributed photo

The Southwest West Central Service Cooperative (SWWC) has opened an autism clinic at Minnesota West Community and Technical College in Pipestone to provide early interventions to children age 6 or younger. “We aim to provide intensive behavioral therapy to young children diagnosed with autism and other developmental disorders,” said Amber Bruns, clinical director of behavioral health services for SWWC. “All of our therapy is based on the principals of applied behavioral analysis, which is currently the gold standard for treatment for children with autism.”

Bruns said the clinic in Pipestone, which opened at the end of August, is one of three READY Clinics SWWC opened in the past year in its 18-county service area. The other Ready Clinics are in Montevideo and Cosmos. All three of them are located in one of SWWC’s Educational Learning Centers (ELC), or alternative schools. The goal of the Ready Clinics is to help prepare children with autism and other developmental disorders for school. Bruns said the children typically have deficits in language, their ability to communicate, social skills or behavioral issues.

“Our goal is to teach them as many skills as we can, so that they’re able to be as independent as possible, and try to fill some of their skill gaps that they may have in hopes that by the time they’re school age they’re a little bit more prepared to be there,” Bruns said.

Children must be diagnosed with autism or a related condition to receive services at the clinic. The READY Clinic can provide autism evaluations for anyone of any age to determine their needs. Adults are referred to other resources. For children who are diagnosed and go on to receive therapy at the clinic, the staff does further intake assessments that are used to develop an individualized treatment plan customized to that child.

“When the clinical psychologist does these assessments too, she’s able to kind of prescribe therapy,” Bruns said. “So she’ll make recommendations about how much therapy should be prescribed for that client per week.” Many of the clients at the Ready Clinic might have services for 40 hours a week, “which is pretty intensive,” Bruns said, and something school districts are not designed to do.

“That’s why early intervention is so important in those early years because we have the luxury of being able to do that if the child can tolerate it,” Bruns said.

Bruns said the earlier a child receives the therapy, the better. She said signs to look for that could indicate a need include if a child is not babbling or cooing like other babies, doesn’t make eye contact or plays with toys in an unusual way.

Bruns said the READY Clinics provide services that were not previously available in the region, or in much of greater Minnesota. When she started looking into opening the READY Clinics back in 2016, she found that there were only 12 early intensive behavioral and developmental intervention providers in the state and 11 of those were in the metro area.

She said some families in the region had to consider moving to the metro area to be closer to the needed services or going without services that could benefit the child. Others utilized early childhood special education through their schools, which she said can be a good resource. She said Pipestone had the benefit of being fairly close to service providers in Sioux Falls or Brookings, but that those programs have waiting lists of up to a year.

“Obviously there’s just a really big gap with services, especially for our area, so our goal at the Co-op is always to try to fill those service gaps for kids and families,” Bruns said.

SWWC is an education service agency and typically fills such gaps through schools, providing services that small school districts can’t support on their own. The READY Clinics are unique for SWWC because the clinics are considered medical clinics.

“It is a very different experience for us,” Bruns said.

Bruns said anyone can be referred to the program or inquire about it. To learn more about it, call 507-339-4933 or email readyintake@swwc.org.