

## The “RD” in CARD: What are Related Disabilities and Why Are They Part of CARD?

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In 1993, the Florida Legislature created the system known as CARD, providing nonresidential resource and referral, training, individualized and programmatic technical assistance, and public awareness services for and about individuals who have communication and behavioral difficulties with the diagnosis of autism, autistic-like, sensory impairment with additional disabilities, or deaf-blindness. For years prior to CARD’s establishment, parents and professionals had worked hard to get legislators to respond to the needs of families and service providers regarding autism spectrum disorders. At the same time, a project called the “Community Intervention Project for Students with Sensory Impairments and Other Handicapping Conditions (CIP)” funded by the Florida Department of Education, was operating at UF’s Department of Psychiatry (the current home of UF/Gainesville CARD), with Greg Valcante, Donna Gilles, Art Wallen, and Winnie Gayler. This three-year grant provided assistance to families and service providers who lived with or worked with children and young adults who were blind/visually impaired or deaf/hard of hearing with additional disabilities, or deaf-blind (“dual sensory impaired”). After the end of the grant cycle in 1991, CIP parents were promised that they would be able to receive similar services through programs developed in the future. Two years later, that promise was met by being named as a constituency group of CARD.

At first, many people questioned why individuals with sensory impairments and additional disabilities (including deaf-blindness) were considered for services. But the more we find out about the complex characteristics of autism as well as the related disabilities, the easier it becomes to recognize how similar the supports are between groups. One basic difference between constituencies is that individuals who have Autism Spectrum Disorder tend to have difficulties in processing auditory or visual information, whereas individuals who experience vision and or hearing loss accompanied by other disabilities have difficulty in gathering information through the affected sensory channel(s) as well as processing that information. Given this difference though, most individuals in both groups benefit when information is presented in more than one modality, while concentrating on the sensory channel that provides them the best access to and processing of information. In fact, many established practices such as using schedules and routines, can be found in earlier literature about strategies for people who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind. And of course, using alternative means of communication (e.g., sign language) originated within the deaf/hard-of-hearing culture.

So what is CARD doing for the other part of our constituency? First, we accept referrals for children and adults who would qualify for vision, hearing, or deaf-blind services and who also have cognitive disabilities. Second, we collaborate with the Florida Outreach project for Children and Young Adults who are Deaf-Blind, directed by yours truly, to present topics of interest to a broader constituency at the annual CARD conference. The 2003 conference marked the first time we organized presentations in strands, one of which was the related disability strand. Three presentations on literacy, considerations for students with multiple disabilities, and calendars, were as well attended as other strands, a success that supports having future strands on related disabilities.

What can you do? Many of you know other families who have children or teachers who have students who meet eligibility criteria for CARD services, but do not have autism. The

individuals may have cognitive disabilities accompanied by a vision loss or a hearing loss, or may have a vision and a hearing loss together. In order for us to represent our constituency better, please encourage them to call us so that we can determine their eligibility to be placed on our registry for mailings or to request assistance.