

A+TheraTEAM helps clients make progress in speech therapy

By Ruth Fields
Courier Advertising Writer

When she thinks back on it, Angela Vanek can't really say why she chose to change her college major. She had begun studying pharmacy at the University of Houston, but midway through her undergraduate program, she decided to switch to the university's speech therapy program.

Just two months later, Angela's daughter, Isabel, was born. Isabel suffered a stroke at birth, which affected her motor control, vision and speech. Angela soon realized that her switch to speech therapy had been providential.

"It was meant to be," she said. Because of her training as a speech-language pathologist, Angela has been able to help Isabel through the difficulties of her development. In addition, she has discovered that parents of disabled or speech-delayed children know that she understands their challenges.

Perhaps it was because of Isabel that Angela thrived on her studies in speech therapy.

"Everything just clicked," she said. She graduated summa cum laude from the University of Houston in 2002, then earned her master's degree in 2004. Whereas most speech therapy students begin externships during their second year of graduate school, Angela was one of only two students selected to participate in a first-year externship. There, she gained clinical experience while working on her master's degree. She then interned with the Magnolia Independent School District, and continued working there after she completed her internship.

While working for the school district, however, Angela became frustrated. She believed that many of the children at her school needed speech therapy, but didn't meet the district's rigorous qualification standards. Children in other school districts, she said, experience similar problems because of the vast number of children who need speech therapy.

Angela discovered that even children who qualify for speech therapy don't often get the intense therapy they need in order to progress quickly. Because she saw about 100 children per week, Angela was

forced to work with children in groups. Unfortunately, she said, children often need one-on-one therapy in order to make significant progress.

"I wouldn't take lunch because I wanted to see the kids who need individual time," she said.

After she had been working in Magnolia for three years, Angela decided to form her own speech therapy practice and opened



Angela Vanek, MA, CCC-SLP, shown here with her eight-year-old daughter, Isabel, is a certified speech pathologist and holds a certification of clinical competence through the American Speech/Language Hearing Association (ASHA). She is also a member of the American Academy of Private Practice in Speech Pathology and Audiology (AAPPSPA). A+TheraTEAM accepts most private insurance plans, and is in the process of becoming an approved provider for Medicare and Medicaid.

A+TheraTEAM in early January. There, she gives clients the individual attention that helps them master their speech problems, including articulation, stuttering, phonological processing and muscle-based disorders, which can affect both communication and eating.

"Kids who are in private therapy just improve so quickly," she said.

Angela also treats adults who have suffered brain trauma, as well as seniors who have Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, or who are recovering from strokes.

A+TheraTEAM's philosophy is to encourage therapists and families to work together and support one another as a team, so Angela parts with tradition by encouraging parents or other family members to observe therapy sessions through a video monitoring system. By watching, she said, family members can learn techniques that they can practice at home.

Angela uses creative approaches when working with clients. For example, she has found that a delayed auditory feedback program works well when treating clients who lack fluency because of stuttering. Clients hear their own words through headphones after a millisecond delay,

which causes them to slow down and say words without stuttering. They can even use a portable device, which is about the size of an iPod, when stressful situations cause them to lose fluency. Just knowing that the device is available, Angela said, can often prevent an embarrassing episode of stuttering.

A+TheraTEAM also uses several innovative programs to help

clients, including The Interactive Metronome™, which stimulates the brain to compensate for developmental delay, and Fast ForWord™, which improves language competence.

If one technique doesn't work for a client, Angela will keep trying other approaches until she finds one that is successful.

"I don't really go by the textbook," she said. "I try different things to find what works for that person."

While traditional speech therapy includes drills, first on sounds, then syllables, then words, then structured sentences and, finally spontaneous sentences, Angela prefers to move clients at a different pace. Rather than engaging clients in structured activities that have little resemblance to real conversation, she teaches them speech techniques that will help them communicate more effectively while they're engaging in everyday activities.

"I teach carry-over strategies from the start," Angela said. "I want them to be functional and use what I am teaching them at home, because that is where it matters most."

Angela provides 60-minute sessions, which gives her enough time to make progress with clients at each visit. She packs a lot into each 60-minute session and uses strategies to ensure that clients and their families will be able to utilize techniques at home. Parents often tell her that their children are so tired after a speech therapy session, they go to bed earlier than usual.

It's rewarding for Angela when her clients make progress. For example, one client suffered a brain injury over a decade ago, but was still struggling to speak when she came to A+TheraTEAM for therapy. After just seven months of therapy, the young woman is able to pronounce most words so that family members can understand her in conversation and can now express herself well enough to tell entire stories.

"After using some specific techniques during the first therapy session, her mother told me it was the first time she had heard her daughter speak fluently in 12 years," Angela said. "It moved us both to tears."



1488 Town Plaza
3600 F.M. 1488, Suite 120
936-273-3833

Metro 936-321-3837

www.AplusTheraTeam.com