

Teaching Communication Skills to Students with Severe Disabilities

SECOND EDITION

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with invited contributors

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Table 8.4. Two examples of service delivery for a preschool student**A pull-out approach**

On Wednesdays at 8:30 A.M., Jake, a preschooler, receives his speech-language therapy from the speech-language pathologist (SLP) in her speech room. Jake is fun-loving, curious, and very interactive. He is profoundly deaf and has additional intellectual impairments. He has had a difficult time learning American Sign Language (ASL) as a result. For his speech-language therapy, Jake sits with the SLP at a table and drills on individual words using ASL vocabulary. Words signed include *hat, shoes, shirt, toilet, play, and jump*. The SLP signs the words and asks him to repeat them. She physically manipulates his hands to make the signs. This continues for 25 minutes. Then Jake returns to his class.

An alternative, integrated approach

The SLP arrives at the preschool at different times to help support Jake during snack, good morning circle, centers, and sometimes outdoor play. She encourages his classmates to use gestures and facial expressions with a few signs to invite Jake to play or to share toys. She shows them how to use the item itself to catch Jake's attention and find out if Jake is interested in playing with them. Occasionally, she leads the entire class in learning some signs that they can use during their morning songs. The children are eager to learn signs for animals, numbers, and colors and to learn the same words in Spanish. The SLP encourages Jake to use his gestures, facial expressions, and objects, as well as some signs, where needed.

confused regarding expectations. Family members will need to provide information about strategies that have been successful in the past as well as the strategies with which they feel most comfortable. If family members are unable or unwilling to interact with their child in a certain way, then that information needs to be shared with everyone. For instance, one family prefers to interact with their child using speech (for receptive purposes), natural gestures,

Table 8.5. Two examples of service delivery for an elementary student**A pull-out approach**

On Tuesdays, at 10:45 A.M., the speech-language pathologist (SLP) comes into the fifth-grade classroom and takes Miranda to another room to work for 30 minutes on language skills. They work in this small room on sequencing pictures and identifying objects and pictures on command. Miranda is then taken back to her class, where she tries to participate in the activity that is now half finished. Miranda's teacher is not told what happened during this time because the SLP has to hurry to another student.

An alternative, integrated approach

The SLP supporting Miranda comes to her fifth-grade class at different times in order to see Miranda in different class activities. Sometimes she is there for language arts, recess, science, or lunch. The SLP observes Miranda in her interactions with the teacher and classmates; looks at some data on interactions taken by her fifth-grade teacher, paraeducator, and special education teacher; and determines how much Miranda is using her pictorial and object devices. She also works with Miranda as part of partner or small-group work. She helps to shape Miranda's appropriate attention-getting behavior with peers (e.g., appropriate touch on the hand or arm) and her responses to classmates (facial expressions, gestures, and use of her pictorial/tactile systems). When any student in the small group or working close to Miranda needs assistance, this specialist provides support as needed. The social-communication demands of the various activities determine what the SLP addresses and how the interventions occur. Instead of spending time developing artificial activities for Miranda to do twice a week in her speech-language therapy room, the SLP utilizes the activities occurring in the fifth-grade class as a basis for teaching Miranda the skills she needs to acquire.

Table 8.6. Two examples of service delivery for a middle school student**A pull-out approach**

Kathleen, an eighth-grade student, receives speech-language therapy twice a week from the speech-language pathologist (SLP) in the speech room. She leaves her language arts class early so she can work with the SLP on a one-to-one basis on ways to greet people (e.g., extending her hand, waving) and producing a vocalization in response to having her name called. These are taught by means of role playing and repetitive practice.

An alternative, integrated approach

The SLP meets Kathleen in her eighth-grade language arts class to facilitate her involvement in class activities. Sometimes the paraeducator supporting Kathleen stays to observe how the SLP works with Kathleen, or she helps support other students or prepares for upcoming lessons. When a lecture, class discussion of a topic, or independent reading is taking place in the class, the SLP organizes Kathleen's pictorial/photographic symbols to be used following the activity. She will remind Kathleen to use the symbols under certain conditions (e.g., to initiate an interaction, to make a comment, to request help), and she will model the use of these symbols. The SLP begins to work with Kathleen on the activity she knows will follow the lecture or independent reading, which gives Kathleen some additional practice time. For instance, following the reading of an early Elizabethan poem, students have the option of working independently, in pairs, or in small groups to analyze the poem and try to determine the author's intent. Usually a few students wish to work with Kathleen because they enjoy working with her and they receive extra help from the SLP or paraeducator. A student rereads part of the poem to Kathleen and anyone else in the group and they discuss what it means. They ask Kathleen what she thinks of the poem or of their analysis and point to her potential comments. Kathleen can indicate messages of "It's okay," "I like it," and "Nah, that's dumb." She is also learning to shrug her shoulders to express that she does not know. The students write down their analysis and include an illustration of how the poem makes them feel. Kathleen assists in the development of the illustration by selecting pictures (e.g., flowers, clouds, stars) and colors. She requests help to cut out pictures from magazines using a pictorial/written symbol for "Can you help me?" A classmate guides the picture and scissors while she activates the adapted scissors with a switch.

and facial expressions instead of requiring the child to use her Words+ AAC device. Knowing this, school personnel can assure the family that they will encourage and support the child's use of the communicative strategies that the family prefers, while they also teach the child how to use her AAC device at necessary times during the school day to clarify her intent. The family's needs and desires are valued, and, at the same time, the child is provided with yet another mode of communication.

Ensuring Consistency Across Team Members

Students may become confused if each member of the team interacts with them differently and, in general, has different expectations. Despite the special education label assigned to students, even those with the most complex and challenging disabilities are able to distinguish fairly quickly how they need to respond to certain individuals on their team. If, for instance, they know that by waiting and not responding a direct services provider will inevitably provide a cue, then students will invariably wait. Some students quickly discover what behaviors make certain adults react negatively and then will exhibit those be-

Table 8.7. Two examples of service delivery for a high school student**A pull-out approach**

Cisco, who is in eleventh grade, leaves his Spanish class to see the speech-language pathologist (SLP) twice a week for 40-minute sessions. Cisco is totally blind and only makes some sounds. In the speech-language room, Cisco and the SLP work on imitating certain sounds, such as the beginning of Cisco's name, "ma" for mother, and "ya" for yes. The paraeducator assigned to Cisco during this time period accompanies them to the SLP room and watches for the 40 minutes.

An alternative, integrated approach

The SLP goes to Spanish with Cisco twice a week. At the beginning of each week, Cisco brings familiar items from home. The general educator incorporates these items into the lessons, adding the words to new vocabulary for the week. Students must incorporate these words into phrases and sentences that they are learning. They learn how to ask Cisco to see a particular item in Spanish. Different students serve as Cisco's partner during each class period. They touch him on the arm, say "hi," and tell him their names in Spanish. They also ask him for a particular item that he has. The SLP provides some feedback to them regarding their interactions with Cisco, monitors their Spanish for the general educator, and helps Cisco shape the appropriate response. Cisco seems to enjoy hearing Spanish, has an opportunity to interact with a lot of students on a daily basis, is learning who some of the students are, and is learning to turn toward a student who introduces him- or herself and respond to his or her request. Occasionally, the class learns some songs in Spanish. Cisco records these on his tape recorder and plays them back to the class. He is encouraged to vocalize along with the class when they sing. One day a week the paraeducator stays to work with the SLP and receives some new information as well as feedback. The other day that the SLP is with Cisco, the paraeducator either works with another student needing support in another classroom or uses the time to prepare for upcoming lessons in Spanish. If the special educator is working with Cisco at this time, then she stays with the SLP to exchange information, observe their interactions, and receive some feedback.

haviors in the presence of those adults but not others. This can be particularly aggravating to individuals on the team who are struggling to do what is best for a given student. For instance, one student had a habit of spitting on certain individuals more than others to communicate that he did not want to finish a task and would prefer to be left alone. Every time the student used this behavior with these individuals, they would stomp off angrily saying, "I'm not going to help you if you do that," thereby reinforcing the behavior. Other adults essentially ignored this behavior but made it clear at the beginning of every activity how the student could indicate his desire to stop (e.g., by touching a simple device with the voice output message, I'VE HAD ENOUGH. I NEED A BREAK). Having this alternative and being reminded periodically of how to use it greatly reduced the student's need to resort to spitting to express his feelings.

Of course, it is quite possible that each student has particular likes and dislikes when it comes to working or being with certain adults. In our quest to help students express themselves more effectively, we must not overlook the real possibility that what they might want to say (e.g., "I don't like you") is contrary to what we want to hear. Individuals using facilitated communication have demonstrated this several times (Biklen, 1993; Biklen & Cardinal, 1997). Respecting the student's preference for working with a certain person could be

Types of Teaching Skills. Illustration by Melissa Ling. © The Balance, 2018. Communication. Teaching, by definition, is a form of communication, so it follows that a teacher must have excellent communication skills. These include both verbal and written communication, professional yet friendly body language, and the ability to actively listen. You must be able to explain the material in terms that are both accessible and meaningful to the students. This is one of the challenges of teaching communication skills: What "good" looks like depends on the context. The skills needed to speak in front of an audience and hold a room are different from those needed to solve a problem or engage in a group discussion. If what you're trying to teach is slippery and hard to define, how can you go about teaching it? Get the best of Edutopia in your inbox each week. Email. A Framework for Looking at Communication. Teaching clinically experienced physicians communication skills: a review of evaluation studies. *Med Educ*1999;33: 655-68. Google Scholar. µ. Vegni E, Moja EA. Effects of a course on ophthalmologist communication skills: a pilot study. *Educ Health*2004;17: 163-71. Google Scholar. µ. Cooper V, Hassell A. Teaching consultation skills in higher specialist training: experience of a workshop for specialist registrars in rheumatology. *Rheumatology*2002;41: 1168-71. Google Scholar.