

THE PARAPROFESSIONAL CONNECTION®

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MAKING IT REAL

When teaching students anything new, it is important to start with the concrete or familiar and build up from there. Concrete means something real that students can see, touch and experience in some way. Can you make a connection to a previous experience that the student has had? For example, the number ten is an abstract number. We need to teach what the symbol, “10” means. You could do this by providing 10 unifix cubes or 10 goldfish crackers gives a concrete example to help the student understand the concept of ten. Another example is teaching vocabulary words. If you wanted to teach the word “apple”, then having a real apple that you could see, touch, cut up, taste and smell would be the most concrete. Then showing pictures of apples of different sizes and colors would be a little less concrete. The most abstract would be the written word “apple”. The more you can identify connections and share real life objects or examples related to a new concept can help support a student to learn the new information.

“All genuine learning comes through experience.” – John Dewey

Some students are concrete thinkers and require more repetition and real experiences to make connections and learn. A few characteristics of concrete thinkers are: difficulty with solutions for even simple problems, require hands on opportunities to learn, take comments literally, have difficulty applying learned skills to new materials or different settings, ignore the important information and focus on a random detail and focus on what is happening right now, unable to plan ahead or make predictions. The ability to think abstractly includes: the ability to explain the why and how of situations, can interpret, analyze and generalize ideas, can make comparisons, recognize relationships or connections, able to see the big picture, understand others thoughts, feelings and perceptions. The development of abstract thinking may take a long time depending on the age and cognitive ability of a student.

One way you can support learning new skills is to make it real and provide hands-on learning with objects, manipulatives, videos, books, or pictures related to the concept. Showing instead of telling increases student engagement and participation in the learning.

VISION PLANS

There are a few additional Special Factors that are considered as a possible area of need if a student has an IEP. They are behavior, limited English proficiency, visual impairment, communication needs and assistive technology. We often take for granted the amount of visual information that we receive every day and vision plans can help support some students.

For a student to qualify for special education services in the category of blind or visually impaired there must be strong evidence that their vision condition negatively impacts their access to education. A medical diagnosis and the results of a medical or vision examination would be valuable. A student may have specific goals and services related to their vision as well as a Learning Media Plan that is based on a Functional Vision Assessment. A Learning Media Plan identifies the primary mode or modes for learning and literacy for a student who is visually impaired. This could be auditory, braille, tactual, print enlargement, optical enhancement or regular print. Literacy is a key consideration for students with vision impairments.

The types of services for a student who qualifies for a vision plan might include a Teacher of the Visually Impaired or TVI working directly on skills like: learning to read and write braille, learning how to use assistive technology to access the curriculum such as magnification tools, text to speech and electronic book readers and learning daily living skills or self-advocacy skills. TVI's also provide orientation and mobility services which includes: developing spatial and directional concepts, learning to use a white cane, navigating the school and independent travel in the community like street crossing and taking public transportation. Materials may be adapted by the vision team, which can include braillists and vision paraprofessionals, into braille, large print or tactile materials to support learning.

Consultative services would be the Teacher of the Visually Impaired working with other educational team members to ensure that the student has access to the curriculum and appropriate accommodations. Due to the limited number of students who qualify for vision services, it is very common for a TVI to support multiple schools in a district or region. This means that the student may not receive direct support very often depending on their needs. Some common vision supports are provided below. Materials, like brailled or large print text, may need to be prepared in advance instead of in the moment as they take resources and time. Lighting, glare, background and text color can be essential. Be aware of fatigue and headaches as students with low vision may be straining to see/read and relying on other senses can be tiring. Reading tasks could take longer when using braille or other technology. Be prepared to verbalize what is happening or what others are seeing by describing pictures or environments. It is very important to take advantage of these services and understand the recommendations given by the Teacher of the Visually Impaired. Students with vision impairments need all their vision accommodations on a daily basis, and you have a key role to play in supporting those accommodations.

REFLECTING ON SUPPORT

I D E A S T O C O M M U N I C A T E

Imagine for a moment someone regularly stopped into your place of employment to provide you with support. This person could give you a break, help you get your job done and take responsibilities off your plate. This sounds like a great idea. Then imagine that the school system started paying that person to be one-on-one with you 5 days a week during the entire school day. Now imagine that you have no say over who that support person was and how they supported you. This person would be present for all your interactions and conversations. They would escort you to the restroom and at times support you by touching your back or shoulder. They might manipulate your hands, head or other parts of your body without asking if you needed help. This person would also give you constant verbal directions for all upcoming tasks, even those that were very easy and familiar to you.

Consider these questions and possible outcomes as you think about your support person:

- Would you become more independent or more dependent?
- How would this support change your relationships with your peers?
- Would you notice a loss of privacy or freedom?
- Would this person's presence affect your creativity?
- At times, would you feel self-conscious about having someone supporting you?

Now take it a step further:

- What if you asked him or her to move away from you and he or she did not?
- What would happen if you did not want him or her to touch you?
- What if they did not listen to your requests?
- What would you do?
- Do you think that you might develop negative behaviors?

These questions are for you to reflect upon regarding how you provide support to students. There may be very specific needs that require a student to have constant 1:1 support during the entire school day, but there are also many students that need more intermittent support or group support. Think about your current assignment and how your support might make the students feel. Then consider how you can honor their feelings, communication or requests and help them feel more comfortable with your support. How can you help a student become more independent with the ability to "do it by myself" or interdependent with the ability to learn to ask for help, connect with other and have confidence?

"It is not what you do for your children, but what you have taught them to do for themselves that will make them successful human beings." - Ann Landers

CALM IN A CRISIS

S U P P O R T I N G B E H A V I O R

What approach would you take with a student with behavioral needs yelling and laying on the floor refusing to move?

Option 1: Stand over him warning him, “get up now or you will lose your computer time.” The student begins crying and biting his hand. The adult become more stern stating, “Get up now. Time to make a choice. You can choose to stand up or choose to lose computer privileges for the rest of the day.”

Option 2: Use the students’ name and get down on his level. Speak in a quiet voice stating, “I can see you are upset. How can I help so we can get back on track?” Then listen and provide wait time.

The words, tone and posture of the adult can make a situation worse or help to calm the situation. Sometimes people insist that it is best to be firm so that students “don’t get away with” behaving in a way that is seen as negative or disruptive. However often the more an adult tries to control a situation, the more out of control the situation may become.

Approaches that don’t work:

- Loud voices, negative statements, threats, punishments (e.g., “You had your chance, now you need to leave, lose a sticker/point on your behavior chart, time to call your parents.”)
- Taking away preferred or comforting materials or activities
- Physical redirections
- Angry tone or body language

Approaches that are helpful:

- Remaining calm, comforting and supportive
- Listening and providing encouraging, reassuring words
- Giving space and wait time

The most effective response to crisis is to offer support by listening, reacting in a calm, comforting manner and helping the person relax and feel safe. It is important to maintain safety for all students and staff. Teaching can come later.

Consider the last time you were upset. Did you yell? Cry? Did you say or do things you would later regret? How did you feel? Embarrassed? Angry? Lonely? When most of us are in crisis or upset, we need gentle support and time to calm down. We might need to take a short walk, be alone, listen to quiet music or talk to someone we trust. Students with disabilities deserve the same care and attention that we would want for ourselves.

