

THE PARAPROFESSIONAL CONNECTION®

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GOOD QUESTION

An important skill for students to learn is to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to solve problems. As a paraprofessional you can support this learning by strategically asking questions that help the students focus on their own thinking processes. For example, “What do you need when you come into the classroom? What do you need to pack up to go home? What do you do when you want to join in a game or play with a friend?”

When transitions of activity or location are occurring, you can ask “What are your friends/peers doing right now? This helps a student look up and look around to use the natural environment cues. Asking, “What materials is everyone else getting out?” instead of “Get out your pencil and red folder” will help the student become more independent.

Questions can also help students transfer what they know to other settings and new situations. For example, “Where else have you seen this? When have you done this before?” It can also help a student monitor their own learning and strategies. “Does this make sense? How do you know you have finished this assignment?” are questions that will help with organization and work completion.

As you become more skilled in using questions to increase student independence, then you can also start using questions to expand their thinking and communication. For example, “Yes, that’s right. How did you know?”

“The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you.”-B.B. King

When a student receives additional support from a paraprofessional, they can learn to rely on the adult instead of their own skills. They may become prompt dependent and wait for the paraprofessional to provide guidance. Well-timed questions can help a student increase their independence and begin to figure it out on their own.

COMMUNICATION PLANS

Communication and language are critical foundations of learning. When a student is deaf or hard of hearing they may access communication in a variety of ways resulting in unique communication needs. This may result in a Communication Plan being developed, which is another Special Factor on an IEP and is legally mandated to be followed. This plan is a tool to gather and share information about a student's language, communication and access. This can be confusing because the Communication Plan is specifically for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, even though there are many other students with significant communication challenges and a potential need for Assistive Technology or Alternative Augmentative Communication. The needs of those students are addressed in other areas of the IEP.

A Communication Plan includes five key components.

1. **Language and Communication Modality** requires consideration of the mode of communication for each individual in the areas of receptive (listening) and expressive (speaking) skills which could be different or require multiple modes like spoken language, sign language (various forms), gestures, or pictures to support academic success and literacy skills.
2. **Auxiliary Aids and Services** includes access to qualified interpreters, notetakers or transcription services to achieve communication that is as effective as communication for students without disabilities.
3. **Expanded Support Services** includes support to increase the ability of family, staff and peers to communicate with the student. This includes opportunities for the student to directly communicate with peers and community members with the goal of career preparation and independent living as an adult.
4. **Continuous Communication Access** addresses an alternate plan for communication if there is an emergency, staff are absent, or technology is broken or not available. This includes access after school for extracurriculars, special events, sports or clubs.
5. **Least Restrictive Environment and Placement** includes the continuum or range of placement options. It could be general education, special education, a program in the district for students who are deaf or hard of hearing or a special school for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The necessary services may be provided in any of the settings.

The types of services for a student with a hearing impairment who qualifies for a communication plan might include direct services from a Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing or ToDHH working directly on skills like: learning sign language, adjusting to using and caring for hearing aids or a cochlear implant. Consultative services could also be provided by the Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing working with other educational team members to ensure that the student has access to the curriculum and appropriate accommodations. Be sure to understand and consistently provide the accommodations for the student.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE

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

Every child has unique needs and deserves to be heard and understood regardless of their communication challenges. A common misconception is that if a student is non-verbal or non-speaking that they don't want to engage or are not listening, but that is incorrect. Everyone wants to communicate and be understood. It starts with presuming competence and approaching all children believing they can think, learn and understand. Here are some general communication supports that are effective with students with a wide range of abilities.

Talk to the student as you would any peers that are the same age. Speak to them directly instead of talking to the adults supporting them. Use simple and direct language. Concrete language and examples can be helpful.

Understand the way the student communicates and respond to all attempts at communication. This could include gestures, vocalizations, eye gaze, facial expressions, pictures, sign language or speech generating devices. Students may use multiple communication modes depending on the situation or what they are trying to communicate.

Think of behavior as a way of communication whether it is positive or negative. Try not to dismiss the behavior, but look at behavior as a potential attempt to communicate something.

Use visuals to support communication. Visuals make language more concrete and help make associations with objects. Visuals, including visual schedules, can also help with understanding routines and anticipate what is coming next.

Use wait time. Give the student time to process, understand what is being asked and provide a response. Pausing for five to ten seconds before repeating or adding additional information is beneficial. Some students may need up to one minute or more before they respond.

Provide choices if the student is struggling with open-ended questions. Giving choices or asking yes/no questions helps the student accurately respond and increases understanding.

If we slow down and truly listen with more than just our ears, we open the door to more interaction and communication with students. Fostering relationships and valuing communication builds the foundation for learning.

“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.” -Tony Robbins

BRIBE VERSUS REWARD

Both bribes and rewards offer something in exchange for a desired behavior, but the way they are offered are different. Many staff are concerned about “bribing” kids for good or expected behavior. If you work with students who have a positive reinforcement or reward system, it is important for you to understand the difference.

A bribe is defined as a payment used to persuade or corrupt someone to act in one’s favor. A bribe promises reinforcement before the expected behavior occurs. It is often a spontaneous, unplanned attempt to influence behavior. When a student is escalating their behavior and you just want it to stop, people may start offering bribes. Unfortunately, that just increases the chances that negative behavior will continue. A bribe would be if I throw my work on the floor and start yelling, then I am told that if I stop yelling I can have a snack and get to skip the work. Offering a child a candy bar to get them to stop misbehaving in the grocery store is a bribe. It also increases the chances that the child will misbehave on every grocery store trip in hopes of getting a candy bar. A child who is bribed learns that they are not responsible for their own behavior and may learn how to manipulate. Bribes teach children they can get what they want by acting out. Bribes can help manage a stressful situation in the moment, but the long-term consequences outweigh any benefit.

A reward is defined as payment or recognition for one’s service, effort or achievement. A reward is reinforcement that is given only when the positive expected behavior occurs. A reward is a paycheck for doing what is right. It is determined and agreed upon before the behavior happens so the student knows what to expect, and is given after the task or behavior is completed. It increases the chances that the expected positive behavior will be repeated. Appropriate use of reinforcement helps a child learn to take ownership of their behavior and helps them learn to be proud of their positive behaviors. Rewards are typically delivered for hard work or actions that are important but also difficult and require significant effort. If rewards are given, they should be linked directly to the desired behavior that you want repeated. Ideally, rewards would only be given when the student is learning the new behavior and then be faded to more internal or natural reinforcement like personal pride for a job well done, good grades or more social interactions and friendships.

Timing is everything when it comes to rewards. Bribes are offered during negative behavior to immediately change it, while rewards are given after a positive action is completed to encourage future good behavior. For example, a bribe is when the principal comes in to do an observation of the classroom and before she arrives that teacher gives everyone a piece of candy and stays outside for extra morning recess if they promise to be good during the observation. A reward would be after the successful observation by the principal, the teacher says “wow, you did a great job so everyone gets a piece of candy, and we can have an extra recess this afternoon.” It’s all about the timing and delivery.

