AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST

EPISODE 59: Expressive language

URL: http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode59

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host, dr. Christine Reeve for more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education, but my real love is helping special educators. Like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris Reeve, and I'm your host. And I am guessing that if you teach special education, that you have students who have goals to improve their expressive language. And in our last couple episodes, I've talked about students who are non-verbal or functionally non-verbal and how we can include them in class. And of course, if you work with students with autism, then you work with students who also need to improve their communication across the board.

I have some posts that I'll put in the show notes on receptive language, which I've described in great detail in other places, but because we've been focusing on students who are primarily non-verbal, I really thought that we should talk a little bit about teaching expressive language. Because let's face it, we all want our students to talk.

We know that we need to improve their expressive language to do that, but there's a lot more to expressive language than just talking. And in fact, there are several key elements that we need to address in our instruction to help our students to communicate effectively. So I'm going to talk about those today and how expanding expressive language goes beyond just getting longer sentences or adding more vocabulary, particularly for students with autism, but also it will apply to many of your other students as well.

So just for a little housekeeping, I have a number of free two to five minute video, quick tip Tuesday videos that are in the dropdown version of the blog post. And you can find everything, the transcript, the videos, I'll also make sure I put them in the resource links Autismclassroomresources.com/episode 59. So let's get started.

So, as I said, there's a lot more to learning to talk than just improving vocabulary, but that is a piece of it. So these four keys are really going to cover the four things

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that I think we need to be thinking about when we plan our communication instruction for our students.

Key number 1 is to focus on initiation. One, the biggest struggles for students, particularly those with autism is initiating action in general, but especially communication. And this is true, whether they are verbal or non-verbal. It's always important to remember that autism is more than just a delay in language. It's actually a communication disorder. And those students have difficulty knowing how to use their language effectively to get basic needs or social needs met. And because of that, that's where we see a lot of our challenging behavior crop up when they are struggling with the different functions and ways to use language.

So, consequently, it's important to make sure that we've developed strategies to encourage the initiation of communication. Being able to communicate something only when someone asks you a question is not effective communication. In order to be an independent communicator, individuals need to be able to understand that communication means I have to get someone's attention. I have to deliver my message. And I have to persist until that message is delivered. In short, initiation is what I call door opener. Behavior problems are a door closer. They limit your opportunities about what you can do. Initiation is a door opener, and it's considered a pivotal learning skill. Because when a student can initiate, they learn more independently. And then this is especially true.

When we talk about communication, when a student initiates, he can go up to someone and start an interaction. And that's significantly different than a student who has to wait for interactions. And therefore he has to wait for learning to come to him. So if we don't have a student who can initiate interactions, we learn communication skills by communicating, by interacting. If they can't initiate, then they're not going to be successful in being able to manage their own learning and learn on their own.

When we think about initiation for non-verbal students, one of the things that I really love to use is the Picture Exchange Communication System. And I've got a post about 10 reasons that I really like it that I'll put in the blog post. But one of the reasons that I really like it is that it specifically teaches the process of communication. That process of initiating and persisting that I described a minute ago are all part of teaching the Picture Exchange Communication System or PECS. PECS focuses specifically on teaching that communication, that initiation.

When we're talking about initiation for students who are already verbal, we may think we've got it made. But in reality, we still see them struggle with initiating interactions and communication with others. And to help with that, scripts are a really good way to help students initiate, delivering a message or a variety of other

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types of communication. So I've done a number of other posts talking about scripts, but I've also got some videos that are in the blog post that demonstrate how to do this. So make sure that you hop over to autismclassroomresources.com/episode59.

The second key after initiation is that we need to integrate our communication instruction everywhere all day long in order to get our students to use their communication throughout their day. We need to teach them and practice expressive language all day. And that means making sure that we've planned out multiple communication opportunities in every activity of their day. For students who are non-verbal, who are still working on communicating effectively, it means making sure that their communication supports are available to them everywhere in the room.

It also means that their communication supports shouldn't be offered only when the teacher is directing communication. In order to increase that initiation from key number one, we have to allow them access to their communication supports like visual supports, augmentative communication systems and devices, wherever they are. And so there's a number of ways that we can do that to engineer our classroom and a link to some ideas for that.

But that may mean creating communication boards that can be available anywhere in the room. So that if they don't have access to their immediate device, they still have things that they can fall back on to communicate in that situation. It can also mean that we integrate speech generating devices into our activities and routines. And I've got a video of a way to do that in the blog post as well.

I also asked my training participants when I train on communication to try this exercise. Sit and think about your classroom and choose three activities to start. For each of those activities, write down three ways that you can create communication opportunities.

So for instance, during an art activity, the student could request colors of paint. He could comment on a friend's art project, or he could describe his own project. Those are all different functions of expressive language. Obviously he could do more than just request colors, but that gives me those three functions of language that the student can practice. Or maybe it's a function that each student within that activity can practice. Maybe that allows you to differentiate.

Do that for every activity of the day over time. And you're going to be embedding tons of expressive language into your students' learning. And as a quick tip, that's just in the podcast, make sure that you write them them down and post them in that area so that everybody can use them in the classroom.

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Key number three is expanding the functions of expressive language. And I've keyed into this a little bit, sorry for the pun throughout this. But communication is about more than just talking. We all use expressive language for a variety of reasons. It's about making requests for desired items. It's about making requests for things that aren't big reinforcers, but that we need to do an activity. Students need to comment to other people about what they see or hear. They need to describe things that you using different adjectives, like color and size so that they can tell people what they're talking about. And they eventually need to be able to hold conversations. So that's a lot of different functions.

In addition, it's important that we don't get stuck on just increasing how many, the words that the student says, or just how many requests he makes a day. Instead, we need to be focusing on how he is using his language. Is he asking questions? Is he answering questions? Is he describing things?

And I'll put a link in the show notes to a whole, post where I talk about communicative functions in much more detail. But essentially we start with basic requesting because it's the most powerful reinforcer. I'm much more likely to ask for something I want and there's a built-in reinforcer. But we have to make sure that we move on to other functions in order for language to be meaningful in someone's life. And so I've got some commenting cards in a video that I talk about that will be in the blog post as well.

And finally, the fourth key is that we need to expand the types of expressive language and vocabulary that we use. So we need to actually teach the vocabulary words. But we also have to teach our students how to use that vocabulary. It's not enough to just teach students to name colors, and assume that they're going to do more than just name colors.

For instance, many of our students are not going to use those colors to describe something that they see without explicit instruction from us. So for many, if not most students with autism, we have to teach them how to use the vocabulary in a meaningful way. And there are a variety of ways that we can do that.

One way is that we might put their favorite treats in a colored box so that they have to describe the box they want, that holds the treat. I want the one in the pink box, or I want the one in the big box. And that means that the color or the size has meaning. And it makes that request more reinforcing, but it starts to make that shift to using different kinds of expressive language. And I've got a quick tip video that demonstrates that as well.

So those are the four keys of things that we really want to think about when we go to think about expanding our students' expressive language. I would love to hear

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how you create these kinds of opportunities and what you see as important to expand on your students' language. So if you're an educator hop over to our free Facebook group at specialeducatorsconnection.com, answer the questions and definitely join us and share in our conversation there.

Thank you so much for joining me. I really appreciate how precious your time is. I hope this has given you some ideas of things to do with your students, and you can find all the videos and a transcript and links autismclassroomresources.com/episode 59. I'll be back next week when we will talk specifically about how we teach initiation, because that is such a big door opener for our students. So thank you for all that you do.