

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

Christine Reeve: 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 am very glad you're here. Since we are already into November, I wanted to take an episode and talk about ways that we can help our students participate in giving thanks at Thanksgiving. It's a busy time of year. Particularly I think it's a time of year for many of us when we stop and think about what different parts of our life mean to us, take stock of what has been given to us, and to give thanks. I think it's really important that our students have that opportunity as well.

I think that we know there are a lot of health and mood benefits to giving thanks and being thankful. But if our students don't necessarily have the support to give that type of thanks in a way that other people will understand it, they kind of get robbed of those benefits. So given that so many of our students have difficulty with communication, difficulty with social interactions, it's an area where I think we can spend some time and help families even know how their child can take part in giving thanks during Thanksgiving in a way that is going to fit in with them.

I want to give you some ideas of things that you can do at school. Some of these are things that you could send home or families could do on their own at home. Some of them have come from my Thanksgivings with my sister, and knowing how difficult it is for her to communicate her thanks, and yet knowing that does not mean that she is not thankful. I think a really big component behind this is that often when people don't have a strong voice, we sometimes don't create opportunities for them to participate in things like giving thanks to other people in the same way that we do.

Sometimes people will assume that they are not thankful because they're unable to say it. So hopefully this will give them a meaningful way to participate in family Thanksgiving routines, as well as ways to express how thankful they are to people for things that they've done for them, that they've given them, all those kinds of things. So let's get started.

There are many typical ways that we think about having children participate in thanksgiving routines, from having them maybe make cards, participate in saying grace. I know when I was growing up, it was always one of the grandchildren that said grace and we prepared for that. It might be helping them to donate food to the needy or participate in ways of buying gifts for those who don't have families or buying Thanksgiving dinner for people who are homeless, all those kinds of things are things that we might do as a way to include our children in that Thanksgiving type of routine.

These that I'm going to talk about today are ways to help your student give thanks to others and there are seven ways that I'm going to talk about that, again, are appropriate for school or for home or in combination. So if you're working with a student with autism who has communication

difficulties, who maybe is nonverbal, that shouldn't prevent them from being able to express thanks to other people.

One way that we might do it is have them create pictures, pictures of people, pictures of activities, pictures of the thing that they were given that they're thankful for, so that they can use those pictures maybe to identify who they are thankful to, to identify what they're thankful for. They could use the pictures to communicate if the picture supports their verbal skills, they could do that. But they could also make a card or a collage wishing that person a happy holiday and helping them show them what they are thankful for.

You could also use these choices to help with some of the other things that I'm going to talk about as ways that they can participate. Another strategy is to use a speech-generating device. So a speech-generating device, or voice-output device as we used to call it, is simply a tool that you can record a message on and the individual can hit the switch and it can send the message. Some students have their own dedicated devices and they may be able to put a message together using that communication system.

For some of our students who are nonverbal, maybe they're not at that stage just yet. They're not at the point where they can use multiple words and buttons to create a message. For them, we might write a prayer or find out what they're thankful for, use the pictures that are talked about in number one, and have someone record either a prayer, a thank you, or what they are grateful for. That may be they're seeing grace at Thanksgiving dinner.

Or maybe they are telling people what they are grateful for as you go around the family and have everyone talk about what they're thankful for this year. Or maybe they're saying a prayer of thanksgiving at some other point in the holiday activities. But a speech-generating device does a lot to give them a voice and it allows them to express themselves. But the other thing that I think is important to remember that an SGD does for our students is it helps others to see them as someone who has a voice.

If you are with a family that maybe doesn't have as much experience with this individual or you're with friends who maybe hasn't interacted with them a lot, which might certainly be the case if they live in a group home or something or on their own in a supported apartment, a speech-generating device may help others to feel like they are participating, that they are contributing to the conversation because they see them with voice when they use it.

I think it plays kind of a double role here of giving the individual with autism a method of communicating, but also helping those around them recognize that they can communicate. It might even be something that is useful if you have a student who's dealing with a lot of anxiety maybe about talking in front of a group, or it might be helpful if you're working with a student who maybe stammers and has a hard time coming up with the word. Sometimes they could record on a speech-generating device or even some sort of just recording device.

You could then put it together. It could even be a video message and then they could show that as a way for them to get that out without stammering. Another is when an individual has difficulty speaking in a group, maybe they're verbal, maybe they can tell you exactly what they're thankful

for, but when they get in front of the group, they really clam up. This might be a good time beforehand to prepare ahead, to have them dictate or write the prayer that they're going to say or what they're thankful for so that they've already pre-thought it out. They have a script, maybe you roleplay it at school so that they can enact it during Thanksgiving at home.

Now you might have the individual with autism read it, but if that is something that was very difficult for them, you could have them put together what they want to say and have them designate a family member or friend to read that message to the group. That's another way that you can help prepare ahead and make it successful for them.

Another way which I kind of touched on a minute ago is to have them videotape their thanks. Again, if speaking groups is hard or they have a hard time finding the right words, if they can videotape it, you can put together the best parts of that, they can stop and start over. Much like I do when I record this podcast where I mess something up and then I have to rewind and go back and record over, a videotape can work the same way or video can work the same way. You could have them video the prayer or video what they are giving thanks for, put the pieces together of where they were successful. Then that becomes something that maybe they can play for the group.

The fifth thing that they could do is something I think most of us would probably think of is to write a note. If they write effectively, they could dictate, or they can type, then they could do that on their own. They can also give information to somebody who helps them to put it into words. That's something I've done a lot with my sister. She wants to express thanks to someone but has a hard time coming up with the words, so we work together to write out what she really wants to say.

But write a note to a person thanking them for something that they did during this year. It could be a sibling that they thanked for letting them play with a toy of theirs or sharing with them. It could be writing a letter to a military member serving overseas to thank them for their service. It can be somebody close to home or it could be somebody that is more of an abstraction because maybe you don't know them directly and the thanks [inaudible] a larger meeting. You can also use guided notes so that they're filling in the blanks if writing is too hard for them.

If you go to my store, I'll make sure these links go in the show notes as well, I have a set of kindness resolutions that are guided notes, where someone decides what they can do that is kind for somebody and then writes out what their kindness resolution is going to be. I have New Year's resolutions that are set up the same way. You could use a similar structure to do thank you types of things, where it's a guided note where they choose what they're thankful for, what they want to say, and then put it all together in the note.

Another is you could have them create a script to thank someone and then have them either send a video or an audio recording to the person with the message. Say there's somebody in your family who can't come for Thanksgiving this year. Maybe this person in your family is particularly attached to them and it's going to be hard. One way to help with that is to allow them to give thanks to that person in a distance kind of way. Being able to send them a video, a

FaceTime, and an audio recording to the person with that message. So you create the script together and then you prepare the video.

Another way that you can use is to have them draw a picture. They could draw a picture of what they're thankful for and give it to the person that they're thanking. This one kind of makes the best of home-to-school or school-to-home holiday gifts as well. As you're thinking about holiday gifts, think about holiday gifts that are going to be meaningful for families. Typically that's going to be something where the student had something that they were putting into it and are able to draw it or express it in some way.

In this season of things, I am thankful for all of you who listen and come together as a community and everything that you do for the special education students in your life, in your community, in your classroom, and in your family. I would love to know from you how you help your students give thanks to others. Definitely hop over to our free Facebook group at Autism Classroom Resources and we can share there and share what you do for that.

Until next time, I will be back next week and I will be talking about some behavioral frequently asked questions. If you have questions about that, you can also share that at specialeducatorsconnection.com in the Facebook group. Have an amazing week and I hope to see you again next week as well.