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SPEAKERS

Chris

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 your host, Chris Reeve. And I want to thank you for tuning in. It's May when I'm recording this, the wild month of May. And that means it's better speech and hearing month. Now I also know that one of the things that many of you who filled out my podcast survey shared was that you wanted more episodes on communication and language. So I thought this would be a great time to share some episodes on that topic.

Today, I'm going to focus on the functions of communication because that's the underpinning of a lot of other things I'm going to talk about. I'll talk about why they're important and why we need to focus more on the functions of communication than form of communication. Essentially, I'm just saying that it's more important to work on why a student is communicating and what he is trying to say and what he needs to be able to communicate for, than what that communication actually looks like.

Then, over the next few episodes, I'm going to share some ways that you can increase communication use in your classroom, and strategies for increasing communication that can help you with all of that. So let's get started.

So let's start with what are communication functions? And how do we come about those? Well, ...

So let's start with what are communication functions? And why do we care about them? Well, we spend a lot of time thinking about how many words our students use, how many new words they learn, the way that they communicate, whether it's with a device, or verbally or with sign language or gestures. But if they can't communicate effectively for a variety of purposes, then their communication is still very limited.

So if all I can do, for instance, is make requests, I can get things or activities that I want, but I can't truly express myself and tell you how I'm feeling or tell you what hurts or tell you why I want to do something. So there's lots of different reasons and ways that we use communication. And we really want to make sure that we're expanding the way a student can communicate.

So we want our students to be able to communicate effectively for variety of reasons, for social situations, for getting what they need, for expressing what they feel, for sharing their viewpoint on things, and all different kinds of things like that.

Now, interestingly enough, we don't all agree on what communication functions are specifically, which ones they are. The way that we specifically classify the functions of communication depends to some extent, on how we were trained.

Behavior analysts define them differently than speech pathologist, it's one of my incredible frustrations, sometimes with behavior analysis, in that we just developed a whole new vocabulary when there was some vocabulary out there we could have pulled from, and that would lead to better collaboration.

However, regardless of whether or not we've been trained to look at things differently, I think that the one thing that most practitioners would agree on at this point is that function matters. Sounds a lot like what I say about behavior, doesn't it? Don't worry about whether it's hitting, biting, scratching, kicking, or just general aggression. The question is, why is he doing it? What is its function?

Same is true with communication. Essentially, the communicative functions are the purpose of the communication. So what is the individual intentionally or unintentionally trying to convey?

There's a really good quotation by Bates that I'm gonna paraphrase. And it's basically that the definition of communication is signaling to someone, something that you have an intent about, you want something, you want to say something. You know what the message is, you're trying to convey that message to them. And that person, you persist in trying to get that message across in whatever strategy you're using, until that person either responds or you give up.

And I think that's a really good description of communication, especially intentional communication, where the communicative message is intended for a specific thing. So I want to be the head of fruit

where the communicative message is intended for a specific thing. So I point to the bowl or fruit because I want a banana. And when someone doesn't respond, I keep pointing.

Now, if I have multiple forms of communication, if pointing doesn't work, I might take your hand and put it on the banana, or I might find a picture banana. But I might have other ways that I can do it. And we'll talk about that in the future. But in the meantime, I know I want a banana. And I'm persisting until my message is either communicated in that I got the banana or was told the banana is not available, or I dumped and I don't get through, and I give up because I get frustrated, which is sometimes where our behavior problems come in.

Another is I asked for directions to get information about how to get somewhere or how to do something. And I persist in that message until I get an answer, or I just decide being lost really isn't that bad after all. That's intentional communication.

Unintentional communication is typically when challenging behaviors serve communicative functions. So in those cases, the communication process isn't purposeful from the start. For instance, a child tantrums because he wants the banana, he wants to get something, or he hits someone to get them to go away to avoid something. But they aren't something where he has that clear message. Or maybe he does. Some behaviors are more intentional than others. Some behaviors erupt out of the difficulty of getting the sender to receive the message.

So there's a lot that goes on to communication. So if communicative function or the purpose of communication, what functions should we focus on to teach. So I'm going to focus on specific ways to practice communication function, and their active role without really worrying about whether or not I'm calling them the right thing. So you know, please don't send me hate mail. I promise I am trying to make it so it's easy for everyone to understand.

The key is that we want to make sure that everybody is on the same page with what we're actually focused on, that we want to think about expanding a student's communication, rather than expanding necessarily that he can ask this in this many words, or with this many kinds of gestures kind of thing.

So one of the most primary methods of communicative functions, one of the most primary functions, is regulation. So young children communicate in a way to get or avoid something. Babies cry to get fed. Babies cry to get changed. Babies cry to get mom to come over and pick them up and get comfort. It's a regulation function.

And these communication functions change the individual's environment and their language development over time. So they are regulating their environment, in a baby by crying, in a toddler by a tantrum. For some of our students, it might be more severe behaviors that are serving the same functions.

So another function would be requesting items, activities, or information. And when we think about communication, this is probably one that comes up most frequently. Most people will call that requesting, behavior analysts call it Manding or some behavior analysts do. And basically it's that they are doing something, they're engaging in some kind of desired action action to get a desired item or activity.

So Jim points to the juice and he gets juice. DeAndre verbalizes I want the train, please and as teacher lesson play with the train. Jenny exchanges a picture of the hat she wants to wear to her mom so that she can wear it when they go out today. I asked directions of how to get to a school that I'm going to visit. Those are all ways of requesting. They're not different functions, they all serve the same function, some are a little bit more nuanced than others. Asking for directions might be a little less tangible than asking for the juice.

Usually, when we're working on teaching requesting, we start out by sabotaging the environment, putting the thing that they want out of reach, so they need to communicate in some way. And that's typically where we start our instruction in a functional approach. It's the most reinforcing function for many of our students who aren't often reinforced by the social functions of language.

You know, we all talk to have conversations with people, to have that social interaction. If social interaction is something that isn't as reinforcing, then that's probably not what we want to start off with.

The key to all of this is that we can't just teach a bunch of vocabulary and expect a student to be able to communicate effectively. I've written a number of have blog posts about requesting, about teaching initiation. I think I have a podcast about that as well. So I'll make sure that those are in the show notes.

Another reason that we communicate is to refuse or reject items or activities. And that's exactly what it sounds like. Essentially it's asking to go away. It's asking for you to go away, it's asking for me to go away, it's asking for this thing to go away. Behavior analysts would say it's being reinforced by negative reinforcement by something being removed. The reinforcement value is that that thing is no longer there.

So Jim pushes the milk away on the table, and that's communicating that he does not want it. DeAndre says Leave me alone. And that is his indication he is not wanting to do what you want to do right now. Jenny exchanges a picture to ask for a break from work. So she is using a picture exchange system to be able to ask for a break, which then removes the work. That's why it fits in rejecting. I asked if I can leave the county fair, because I'm pretty overwhelmed. We all use these function.

So to teach it, we're essentially setting up situation that the negative situation that the person wants to avoid, obviously, we're not contriving situations where we're typically trying to make it difficult for the person. Instead, we are actually just using regular activities that happen in the classroom that this person wants to avoid. So maybe it's their math work, or maybe it's independent work. And then we help them to make a request to have that removed or to be removed from it. So I asked Jenny to work and I immediately point to a break card. And she exchanged it.

We've got a number of posts and podcasts that focus on that. And they'll actually put together a podcast sequence. And I will make sure that that gets linked in the show notes as well, that you can grab and listen to the series of episodes about it.

So now we're kind of moving from that regulation function to social interaction function. So the next one is requesting attention. And I included the separate from other requests, because it's requesting for social interaction. Now, it's still a request. It's still a mand, but it's involving interacting with other people rather than getting something material or activity based.

So this is sometimes important for some students, but not for others that aren't as interested. So Jim reaches his hands up to get mom to pick them up. DeAndre calls mom when he wants to talk to her. Jenny hits a speech generating device that says please talk to me. I call my mom, so I can talk to her. I call my sister so I can talk to her.

To teach appropriate attention seeking which is basically it says we're trying to use communication to replace negative behaviors that seek attention, we set up a situation where we know we have time to attend and we prompt, we tell the student to work on their own, we work on her own, and then we follow through. And then we get them to request your attention and you immediately attend and there's a whole protocol. So I will link to a blog post that I have on that as well.

Another one is labeling and describing. Labeling and naming items are very important and building language so that we can talk about things with other people. Clearly labeling some things makes it easier to request the more efficiently. It allows you to talk about things and activities. Going to the next level of adjectives and adverbs and prepositions makes it easier to describe things and talk about our experiences.

Imagine that the person couldn't tell you the name of something that they saw, but they can describe it so you can figure out what it is. Many of our students learn it receptively with the way that we teach, but it does them the most good when they start to use those words to give meaning to something that they don't know how to say.

So I always think about this student that someone told me about that she learned the word Band Aid, and she learned her body parts. She learned them in two different situations. Learned her body parts like her tummy. And she walked up to instructor one day and said bandaid tummy. And then she

like her tummy. And she walked up to instructor one day and said bandaids tummy. And then she threw up on their shoes. So that's a really good example of, I took these things that I learned and I put them together to tell you how I felt, to label what I'm feeling. I didn't have the word, but I had other words that I've used.

So Jim is shown two drinks juice and milk. He says white so mom knows that he wants the milk. DeAndre tells his mom that he ran the race really fast. So it really expands their ability to tell you what they're excited about. He wasn't excited about going to race he was excited because he ran really fast. Jenny indicates to mom that she wants to wear the blue shirt with her picture strip. And I'm able to describe someone who helped me at the store so a friend can shop with that same person when they go to that same store, even if I don't know their name, which I typically don't.

When we teach labeling and describing a lot of times, we'll use discrete trials, we'll teach it receptively first. There's lots of different ways that we can do it. But it's really important that we are focusing on expanding our language beyond just naming things.

Along that same line are commenting, which is another function. And this involves providing information usually just for social interaction about a situation. Sometimes it's because you're telling someone how you feel, what you think. We often use it as a way to gain social interaction or share an experience.

So Jim gets the milk and he says cold. He's commenting on the milk. DeAndre says it's cold out today, when it's time to do the weather and morning meeting. Jenny exchanges a picture that says funny when a classmate tells a joke, so she is responding to their joke, and commenting on it. I comment on the weather when I'm getting on the hotel elevator because I don't know what else you're supposed to talk to strangers about. I lived in New York for too long.

To teach commenting, we first want to start by teaching characteristics from some of the communicative functions that I talked about earlier. Then we start building it into social routine. You can pair it with requesting wanted or needed materials. So we add things like sentence starters, I see and I hear instead of just I want.

That's how we begin to get out of requesting and into other functions of communication. You know, can I play? I see this. You win. Congratulations, you won. I want to talk to someone. So you want to make sure that you've had tools that can help the students focus on a variety of different function.

Another function is social routine. Social routines are common exchanges that are typically completed for social reasons. So greetings are probably the most common example that we use, and often where we start. So Jim says Hi, when his teacher walks into the room. DeAndre asks how a friend is feeling when he sees him for the first time today. Jenny responds to a greeting by finding a picture for Good morning at Circle.

Social routines, I think we're all pretty familiar with them, we tend to teach the beginnings of them. We teach, we set up routine situations like having them check in during morning meeting, to build those communication skills. So for instance, in morning meeting, I have a who's here board that I use where the students come up, they check in, and they say hi or good morning as part of that interaction. So that's part of the social routine.

Another function is to answer questions. So when someone is talking to us, and asks us for information or an item, we have to respond. So asking questions is often a way to request information or answering one has a social function. You know, I'm not telling you how to get somewhere that I don't need to go, just because I'm doing it for the social interaction, or I'm doing it to be nice, rather than I'm not getting anything out of it. You're not taking me along in this situation. Let's say somebody pulls up, says can you tell me how I get to this at a national park? I'm going to answer them if I have the information, I'm not going to say well, I'm only going to answer that if I get to come, too.

We answer questions that are asked because we are socially reinforced for doing it. Typically, it's part of a conversation or providing information. Some questions might also fall under social routine, like answering a question or saying how are you or answering how are you? You know, and so, a friend asked you the name of your favorite sports drink and you said Gatorade, you're not getting anything out of that but the social interaction.

To teach answering questions, obviously, we asked them. We have to make sure that we vary the kinds of questions too. We tend to ask a lot of factual questions during our day. And those are often much easier for our students to answer than opinion, than yes no questions, or other kinds of questions that may not have a right or wrong answer. And that is where answering questions becomes a little bit more complex. And I will link some resources about that as well.

Another function is describing and sharing experiences and feelings. So you know, there are a lot of other reasons but this is the one that I think we all are moving towards most often, is for a student to be able to tell you what they did this weekend, to tell you how they felt about it, and to tell you when they're not happy about something as well. Those have purely social functions. They don't result in any other types of reinforcement.

So Jim says school happy, which means he was happy at school, I understood that from just those two words. He didn't have to say I was happy at school today. He didn't have to give me a whole sentence. Those two words told me what I needed to know. DeAndre said he was so excited to win the race, because remember, he ran fast. And Jenny uses her AAC device to say I went to music today.

This is a really important function of communication. And it's tougher than all the others. partlv

because we don't always know the students experiences or emotional state. So it's really hard for us to prompt them and set them up to get the right answer.

One way we can do that is to try having families send in a quick note about their weekend. Sometimes I will send when I send them home notes, I have one that is a return note from home that gives information about the student's day, even when nothing special happened. What did they have for dinner? Who you know, did someone come for dinner? Who was at the table, because everybody has all these different social schedules? So who was at the dinner table last night? Then the classroom staff knows what to set that student up to talk about and to answer and we know what kinds of say visual supports we're going to need in order to help them do that.

We often use feeling charts for students to identify emotions. But it's important to remember that a static picture of a smiley face or even a photograph of a smiling face, it's a much different thing to label pictures of emotions than to actually experience them and express how we felt. So it's important to recognize that just teaching a student to identify pictures of emotions does not meet the criteria of them being able to use this function of communication, it might be a good place to start in some cases. But even that the pictures are static. And typically people's faces are not static when they're trying to read them, which is one of the things we're trying to teach them. So we might want to use videos instead for things like that.

So there are lots more communicative functions of language. And as I said, different disciplines describe them and divide them up differently. So for instance, verbal behavior in ABA talks about mands as requests, tacts as labels, intraverbals, as language that's reinforced by social interaction alone. But the speech pathologist would not label them that way. I don't label them that way. Because other people who are behavior analysts don't know what I'm talking about.

I talk about request and labeling and conversation and commenting and these kinds of things. I find it easier to focus on how our students will be using their language in their daily lives, rather than worrying as much about the labels.

So I hope that this gives you some ideas about how we can expand our students language, and that it gives some ideas about how we can expand their language say on an IEP, beyond just how many words he uses, or how many things he can ask for. I think we really want to make sure that we're expanding the type and the function of the communication that they're using.

So I will be back next week where I will have some strategies for you. Some things to know about facilitating communication in the classroom. Until then, I hope you have an amazing week. Thank you so much for stopping in.

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review there. It would mean the world to me to know that what you think of it and if you have ideas of topics you'd like to hear about, definitely hit email and let me know.

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