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**SPEAKERS**

Chris

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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 we are in the midst of a series on communication and supporting communication in our classroom. May is better speech and hearing month. And so we have had an episode talking about why the functions of communication are so important. We've had another one the last episode which was about things we can do to support communication, particularly for students who using augmentative communication strategies.

So today, I wanted to talk a little bit about how we can set up the classroom to improve our students' communication skills. I talked last week about the fact that we want multiple opportunities to practice different skills throughout the day, I talked about in episode 164, about varying the functions of communication that our students use.

So today, I want to talk a little bit about what we can do to support language and communication by engineering our classrooms so we have what we need when we need it, to make it work for our students and for our staff.

So one of the most important elements of teaching language and communication is making sure that we create many, many opportunities to practice it throughout the day. Language, obviously, is something that we have to practice, one of the earliest milestones that we see in little kids is when

they start playing with words. And they're doing that as a way to kind of practice what those words can do.

You know, I always think back to a cousin, who had a three year old when we, our whole family was together and she said, I have an entire scrapbook of this kid pointing, he's pointing at everything all year long. I'm like, that's a good thing. That's actually what he's supposed to be doing at that age because he was practicing his gestural communication.

So we want to make sure especially given some of the instructional difficulties that a lot of our students have with learning things that have new characteristics being very rigid in what they learn difficulty generalizing a skill from one place to another or one person to another. It's really important since communication is such a critical skill, that we are practicing it in many situations in many different ways. So that it's more likely to generalize to new people and new situations. And also so that it maintains when we aren't there actively trying to teach it. We want to make sure that our students can still communicate, even when we're not there. We want to make sure they can continue to communicate when no one is there creating lots of opportunities for them to practice, we don't want them to forget how to do it.

So generally one of the pieces of advice that I give or when I set up a classroom, I try to set it up in this way. I take our targeted communication goals and I want to make sure that we have at least five opportunities for the student to practice that skill in multiple activities during the day.

So I use what I call a naturalistic data sheet. I also sometimes call it a group data sheet because heaven forbid, I should be clear about what I call things. But it's basically a system where you can have multiple activities or multiple students on the form. And each one has multiple goals. And I use that in concert with my teaching implementation plan. And I will link to an episode about the tip in the show notes.

But I I use this form with the TIP to plan out where are we going to really hone in on this specific language or communication goal? And how are we going to get five opportunities to practice it. Now for some things, I can get five opportunities to practice it in that one activity and I might do it doing three activities that we've targeted and will also create opportunities throughout the day but I really want to make sure that we've targeted in on getting those.

I chose five because it's a reasonable amount to get in a 15 minute activity. You know if you're working at snack, and he's requesting something to eat, five opportunities is simple. There are other skills that we're teaching like asking for a break, or asking someone to play with them, where we may have to get those opportunities, a couple in one activity and a couple in another activity. So we may have to spread it out throughout the day.

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But the key of the five data points is that I want people to get used to the idea of creating five opportunities, not just waiting for them to happen. Because if we wait for communication opportunities to amble down the road into our activity, it's not going to work as well for our students for getting the intensive instruction that they need in this area.

The other good thing about using the data sheet is that the five boxes remind everybody to create those opportunities. That also allows the teacher to look at the data sheet, and see where maybe we need more training on how to create opportunities for that communication skill, because the boxes aren't getting filled in. So it serves as a feedback tool, as data often does, for the teacher to problem solve when something isn't working the way we want it to.

So that is one of my core kinds of strategies that I use in setting up the classroom. I use it for almost every skill, but it is incredibly critical for language and communication because it is such a important life skill, among other things.

So another thing that we can do to really make sure that this is working, is making sure that our students communication systems are available to him throughout the day, and aren't just pulled out when we are asking a question or creating know that we're creating up an opportunity.

Okay, I can talk anywhere I go. Unless you put tape over my mouth, please don't do that. I will be able to talk wherever I am. So I have the ability to communicate, wherever I go, I carry it with me. If a student has a communication device, but it goes on a shelf, except when we're working on communication, we are sending the message to him not to communicate at other times, which is exactly the opposite of the message that we want to set. So we really want to make sure that a PECs book, a device, a single switch, a picture board, whatever it is, it needs to be available to him throughout the day.

I will never forget a classroom that I was the administrator for the program so all of this fault is on me, where we had a morning, the morning part of the day and a late afternoon part of the day. And they were two different sets of staff because the school ran for eight to five. And so the morning team set the classroom up so that the students were all using PECs books, which I'll talk about in our next episode. And that book went in their desk and the desk was open to the students. So no matter what he could pull it out and ask for what he wanted or communicate in some way.

We would come in at the end of the day, after the afternoon session had left. And the afternoon staff would have turned all of the desks around so that those books were on the opposite side of the desk for the students to access. So essentially, they could no longer access their communication forms. Obviously, this was a red flag that we did a lot of retraining about.

But one of the things that I've seen often over the years are people who say, Well, he can't have anything, so we're not giving it to him right now. He can't have what he wants from his device. That's

not how we teach that skill. And I'll do another episode if you want on how we teach that skill. But we don't teach me not to talk by eliminating my vocal cords, or taping my mouth. I can talk and ask for things. Typical kids talk and ask for things. And when they can't have the thing they asked for, we teach them how to handle that hence the tantrums of the terrible twos.

So we need to do that with our students as well. And we need to be clear that we are sending the message that we want them to communicate everywhere in the day. On the flip side of this, one of the things that is difficult is that oftentimes their device isn't something they're good at being personally responsible for. They don't know how to take it to the different parts of the room.

In addition, many times we have students that their device takes up their whole desk so now there's nowhere for them to do their work, which is one of the reasons we put their PECs book in their desk instead of leaving it on their desk. So one strategy that we have used in the past is to keep the device or put the book someplace that is accessible to the student throughout the day.

Along with that is the caveat that when he gets up from morning meeting, and looks like he's just leaving the activity, we need to wait and see if he's looking to go get his device. Because if we've stored his device outside that activity, then he has no other choice to communicate other than to go get it, which he's not supposed to get up and leave morning meeting.

So that becomes a conundrum that we have to work out. So one of the ways that we can address this situation, where having their device with them all the time isn't always like, how do I play when I have this heavy device with me all the time?

One of the things we want to do is what I call engineering the classroom to support communication, because our students don't need to have just one device that they use to communicate. What if that device goes away? What if it self destructs? What if it's not charged today? What if we lost all the pictures? Whatever it is that can happen to it. What if I spilled my morning coffee on it right before class? All of those are things that can easily happen to all of us. And then we need to have other ways for that student to communicate.

So one way to address this is to make sure that we have communication set up throughout the area with different types of communication support. This is also a really good strategy to use, when we're working with students that maybe don't have a device yet, maybe we think they need to be evaluated. Nobody's done the evaluation yet. So he hasn't gotten a device. That doesn't mean he doesn't need communication support.

So we can have classroom supports that are open and available to everyone in the classroom, including the staff, who should be using it, in Aided Language stimulation in modeling communication using the same devices. They are open to everyone to use. So it's important that we make sure that

they have ways to communicate. Maybe one of the things you put on a morning meeting communication board that's available to everybody is I need my device, if they want to say something that isn't available on the other communication strategies that are there.

So here are just some other things to think about. As we are thinking about how we engineer our classroom to make it work to support our students communication with a variety of devices.

One is we want to make sure that we have special vocabulary that they're going to need ready in an activity. So if we're doing a cooking lesson, we want to make sure that the things they need to talk about during cooking, or for doing a special snack, the things that they need to ask for in that special snack, which may not be things that are typically on their device.

So for instance, I was in a preschool class that was making English muffin with raisins and cream cheese. Wouldn't have been what I thought about but the kids actually liked it. So in order for a student to make a snack in that activity, he had to be able to request those different ingredients. A lot of kids don't have cream cheese and English muffins as a word on their beginning language devices.

So we needed to make sure we had those pictures to support that. We don't have to go in and change everybody's device, we can provide a communication board or a set of communication pictures to augment that device.

Now for some of our students, if we're really focused on them using their device, we might put it into their device. But if it's only going to be used for one day or one week, I don't know that we'd really necessarily want to teach them that way. It might be a good way to teach him, Oh, it's not it my device, but I can communicate in a different way.

Similarly, different foods that they have in the cafeteria, we want to make sure we've got something to support that we might do that by having a board that goes with us to the cafeteria that has things that they regularly have to order that we know our kids like.

We also want to make sure that remember I talked about those five opportunities to practice the skill when they're making those requests for the ingredients to make their snack, they're getting, two raisins, and then two more raisins. And then two more raisins. So they have two big three requests instead of one. Or until they don't want any more raisins. They can make as many requests as they want. So we're always getting those small amounts, so they get multiple opportunities to practice that same skill.

Similarly, we can set up communication boards at different areas of the classroom to supplement the student's individual systems. So for instance, in the play area of a preschool, I might have a board

that has your turn, my turn, the blocks, thne pretend play, the oven, the stove, the pot, the cups, the plate, the things that they might want to ask for and talk about within those situations.

So I might, again, augment their device with other kinds of communication options. I also might want to make sure say we're playing with the dollhouse, that maybe I have a board of doll house vocabulary, so that we're not only working on requesting, it has the ability that the teacher can point to it, say, Oh, this is the grandma and point to a picture of a grandma while holding a doll.

Oh, put the baby in the bed and point to the bed on the board. That then models for the student how to use the board, they can then say where they want somebody to put something, it's one thing that I work on, I can create a lot of language opportunities by being the person who puts the things in the dollhouse, and the child directs me how to do it.

And so I may not initially set that up in his device, but I may have a board that has in the bed, on the couch, the television, in that room. I might have the different rooms on there. So he can point to it. So that he has some kind of communication strategy to tell me about that. I might also set up communication board for activities, and then again, teach the staff how to create those opportunities.

So when I do music and movement, I always have a choice board. And that's because I always want the students to be making a choice. But also, it's a way that I can pull out for them to communicate. You're using the cymbals, yes, he can then show me the picture for the cymbals, he can choose musical instruments. He could choose the song we're singing, he can choose the game we're playing, if we're doing gametime, those are all tools that I could pull out and use for him to communicate.

I can also have a board like my AAC boards that I talked about last week, that are designed specifically for different activities. So there's one for the player that has common things they might want to ask, common actions they might want to take that they could learn to comment on, and Core Words that they need, like yes and no and bathroom and help.

So that those are on every board and every in the same place. Similarly, when I do art, I don't give everyone the materials. And I give communication visuals for them to ask about the color, or the thing that they want to use for the art project or if they need more paper. So they have lots of things to ask about. But then I also want to make sure that I have communication strategies on that board for them to be able to tell me about their art project.

Oh, What color was it? Oh, yes, you use blue. That's a very interesting blue house, you that there. So I've got materials that I can pull out for them to expand their communication.

Another is to use simple speech generating devices or simple switches. You can actually get them on

Amazon now. Or you could use picture exchange communication systems or sentence strips to work on greetings, for instance.

So at the front of the room by the door that the students come and exit through, I generally will have switches that say hello, and another one that says goodbye. I might also use a picture but I like the switch for this situation. Because A - they hear what they could say and B - it gets people's attention. Whereas if we haven't really taught the kid to take the picture to someone the way the PEC system does, he can just sit there with a picture of Hello until somebody sees them. And that's not really effective communication.

So the fact that it says something makes it easier for someone to know that he's doing it. So it also gives us the opportunity to stop at the door and wait for them to greet you, to say goodbye before you let them go or to say hello before you let them in. So we're reinforcing that with we can reinforce it with praise. We may reinforce it with other things. But we're also reinforcing it with the natural consequence, which is I come into the room or the natural cue, I come into the room. And that's when I say hello, and I leave an area and that's when I say goodbye.

Even if the students who are using PECs or they are verbal, having speech generating devices around the room can often be really powerful, because it can give them an extra voice. And I talked about this, I think I did a podcast on it. And I'll look up and see what number it was. And put that in the show notes. It might have been a blog post but I think it's a podcast about students that I go to see who are nonverbal and the other kids in the class will say well he doesn't talk when I want to talk to him? I'll be talking to him. And they'll say, Well, he doesn't talk. Like, I know that's okay. You know, I'm talking to him. But he doesn't talk.

And then the premise that they're saying that under is their understanding that we'll see he doesn't talk so there's no point in talking to him. Because I'm not getting anything back. They're not getting reinforced for talking to the kid. And they don't know that he can still hear you. And that doesn't mean it doesn't have anything to say. So giving a student who is nonverbal, just a simple switch, to be able to say good morning to his peers, gives him a voice. And it is a really great way to help students to have a voice and be really part of that verbal community in their classroom.

So that's one of the things that I find really helpful, whether it is a cheap talk 8 that has 8 messages, and they can choose what community helper we're talking about today. Whether it is just a device that I used to use in a middle school, where a student would say more music, and we would turn the music back on, and then we'd shut it off, more music. And they would make those requests, they would also tell the class, when to start and when to stop dancing based on what they said and what they wanted in the music. So it has sort of a multi function thing.

Recognize too, that when a student is angry, if we're teaching him how to ask for help, sometimes when students are frustrated, that's the hardest time for them to access their language. So we may want to have a voice output device that says help me, because maybe I can't come up with the words

what I'm really frustrated.

Think about a time when you were really angry. And for some of us words just don't come to express what we need, when we're really angry. You know, it's one of those, I just, I can't even, I can't even, you know, when we look at each other, like I have no words. Our students have that difficulty regularly. So sometimes just having a switch that they can easily access to say I need help, can increase their functional communication and may decrease their challenging behavior as well.

Now, obviously, there are tons of ways that you can engineer a classroom to support language, using visual and augmentative communication supports. You can even build opportunities into structured work time by sabotaging the system. Only do that if the student can work independently. So they have to ask for a pencil that you didn't put in their basket to do the worksheet. I've even had it where students have it here that they have to tell to raise their hand and let somebody know they're finished and have their work checked. Because they kind of sped through it didn't pay attention to it half the time. And it gave a communication opportunity there.

You can also have students working on receptive language like matching pictures or sorting pictures and things like that. But we're we're thinking about communication, we really want to make sure that our students have the opportunity to practice it many times throughout the day, and that we have the supports in place for them to be successful with it.

So I would love to hear what your thoughts and ideas are about how you engineer your classroom. If you want to come share, you can share pictures, you can share ideas. If you're a special educator come to our free Facebook group, you can look for the picture of this podcast, and share with us there about how you engineer your classroom to let everybody benefit from your experience or if you have questions, you can bring them there as well. And you can find our Facebook group at specialeducatorsconnection.com

If you are looking for communication boards to help you engineer your classroom, go and look at them in my store, you can find them at autismclassroomresources.com/communication.

So I hope that you are having a tremendous week, that you are if not at the end of school, close to the end of school and getting ready to enjoy your summer. And I hope that you'll come back next week when I will be talking about the picture exchange communication system and why I think it's a really valuable tool for our students. Until then, have an amazing week.

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