

Episode 165 Transcript

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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, thanks so much for taking the time to be here and join in this podcast of mine. If you missed the last episode, then I just remind you that May is better speech and hearing month. So I'm doing a series of episodes that are focused specifically on communication and language.

Now last week, I talked about the functions of communication and how we use them. And I talked about the fact that we want to focus on expanding the functions of language, rather than say the number of words or the kind of communication that a student is using. So we focus more on the why of the communication than whether it was verbal or gesture, one picture or two on a sentence strip, one word or two, all those kinds of things.

So today, I'm going to focus on eight things that you can do to help build communication within your classroom, particularly if you're working with students who use any kind of augmentative communication, a device, a picture system, or core board, anything like that will fit in this category.

Now, I don't want you to stress out, it's not going to be a lot of things that you need to add to your day. And in fact, it's mostly about how we set things up in our day, under all the things that we do to support communication. So let's get started.

Are you looking for fresh ideas to enhance your students communication skills? Check out the Special Educator Academy. Our membership offers a wealth of resources to help you effectively teach communication skills, whether you need a quick five minute training on echolalia. Or you want to dive deeper with our comprehensive course on teaching communication, we've got you covered. Our 15 minute quickly win videos covering a wide range of communication strategies, from communication temptations to teaching, answering w h and yes, no questions. But that's not all. As a member, you'll also have access to our workshop of facilitating communication, as well as our community of amazing special educators. Connect with like minded professionals, get your questions answered, and share ideas to create a positive impact in your classroom. And don't just take our word for it, one of our members said join, it's good for the soul. Sign up today for a free seven day trial at specialeducatoracademy.com and take your teaching to the next level.

So number one, it's about function more than form. Now I talked about this last week. But communication is a lot like behavior in that the functions of communication have more impact than the form does, gives us more power to the communication. So for instance, it's great that someone can put words together to make a sentence. But if all they do is ask for things they want, it doesn't really matter whether they do that with a word or 20 words, when they aren't conversing or using language in any other way.

Imagine the things that they can't do. They can't talk about what they're doing. They can't describe something if they don't know the word if they don't have that function to describe something that happened to them. So we need to focus on the number of functions of communication our students use more than we worry about how many words there can string together, or how many pictures they put together in their device.

So this is especially true when we're talking about communication activities for students with autism, because that function of language is one of the things that they really struggle with more than form. And we certainly see that for students with echolalia, who can use lots of different words, put them together in lots of different ways. But it doesn't always fit the function. Sometimes it does and it gets kind of interesting that way.

Number two, we want to make sure that we include core vocabulary. Now core vocabulary, if you're not familiar with it, is a really important component in language. So it is the compilation of all the words that are most commonly used in English language. So knowing the core vocabulary, obviously it's going to be important because I can use it in a lot of different situations.

However, a lot of people have taken core vocabulary and taken it to the, this is all we need to teach. And I don't believe that it's the only thing we need to teach. And that's actually backed up by a number of studies and practitioners who said the same thing. Core vocabulary makes it easier to communicate a variety of functions because you have core words, you have words that are used for a lot of different things.

But if I really really liked Cheetos, Cheetos is not a core word. So it how do I ask for them if all I know our core words? When we apply it to students with communication disorders, rather than students who are just delayed in language, or students who have a limited understanding of language, some of the communication that they have using only Core Words can be difficult.

So another thing that makes core difficult sometimes is they aren't typically words that are easily depicted with pictures. You know, if you think about how do we depict more in a picture, they have to be able to recognize the symbols of there's more in this thing that the arrow is pointing to. Sometimes we've tried to use a sign but unless they're familiar with sign language that isn't going to be meaningful. Words like yes and no and help are very contextual. And when use contextually they work and they convey meaning. But it's really hard to develop a good concrete picture for a student who isn't sure what yes, no and help really mean.

But with all that said, using core vocabulary, our students can communicate so much more than if their tools only included nouns and full sentences. If we only put the things on there that he likes to request, we're not going to be working on very many other functions of communication, either. They can combine words in different ways to get their meaning across. And that really is one of the powers that core words bring is the ability to use them in a lot of different situation, with more situations specific vocabulary.

The focus again needs to be on the function of communication and how they get their ideas across. It's not about how many words they say it's not about whether or not they say it in a complete sentence. It's about whether or not they said it to ask for something. And now they're saying it to tell you about something that they did.

So what this means for teaching communication is that we do want to include Core Words in our communication instruction. So for instance, in my AAC board in my store, I made a point to include a variety of core vocabulary that allows students to start and construct new thoughts and ideas. It also serves the function up giving the staff the vocabulary to model to cue the student so they remember to use those words as well.

So there are some core words that are going to go through all different situations. And the the AAC boards that I made are designed for specific activities in the classroom. So they have situational specific vocabulary, but Core Words on the outside that can be used for combinations. So the boards are set up for specific contexts but core vocabulary typically stays the same across the board. Words like no, help, all done, bathroom, mine, are things that they would use in almost any situation. So those are included there as well.

Number three, we want to start with requesting, but then we have to move on. I mentioned last week that requesting is one of the most reinforcing functions of communication, because we get something that we want or something that we need. And that's particularly important for students say with

autism, who struggle with social situations, and they may not want to communicate, to interact in social situations. But while basic requesting for motivating items is a really great place to start because it's so powerful, we need to make sure that we're moving on to other functions as well, because the student needs to be able to do more than just request.

Number four, create communication opportunities, all during the day, everywhere. Communication needs to happen every day, all day long. I don't just talk at one point during the day, except you know, when I'm doing podcasts. It can't be something we just do during group or during speech. We talk everywhere we go. Our students need to do that as well and they need to communicate with multiple people in multiple situation. They need to talk about a variety of things.

Keeping up with situation specific vocabulary can be a full time job. We all know that you already have a full time job, and that's one of the reasons that I created the communication boards in my store for different activities so that it can supplement somebody's individual device. That way you have specific situation vocabulary to supplement your student's PECS book or his iPad or his Dynavox.

So for instance, the student that you're working with may not have the ability to search through a number of pictures to find the cooking specific page, putting boards around the classroom allows you to have that cooking specific vocabulary, right on hand to either prompt the communication or use it to have them point to it and communicate with you that way. And I'll talk more about strategies like that in next week's episode.

Number five, we want to combine communication activities for students. When I communicate, I do it with multiple methods, I use writing, and pictures, and speech depending on the situation and often at the same time. It's no different for our students, they need to be able to use different tools to communicate, so they have a backup, when say another tool fails, I missing my pictures, my battery for my device wasn't charged.

I don't speak Italian. But when I was in Italy, I had to figure out how to communicate with people who didn't speak English. So I had to pull up my map and do pointing and gestures. I had to step back in what we think of as a more primitive form of communication, but that was my repair strategy.

So our students also need to have ways to clarify something when someone doesn't understand them. We typically change what we say or how we say it when that happens. Having alternatives tools and communication activities for students, gives them a way to do that.

Number six, we need to model for our students using their tools of communication. Just like we do with little one and two year olds, when they're learning to talk we are modeling a little bit ahead of what they're doing, using what we want them to use, which would typical kids is speech. But for

students that are nonverbal or need communication tools, then it's something else, it's a point board or a PECS book or a device.

So this is something that's known as Aided Language stimulation. And it involves that we are modeling using the student's form of communication when we are talking. So when I'm talking, I put what I'm saying on his board and let it say it. Carole Zangari's Practical AAC has a really great post that I'll make sure it's linked in the show notes about this.

But if you think about it, it's really just common sense. Children learn from the models that they hear or see. But when we use a device or a picture system, we sometimes forget that and we don't model how they should communicate.

Number seven, we need to make sure that our students have repeated practice of communication activities for students. No communication strategy, no matter what it is, is ever going to be successful if the student doesn't get to practice over and over and over. One opportunity here and one opportunity later in the day. And then another one tomorrow is not going to be enough for our students to make meaningful progress. So that means that making sure that we are targeting specific communication objectives during the day, and we're setting up lots of opportunities for them to practice.

That means that we're also making sure that the staff knows how to implement the communication activities so opportunities occur with them when the teacher or the speech and language pathologist isn't there. So that means helping them learn how to set up a situation where a student needs to communicate, giving that expected waiting cue of holding out my hand or just the look on my face, and then expecting the student to communicate in some way.

And in general, just to get at this because I find giving specific targets helps, I typically ask staff to focus on five targeted opportunities to practice some kind of communication in every activity of the day. I gear my naturalistic data sheet to that expectation. So there are five boxes in it, not just because five boxes fit well in that space. But because I like to see five opportunities to practice that skill when I have targeted it in that activity.

So that also that data sheet also serves as a reminder to the staff to get those five opportunities for the student to communicate. That just seeing if it happens or not is not enough for our students who need consistent practice.

And finally, number eight, provide the Goldilocks of communication. We want to provide the communication that just right. If the student only has communication at his or her current level of skill, then that's all they can communicate. So if they are requesting, and they only have nouns, and I want in the PECS book, that that's all he's going to be able to communicate for. On the flip side, we'd

probably have all worked with a student who had an advanced device or a new app that had tons of pages and vocabulary that made it impossible for the student to find what he was trying to communicate.

So that's too advanced for the students. We always want to find a balance between challenging the student and overwhelming the student. I like to do that by having a variety of communication strategies available to the student. I don't want us to get stuck on one because what if it stops working. So I like to have choice boards in an activity for making requests. I might have more sophisticated tools to challenge students with a simple voice output device that has multiple choices on it, and so they could move up to the next step.

You probably already have the tools ready to use, you just want to implement them in the activity where they are needed, so that they can be successful. So really making sure you've got a combination of tools allows you to give that Goldilocks level of practice.

If you're interested in more ideas for how to ramp up your communication instruction this summer, or in the coming year, check out the Special Educator Academy, which has a whole set of resources on communication among lots of other topics, and grab that seven day free trial at specialeducatoracademy.com.

And if you're looking for the communication boards that I've talked about to engineer your classroom for communication, that includes some core words, you can grab them at autismclassroomresources.com/communication.

Thanks so much for spending this time with me. I'll be back next week with some suggestions about how you can engineer your classroom to support communication and get lots of those opportunities throughout the day.

In the meantime, if you had experiences with anything I've talked about today, or you just have questions about communication, hop over to the podcast post in our free Facebook group at specialeducatorsconnection.com and share them there. Thank you so much for the time that you spent with me. I hope that we'll be back next week.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. For even more support, you can access free materials, webinars and Video Tips inside my free resource library. Sign up at autismclassroomresources.com/free. That's F-R-E-E or click the link in the show notes to join the free library today. I'll catch you again next week.