Long Extended Abstract:

Teaching Social Skills to Individuals using High-Tech AAC

One of the most important functions of communication is to achieve social closeness (Light, 1997). At a very young age, typically developing children have the ability to communicate effectively with others beyond their needs and wants and begin to develop social connections with people in their surrounding environment. For individuals with complex communication needs (CCN) and use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), these same opportunities to participate socially can be challenging and thus limited. In fact, most children who use AAC have “deficits in terms of the social and communicative interaction with peers” (Lilienfeld & Alant, 2005). Research continues to describe students who use AAC in the classroom as passive communicators who rely heavily on their partners to direct interactions (Calculator & Jorgensen, 1991) and repeatedly points out the neglect of the sociorelational aspect in the field of AAC.

Social participation is critical to the development of social competence - the awareness of “when to speak, what to talk about with whom, where and in what manner” (Hymes, 1972, in Thirumanickam, et., al., 2011). It includes skills needed to communicate effectively and in socially appropriate ways to:

- Interact with others.
- Gain attention.
- Introduce a topic.
- Change a topic.
- Make comments.
- Ask questions.
- Communicate about a variety of topics.
- Use a variety of communicative functions.

For individuals with CCN, social competence goes beyond establishing connections with others. It provides them with a way to control their environment, develop language and literacy skills, improves respect from communication partners and increases communicative opportunities.

As clinicians, teachers, aides, and parents who support individuals who use AAC, we all seek to build a culture of success and inclusivity. One that fosters AAC users at all skill levels, promotes communicative competence, and provides communicative opportunities mirroring that of their fellow peers. Our challenge is to provide supports and instruction for the spectrum of individuals whose skills fall along a broad social continuum. Fortunately, with the advancement in technology, communication devices now have the ability to incorporate dynamic vocabulary and contextually rich visual symbols and/or scenes for a range of literacy skills, communicative contexts or interactive purposes. Through video and demonstration we will explore a variety of features in high-tech communication devices used to address social communication, expressive and receptive language, and behavior and emotional regulation.
Yet, even with the advancement in technology, if a “core deficit of several developmental disabilities is difficulty with social skills” (Whalen, et. al., 2011), then it is imperative we also focus our attention on teaching pragmatic skills and sustained social engagement while addressing comprehensive communication goals for all of our AAC users. In this session, we will introduce an AAC Goals Grid (DAGG-2) outlining a proposed hierarchy of linguistic, operational, strategic and social competencies for AAC users across communication ability levels. The focus will be on goals targeting the social competency skills. These progressions of goals include early understanding of social cause and effect, joint attention, conversational turn-taking, asking person-focused questions and using non-obligatory comments related to the topic. The DAGG-2 includes goal writing and schedule worksheets to help outline an organized structure to document (and measure) routine and novel activities, the significant communication characteristics of the activities such as communication partners, and current and projected level of support required for targeting specific skills. In addition, we will address both foundational and new strategies and techniques to teach communication partners to actively engage AAC users communicatively and support more successful participation.

Discussion, case studies and video examples will be utilized to help attendees personalize the goals and strategies. Attendees will leave with access to valuable AAC implementation resources to utilize within their specific clinical settings.

While this session is being proposed by employees of an AAC device manufacturer, the information, suggestions, and examples presented will be applicable to many different types of AAC systems.

References:


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Program Planner/Instructional Personnel’s Name: Holly Schneider, MA CCC-SLP

Course Title: Teaching Social Skills to Individuals using High-Tech AAC

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