

Supporting Children with Disabilities to Develop Language and Communication Skills into Inclusion

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“My opinion is, never say they cannot. It so much that they can do.
You have to give them a chance, if you do not give them a chance how you know
that they can or cannot.

I really do not think of autism as be a handicap because in autism,
they are extremely intelligence.

You find out what those are and you build on that and you work with that ...”

By interview with the parent who has a child with low functioning autism
(Andrade, 2014)

Abstract

Every child has the right to use their own voices with respect and dignity. Even though, some young children have difficulties with language and communication development; they still deserve their rights to express their needs, to ask for help, to make requests, and to receive attention. Listening to young children is a crucial contribution that grants support of their perceptions and can be designed into matters of meaningful support. Language and communication skills cover two principal purposes: (a) receptive language, and (b) expressive language. Receptive language describes the capacity of understanding others' communication and showing interactive responses in appropriate ways. Expressive language describes the capacity for expressing needs by encompassing words, gestures, or facial expressions (verbal or nonverbal communication skills). Young children who are receiving proper supports in early language and communication development are more likely to be successful in academic and social learning. Two areas are included when developing language and communication skills: (1) Providing effective communication techniques, and (2) Creating the process of facilitated communication. This paper highlights these two areas and how they provide direct instructions and techniques for developing young children with disabilities in

language and communication skills thus promoting positive responses with others in the general classrooms.

Keywords: Children with disabilities, General classrooms, Inclusion, Language and communication skills, Receptive and expressive language

Introduction

Significant challenges have directed how schools prepare to fully support students with disabilities who are attending general classrooms or inclusion. In the United States of America, students with disabilities have shown an increase in being taught in the general classroom. Soodak (2003) discussed, “Ten years ago, less than one third of students with disabilities participated in general education classes. By 1997-1998, more than 75% of the 6.5 million students with disabilities were being educated in classes with their nondisabled peers” (p. 327). Soodak also described that the meaningful move toward inclusive education has received attention by legislation, and numerous research studies have found the relevant benefits of inclusion. Hence, the controversy about whether to include children with disabilities in inclusion should be less important than focusing on how to prepare the effective planning that provide maximum learning benefits for young children with disabilities to integrate within general classrooms (Hundert, 2007; Soodak, 2003).

In early childhood, young children can develop language, social communication and emotion skills quickly by simply playing with toys, dramatic play, rule-based games, story-telling, and conversations with other peers as part of their daily activities. Supporting language and communication development is a fundamental emphasis for young children while they interact with others to initiate conversations within natural settings such as asking for help, making requests, and asking for a turn while playing games. Providing communication opportunities can promote friendship, group work, and academic learning. However, most young children with behavioral challenges or other disabilities may lack social interaction opportunities with peers because their language limitations and communication deficits (Hansen, Frantz, Machalicek & Raulston, 2017).

Young children with disabilities can have trouble expressing their emotions and/or other needs which can be related to their lack of language and communication development. These characteristics likely involve speech and language deficits such as hearing loss, specific language impairment, visual disabilities, cognitive disabilities, emotional disorders, autism, structural abnormalities, motor problems, voice disorders, and stuttering (Cook, Klein, Tessier

& Daley, 2004). Some young children with disabilities are included in the general classroom, and they are also commonly diagnosed with one of these specific characteristics. Similarly, many children with autism are sensitive to sensory stimuli, which can interfere with their developmental delay of communication skills and possibly conduct to behavioral challenges (Cook, Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004). Additionally, the lack of social interaction can impact the limits of language and communication development. Cook and colleagues (2004) discussed the importance of stimulation from birth which supports young children's language and communication development, especially interactions from loving between parents and their child. Thus, young children with disabilities require well-planned language and communication development and greater opportunities to enhance quality of social context. In this article, two principal areas are discussed that direct instruction and provide critical techniques for assisting young children with disabilities to develop language and communication skills, including: (1) providing effective communication techniques, and (2) creating the process of facilitated communication.

I. Providing effective communication techniques

This area focuses on three main strategies that provide direct instruction for assisting young children with disabilities to develop language and communication skills and improve appropriate responses with others. The three main strategies consist of (1) Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), (2) Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and (3) Milieu Teaching. These three techniques are for shaping specific communication behaviors in the context of strategies that are described as follows:

1) Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

In recent years, Augmentative and Alternative Communication or AAC has influenced many children who need additional communication assistance to connect socially. These children may be associated with difficulties with spoken communication, expressing themselves, lack of understanding language and communication works, and unclear speech. Communication Matters (2015) noted, "An estimated 1 in 100 people have significant communication difficulties and might be helped by some form of AAC" (p. 2). The benefits of AAC could help children improve their communication, and have more opportunities to participate in education, social relationships, and independence. The AAC is found in many types of communication which includes unaided communication, low-technology communication systems, and high-technology communication systems. Unaided communication includes body language and gestures that are key such as pointing, eye

pointing, and facial expression, etc. Low-technology communication systems are simple designs functions or none electronic formats such as communication books with pictures, photos, alphabet printed on cards, word boards, pen highlight color, and paper to draw or write short messages, etc. High-technology communication systems are electronic equipment with a battery for mobility that provide synthesized speech and/or produce text functions such as messages generated from mobile devices, tablets, laptops, and/ or computer keyboards, etc. Some devices can be activated by touch to produce text or synthesized speech for communication (Communication Matters, 2015; Cook, Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004).

Figures 1-4 present the examples of low and high-technology AAC devices. Visit the websites for more information regarding limitations, beneficial details and clarification on the usage of these resources.

- Low-technology AAC



Figure 1. A Flip book

(Photo: <http://literacyforallinstruction.ca/symbol-based-communication/>)



Figure 2. A Flip and Communicate Wrist Wrap

(Photo: <https://www.closingthegap.com/augmentative-resources-your-source-for-low-tech-aac/>)

- High- technology AAC



Figure 3. GoTalk 20+ with GoTalk Overlay Software
(Photo: www.Schoolhealth.com)



Figure 4. Symbolic communication devices
(Photo: www.Portale.siva.it.)

2) Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

The Picture Exchange Communication System or PECS was established by Dr. Bondy and colleagues at the Delaware Autistic Program which developed from an idea of an augmentative alternative communication system (Richard, 2000). The purpose of PECS focuses on developing better early social communication skills for children who are associated with a variety of communication disorders, social-communicative deficits, especially, minimally verbal, non-verbal, or lack of functional oral language (Flippin, Reszka & Watson, 2010; Richard, 2000). PECS is designed to use a simple low-technology system based on picture communication and employs behavioral techniques to guide the children towards learning how to express themselves. The goal of PECS is to prompt children's physical responses and social interactions actively (Flippin, Reszka & Watson, 2010; Cook,

Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004). Flippin, Reszka and Watson (2010) noted Bondy and Frost's discussion (1994, p. 3) that said, "Children using PECS are taught to approach and give a picture of a desired item to a communicative partner in exchange for that item. By doing so, the child initiates a communicative act for a concrete item within a social context" (p. 179).

The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders (2010) and Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (2016) describe that a PECS's implementation requires a variety of behavioral techniques and activities such as physical and verbal prompts, and reinforcements. PECS is divided into six principal phases:

- (1) Teaching the physically assisted exchange
- (2) Expanding spontaneity
- (3) Simultaneous discrimination of pictures
- (4) Building sentence structure
- (5) Responding to "What do you want?"
- (6) Commenting in response to a question.

To apply Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) step-by-step, it is recommended to follow the implementation guide at the website <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/sites/afirm.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/resources/PECS%20Step-by-Step.pdf> by Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (2016). PECS is a critical system that promotes social interaction opportunities and engages physical prompts to enhance language and communication skills. The children are taught to use physical response and interaction with another person by removing and handing a picture from the book or communication binder instead of pointing at a picture. The children receive training closely with two persons that include the communicative partner and helper. Cook, Klein, Tessier and Daley (2004, p.311) suggested that the communicative partner and helper should use physical prompts carefully, and assure the child accomplishes learning: (a) finding the appropriate picture, (b) removing the picture, (c) approaching the communicative partner, (d) handing or giving the picture to the communicative partner, and (e) waiting/listening for the communicative partner's response and compliance with the request.

Here are some examples of PECS which are shown in Figures 5-7, visit the websites for more information regarding limitations, beneficial details and clarification on the usage of these resources.



Figure 5. Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
(Photo: Center of Human Development University of Oregon)



Figure 6. Free time/ Reward choice by Amanda Nolan
(Source: teacherspayteachers.com)



Figure 7. PECS Hospital I need help 2 by Pathfinders for Autism
(Source: <https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/healthcare/visual-supports-for-hospital-visits/pecs-hospital-i-need-help-2-2/>)

3) Milieu Teaching

Young children who have language and communication difficulties experience high risk of academic and social skills deficiency. Research revealed that early language intervention programs show inadequate support of learning opportunity for generalization, functional response, and natural language capacity. Therefore, some children still have difficulty using language to communicate with peers, teachers, family members and others during communicative situations in daily life. There is evidence that naturalistic language intervention, especially Milieu Teaching, focuses on helping children develop both areas of acquisition and functional communication, and language skills (Kim & Choi, 2003; Kaiser & Hester, 1994).

Cook, Klein, Tessier and Daley (2004) described the Milieu Teaching technique as, "...it is a term used to refer to a variety of behavioral techniques that are used in the natural environment to teach specific communication skills..." (p. 304). Milieu Teaching is another model of naturalistic intervention which is designed to teach the child language and communication skills within natural environment instead of providing a restrictive individual setting. Natural communicative environment would be purposed for the child's learning opportunities during unstructured times within typical daily routine activities such as classroom, playground, and home (Kim & Choi, 2003). The language teaching intervention occurs when the teacher follows the child's interests and the child-selected situations to motivate communicative response. Hence, the role of the teacher is likely the follower of the child's lead and to interact with the child when he or she seeks the requests, or attempts asking for help at certain communicative situations. The goal of practical Milieu Teaching is to promote meaningful language communication rather than forcing the child to speak with correct grammatical structure or language patterns. This naturalistic intervention supports the communicative interaction between child and adult occurring in flexible structure and language naturally. Cook, Klein, Tessier and Daley (2004, p. 305) explained five major teaching procedures of Milieu Teaching:

- Create the need or opportunity to communicate: Teacher arranges certain natural environment to encourage the child making an effort to communicate such as asking questions, help, or other requests. During the child initiated communicative interactions, the teacher must keep in mind what motivates the child on his or her interests in activities, materials, events, objects, or persons.
- Pause and wait: Teacher could help the child gain language and communication skills by providing opportunity for child's attempts during initial communication. It may be

difficult for the teacher to wait for the child's response 10-20 seconds or longer, then to provide prompts or cues (such as using AAC devices) to observe the child's continued interests. The teacher encourages the child to use behavior response, and helps the child acquire language and communication skills.

- Provide a natural cue: Teacher could provide communicative behavior, prompt, and cue when the child is unable to respond or acts inappropriately. However, the teacher should be informed to not provide these behaviors consistently, unnecessary, frequently, or independently; a natural verbal cue is one supposed to occur naturally in the natural environment. For example, "What you want to do", "Which color do you want, red or green?", or "Can I help you?"

- Use prompts and assistance: Teacher could use prompts to help the child in communicative behavior when he or she is unable to respond or lacks language understanding such as modeling or physical prompting. Modeling could be a beneficial prompt for children who have visual learning or a generalized imitation style. Physical prompting also could be the effective prompt to guide the child through the behavior such as holding the child's hand to move the chair away when sitting down on the floor during activities.

- Comply with the communicative request: Including several steps, there are (a) "the child actively processes incoming information and recognizes the need", (b) "the child initiates communicative interaction and is not forced to wait for a specific stimulus to which to respond", (c) "the child's communicative behavior has an impact upon the environment", (d) "the child thus experiences reflectance", and (e) "the opportunity is created for the teacher to use verbal input to map language onto the child's experience" (Cook, Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004, p. 306)

Milieu Teaching technique could be addressed by supporting the young children in the early stage of language development within the general classrooms, including the children with developmental delay, mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, autism, and other children with at risk language or communication delay. Kim and Choi (2003) provided a good brief summary of Milieu Teaching, they concluded "Milieu Teaching promotes the generation of acquired language skills to new context by selecting common stimulus items, functional response, and natural consequences" (p. 41).

II. Creating the process of facilitated communication

Some children demonstrate restricted language and communication capacities while compared to others at the same ages such as spoken language or unclear speech. When

these children are included in the general classrooms, the teachers should encourage students to communicate for themselves instead of talking for the students or blocking students' communication. Even though, the children are not able to communicate with verbal responses; they could have the opportunity to use any sign communicative forms or behavioral response such as body movements, gestures, or other expressions, etc (Peckham-Hardin, Hanreddy & Ogletree, 2018). Three critical primaries are associated to the development of communication skills, including: social interaction, functional communication, and responsive environment (Cook, Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004).

- **Social Interaction:** Turn taking and reciprocal interaction are important experiences for young children to learn and practice their communication skills with others. This social opportunity is the first fundamental to the development of communication skills in early intervention.

- **Functional communication:** The children must learn to use language for meaning, so the effective communication skills must be functional for the children. They should have an opportunity to initiate communication and interaction within natural environment for asking questions, to acquire information, and to solve problems.

- **Responsive environment:** The greater development of communication skills is involved in a responsive environment. The teachers who pay the most attention to the children's communicative intentions would be most outstanding in facilitating language development.

Cook, Klein, Tessier and Daley (2004) also suggested that the principal subject matter of facilitated communication can be addressed in the classroom strategies as follows:

1) Beginning where the child is

The teachers must have background understanding of milestones of language and communication development regarding contributions to assist the children's learning level. Also, the children should be taught to use proper language and communication by practicing receptive and expressive language which is emphasizes part of social communication skills. For instance, if a 4-year-old child could not point to the object, the teacher needs to encourage the child with more interactive communication such as the teacher saying, "hand me an apple" and the teacher pointing at the apple. Learn more information about Language Development in Children: Components, Requirements and Milestones visit the Children Health Explanation at website <http://www.childhealth-explanation.com/language-development-pg2.html>.

Figure 7 presents the example of communication and language development between 2 - 24 months of age by Children Health Explanation (October 2019).

Communication & Language Development Milestones 2-24 months		
Milestone	Average Age of Attainment (months)	Developmental Implications
Smiles in response to face/voice	1.5	More active social participation
Babbles	6	Experimentation with sound
Inhibits to "no"	7	Response to tone
Follows one step command when said with gesture	7	Response to gesture
Follows one step verbal command when said without gesture	10	Verbal receptive language
Monosyllabic- mama/dada	10	Expressive language
Points to object	10	Interactive communication
Speaks first real word	12	Beginning of labeling
Speaks 4-6 words	15	Learns names of object and people
Speaks 10-15 words	18	Learns names of object and people
Makes 2 words sentences	19	Grammatization, 50+ words vocabulary

Figure 7: Example of Milestones of Language Development
Source: Children Health Explanation (October 2019)

2) Conversing with the child

In the general classrooms, another role of teachers is as an observer who pays close attention to an individual child's interests and strengths. Observation is a primary component to build the effective teacher-child communication. To develop language and communication skills, a child's initial communication could begin with familiar things that interest children. The effective teacher-child communication affects significant development of social and academic achievement of the child's skills. On the other hand, some research revealed that many teachers lacked understanding of the important teacher-child communication effectively with young children (Ata-Aktürk & Demircan, 2017). Teachers encourage the child to use verbal language which is associated with a basic knowledge and familiar experiences of the child (e.g., family members, peers, toys, objects, food, and/or special events).

3) Choosing what to talk about

Developing social communication skills of young children should begin with objects and events that are around the child's everyday life, especially food, and play. Food is a great idea to start developing a child's communication skills and social interaction skills. For example, during snack time, the teacher could describe the names for fruit (e.g., taste, size, color). Also, children learn to pronounce the names of objects, make requests, ask for help, and share the foods (e.g., turn taking and using appropriate requests). Play is another enjoyment of all children to interact with others. The children learn vocabulary, engage in conversation, and imitate social behavior with peers modeling during play or recess time. For example, the teacher could provide various kinds of play for a child to engage in class activities with other typical peers, such as physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, constructive play, and games with rules. Play is another learning opportunity to develop understanding the social communication and interaction skills within inclusive environments. The advantage of play also promotes the children to learn how to behave, express, manage emotions appropriately, and gain problem-solving skills (The national association for the education of young children, 2009).

Ten common strategies benefit teachers when supporting young children to engage in conversation productively, including: (1) pay attention to and listen to children, (2) speak slowly and distinctly, (3) provide short sentences, (4) encourage two-sided conversations, (5) talk mostly about present, and try to avoid complex grammatical structures of past and future tenses, (6) use a pleasant and calm tone of voice, and avoid a loud voice if unnecessary, (7) pay attention to and use words the children are interested in, (8) keep sentences not too fast, (9) make sentences longer, if the children understand and speak more, and (10) make sentences more complex, if the children understand language at a higher level.

4) Listening

The roles of teachers are as not only observer, but as a listener too. Teachers should be a good listener and pay attention listening to children with great interest. Some children may not develop language and communication quicker than the teachers' expectations level. There are some strategies to support the children performing greater efforts for language and communication development. For example, the teacher may reinforce a child with rewards that reflects his or her interests. Another example, a teacher may demonstrate an alert facial expression, remaining quiet, being patient, and providing equal attention to all children (Cook, Klein, Tessier & Daley, 2004).

Listening to young children is a significant means to assist the children's experiences and their growth of language and communication. First, all young children have the right to be able to express themselves for their needs, and teachers need to be thoughtful about matters that affect them. Secondly, teachers could gain more understanding of an individual child's priorities, interests and concerns by keeping track of the differences when listening. Third, the respectful relationship could be developed by listening closely to children. Forth, teachers allow children an opportunity to share the differences that could help the children understand how they feel about themselves (Dickins & Williams, 2017). Finally, "Listening is not only important for the children who are being listened to, but also for the adults who are listening, whether at home or in an early years setting, at school, at hospital, at a local authority level or in national government" (Dickins & Williams, 2017, p. 3).

5) Developing pragmatic skills

Cook, Klein, Tessier and Daley (2004) noted that "pragmatic skills are the social skills of language" (p. 298). Various kinds of pragmatic skills could promote social language and communication development such as taking turns during conversations, refraining from interference, and understanding the appropriate conversation. Hence, social experiences are required for children development of pragmatic skills, and they can be beneficial learning from teachers and peers modeling in the general classrooms. Cekaite (2012) discussed, "Pragmatic development involves children's acquisition of communicative competences, that is, learning how to use language, to communicate and understand others appropriately and effectively in a widening range of social contexts and activities while assuming increasingly complex social roles" (p. 1). For example, role-playing is another useful strategy in developing pragmatic skills (e.g., using polite forms, establish language and communication context, and initiate conversations).

6) Expanding skills

Language and communication skills could be expanded through adding complex conversations and using more complex vocabularies and sentences. Cortese (October, 2019) provided a meaningful statement, "...language is something kids acquire naturally, so we want to watch what they're interested in, observe and listen to how they communicate, and help bring them to the next level of language skill..." She also suggested useful strategies to help the children expand their language skills to reach the next level of complexity, and ten strategies are included: imitate, interpret, expanding and recasting, commenting and describing, eliminate negative talk, contingent responses, balance turn taking, label things,

limit “testing”, and labeled praise. Below are examples of each of the ten strategies:

Imitate: Teacher can respond to children that they approve and hear what children say by imitating the children’s sounds, words, and actions. Teacher should also motivate children to learn turn taking by imitating teachers as well.

Interpret: If the child is pointing at the restroom, you can interpret that he/she may want to go the restroom. So, respond with “Restroom!, You want to go restroom?”

Expanding and recasting: If the child said “apple,” teacher can response and expand on that by saying “Yes, a big green apple.” Also, if the child said, “I eat apple,” teacher can recast his/her grammar by saying, “I’m eating an apple.” Teacher uses word stress and intonation to help the child pay attention and keep focus on the conversation.

Commenting and describing: Teacher describes what the child is doing instead of telling the child what to do. This strategy can guide the child to organize their thoughts, learn new vocabulary, and understand grammar context. For example, “You are washing your hands carefully. It will help to prevent dirty germs.” Maybe the child was washing their hands too quickly, but helping the child understand the purpose of washing hands the teacher has given the child knowledge.

Eliminate negative talk: The teacher should avoid negative talk with the child when he or she is attempting to communicate. For example, “apples are not pink” or “that is not where the dog goes.” It is significant importance for teacher to use positive phrasing that can encourage the child to become more confidence and independence in communication.

Contingent responses: The teacher should respond immediately (e.g., words and body response) while the child is making the effort to communicate. This strategy would help the child gain better understanding how significant communication is necessary. The teacher would have an opportunity to model more refined language skills.

Balance turn taking: The teacher provides opportunities for the child to practice communication skills by making sure everyone gets his/her turn. Turns can be either talking or interacting to communicate. For example, “the child is handing you apple, and points at your mouth.” Maybe the child wants his/her teacher eat apple too. The teacher can say, “Do you want me to eat this apple?” and point at their mouth. Then the teacher waits for the child to hand them the apple.

Label things: Teachers can help children learn languages by labeling various item with the vocabulary around the classroom, even though some children are not ready to use or read words yet.

Limit “testing”: Teachers should avoid testing and keep asking the children; if they

already know that the children knows the words and sounds. For example, “What sound does a dog make?” Instead the teacher can say, “Do you have a dog at your house?” “If you have a dog, what’s your dog name?” Asking different questions can help the children expand their language and communication skills.

Labeled praise: Even though, the child is not ready for using the word yet, the teacher can reinforce the child to learn a good behavior by saying “great job cleaning after playing with those toys.” Instead of just saying “great job,” add a label on that praise. For the child who can use some words, the teacher can say, “good job saying more apple juice please.” This strategy can encourage the children to attempt saying new words, and build positive feelings around communicative interactions.

No matter if a child is with or without disabilities, they deserve to use their own voice. This article is divided into two main areas to support developing language and communication skills by: (1) providing effective communication techniques such as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and Milieu Teaching, and (2) creating the process of facilitated communication. Various communication techniques and facilitated communication can be implemented in the general classrooms or inclusion by providing individual needs. Furthermore, the main roles of teachers can be being a good listener and supporter to help children become more independent to grow and learn through developing their language and communication within a natural environment. Finally, a significant value is to grant the key of inclusion to remain a right, thus gaining social communication opportunities with respect for all children.

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