

The Teacher Para Learning Connection

State Support Team 9

Issue 3

March 2014

This newsletter is a means of connecting teachers and paraprofessionals as they learn new ideas together that support the students they serve. This newsletter will be published four times a year.

In this issue, we will discuss collaboration practices that support teacher-para teams. We start with an analogy of the **Ice Dance Partners** as a way to portray teams.



Ice Dance Partners

During the Winter Olympics the ice dancing performance displayed partners who were in step with each other, moving rhythmically across the ice. Communication behind the scenes occurred as they practiced, discussed ‘how to’ perform specific lifts, built respect for each other’s competencies, and shared feedback to build their team. One dance partner was the leader while one followed though seemingly equal as they danced; each had specific roles and skills that supported the team. One led and one followed with no confusion about their relationship or contributions to the team.

As teacher-para teams, communication often

happens ‘behind the scenes’. The collection of data by the para is given to the teacher to analyze and revise intervention plans. The lesson planning, goal setting, and the decisions about accommodations or modifications are created by the teacher and shared with the paras to support student progress. Not seen by educators or parents, we understand that these aspects of communication support the effective teacher-para team as they move through their daily steps to prepare the augmentative communication device with vocabulary words for a lesson, re-teach good hygiene skills, or reduce the amount of problems on a worksheet. Communication is a hidden key to team success.

Teacher – Paraprofessional Communication

In Issue 1 (October 2013) we defined the roles of the paraprofessional and in Issue 2, we discussed effective collaboration factors. In this issue, we discuss communication as a key to your success as teacher-para teams. The Council for Exceptional Children defined standards for professional ethical principles which included communication. Teachers are “Practicing collegially with others who are providing services to individuals with exceptionalities”(2010) and paras “Communicate effectively with stakeholders as determined by the instructional team” (2011). Refer to the Council for Exceptional Children website at www.cec.sped.org.

We often think of communication being verbal, but non-verbal communication occurs continuously. For a child, we watch as they rub their eyes possibly indicating tiredness or their inability to focus on a worksheet or the video clip displayed at a distance. Active listening and learning as we non-verbally interact with one another involves sitting up, leaning forward, asking questions or acting interested, nodding, and taking notes or notice of the message (acronym SLANT) (Minnesota Department of Education, 2007). We teach our students this technique and use these actions ourselves as we communicate with others.

Communication also includes verbal messages received through active listening and given through statements or

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asking questions. Active listening means listening to the meaning and understanding the message, which goes beyond hearing the words. Active listening focuses our attention on the speaker, using gestures or brief verbal comments to indicate our attention, and comments on the message such as summarizing the speaker's statements or asking questions. Perhaps we are conveying information such as directions for a task, information about a student's needs, or when to transition a student. In the supervisory role, delegating tasks from a teacher to a para occurs with a level of specificity for the task to ensure it is completed as intended. Messages may be a means of requesting assistance, such as "I am not sure how to lift Caroline, please show me the proper procedure." Not only is this a means of communication but serves to professionally ensure safety for the student. Other questions may include "How much contact should I have with parents?" "What student records are available to me?" or "What are the triggers I need to be aware of for this student?"

Another means of communication from the teacher to the para is sharing feedback that positively commends performance or supports improvement. Example: "You started the re-teaching process by stating the goal/plan, reviewed the math facts the students knew to promote their success and belief in their skills. Then you proceeded with one task at a time to re-teach the problems that I taught in my lesson. At the end of the lesson, please remember to give the students praise for their efforts and tell them what will happen next in their schedule. This statement of transition supports them."

Written communication may include a copy of a student profile giving information about a child's strengths, needs, preferences, and interests; goals; accommodations and modifications to use in the classroom; and services such as occupational therapy every Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. The specific types of data to be collected and the forms to collect the data are another means of written communication. Frequency counts (tally marks), interval schedules or duration schedules along with objective anecdotal records document student progress on goals. After paras collect this data, their teammate (teacher) can analyze, define the progress and determine the next steps for intervention support.

Daily schedules and plans for student work, medication plans, behavior plans that include specific statements to calm a student and triggers may serve as written forms of communication. These types of communication often occur 'behind the scenes' yet support the teacher-para teams in their daily roles. Remember that these forms are **confidential** but may become public records during legal procedures. Objective information needs to be written, not personal comments.

When verbally communicating, "I messages" are a powerful communication tool. "I messages" follow a three part pattern of describing the behavior, stating the event that was the consequence of the action, and sharing the feeling that resulted. "Mary, when you took my pencil, (behavior) I had nothing to use for my worksheet (event), and I got upset (feeling)." The U.S. Department of State (n.d.) indicates that the most powerful I messages are positive ones because they provide positive reinforcement. Here's an example, "Karen, I noticed you went a whole week without calling Barbara any names. (behavior) Class is much less stressful now (event) and I am very proud of you! (feeling)."

Communication occurs through multiple interactions throughout the school day. Be mindful of when we share messages, with whom, and how to maintain confidentiality yet ensure teamwork and collaboration.

Minnesota Department of Education. (2007). The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium, Area C,
Modeling for paraprofessionals. Retrieved from <http://ici.umn.edu>.
The U.S. Department of State (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/65957.htm>

Please send feedback, comments or questions for possible inclusion in The Teacher-Para Learning Connections newsletter to Denise Uitto at duitto@uakron.edu.