Communication Supports for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: What Parents Need to Know

TIES Center

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Being able to communicate is an important skill for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Communication does not need to be oral. But it should be sufficient for conveying messages to others.

This Brief describes how families and other members of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams can help students get the supports they need to build their communicative competence in inclusive classrooms.

All students communicate, but some students may need options other than oral speech, or in addition to oral speech. A student who only uses one or two words may benefit from augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Providing modeling to teach the use of an AAC device supports the development of oral speech. As communication partners point to and say the words on the device—their speech slows down allowing the AAC user to process the message more clearly.

A TIES Parent Brief

> *Communicative competence* is defined as the successful use of communication skills between two or more communication partners in which the message sent by the sender is understood by the receiver.

Many people with severe speech or language problems rely on alternative forms of communication, including AAC systems. They may use AAC with existing speech or to replace speech that is difficult to understand.

AAC includes all forms of communication other than oral speech used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas. We all use AAC when we make facial expressions or gestures, use symbols or pictures, or use print. Special aids, such as picture and symbol communication boards and electronic devices, are available to help people express themselves. One goal of AAC for students in educational settings is to provide a method for communication that supports engagement in academics and other school-related activities such as extra-curricular activities and work-study. AAC also supports safety, expressing wants and needs, social interactions, friendships, and the student's sense of self-worth, as well as continued communication through their life after school.

Legal Background for Obtaining Communication Supports

Federal law addresses the obligation of all public schools, including charter schools, to meet the communication needs of students. This was made clear in a document written in 2014 by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice. That document, which contained frequently asked questions (FAQs), is available at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-faqs-effective-communication-201411.pdf.

The information in this section is based on the FAQ document. For links to the FAQ document, as well as to fact sheets in English and Spanish, go to https://www.parentcenterhub.org/effective-communication-for-students-with-disabilities.

Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are relevant to communication for students with significant cognitive disabilities. IDEA requires that schools make available a free appropriate public education (FAPE), consisting of special education and related services, to all eligible children with disabilities (including those with communication needs) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Among other things, the IEP must address the communication needs of eligible children (IDEA regulation §300.324(a)(2)). The Endrew F. Supreme Court case in 2017 strengthened FAPE beyond prior interpretations. The Court emphasized the requirement that "every child should have the chance to meet challenging objectives." It is not possible for students to do so if they do not have the supports they need for effective communication.

ADA's Title II regulations include a requirement for effective communication for individuals with disabilities. According to the FAQs: "Title II regulations require, among other things, that public schools provide students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in all school activities and that public schools ensure, through the provision of auxiliary aids and services, that communication with students with disabilities is as effective as communication with students without disabilities." State Departments of Education are responsible for enforcing the Title II rights of students with disabilities.

The answer to Question 2 in the FAQ provides examples of auxiliary aids and services. It also goes into detail about the obligations of public schools. For Question 10, the FAQ answer explains how IDEA and Title II work together. For example, it states that "if the special education and related services provided under the IDEA are not sufficient to ensure that communication with the student is as effective as communication with other persons, the Title II obligations have not been met." In answer to Question 13, the FAQ states that "the school district also has an affirmative obligation to provide effective communication under Title II, whether or not a parent requests specific auxiliary aids and services under Title II. This obligation is in addition to the requirement that the school district make FAPE available if the student is eligible under the IDEA." The answers to Question 15 and Question 16 of the FAQ describe the process of evaluation and decision making for obtaining communication supports under Title II and how they work with IDEA evaluations and processes.

Resources on Communication Supports in Inclusive Classrooms

The need for communication supports, including AAC, is not a reason for a student to be removed from the general education classroom. In fact, as stated in TIES TIP #4, *Successfully using Communication Practices in the Inclusive Classroom*:

> The inclusive classroom has proven to be the most effective placement for supporting students who are AAC users and have complex communication challenges …. In inclusive classrooms there is an opportunity for everyone (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, peers) to model the use of AAC for a variety of communicative purposes. Peers play an especially important part in the inclusive classroom. Encouraging peers to use AAC provides a wonderful opportunity to develop relationships and increase understanding between classmates.

TIES TIP #4 provides other details for general educators to successfully use communication practices in their classrooms.

In addition, there are other TIES resources

on this topic. Several are listed here, but more are available under Communication Supports in the Topics tab on the TIES Center website (see https://tiescenter.org/topics/communicative-supports/overview):

TIP #1, How Peers Can Support AAC Use by Students with Significant Communication Needs.

TIP #2, Using Collaborative Teams to Support Students with Significant Communication Needs in Inclusive Classrooms.

TIP #3, Getting to Know Students who use AAC, with important strategies, including developing a student profile.

TIP #5, Connecting Core Words, Aided Language Modeling, and Literacy, which describes how to implement these practices in inclusive classrooms.

TIP #17 describes communicative competence in greater detail, with additional information about what this should look like for the student with a disability and classmates.

TIES 101, Communication Supports in the Inclusive Class, a course for educators on evidence-based strategies for supporting AAC users in inclusive classrooms.

The CEEDAR Center supports state personnel preparation systems. It has a resource that may be helpful for teacher trainers: Preparing Teachers to Facilitate Communication Skills in Students with Severe Disabilities.

Parents can support their child's communication at home in several ways during everyday home life. TIES provided a video about this (see https://tiescenter.org/resource/helping-your-child-with-communication-at-home).

A focus on your child's communication skills will help to ensure success during school years. It will also help as your child moves through transition and into post-school life. Key points from this Brief about communicative competence and how to access communication supports and resources are highlighted below.

Key Points

- Students with disabilities, like all students, must have the opportunity to fully participate in our public schools and to meet challenging academic objectives. A critical aspect of participation is effective communication with others. This is referred to as communicative competence.

- IDEA and Title II of ADA address the obligation of all public schools to meet the communication needs of students. The obligation also applies to charter schools.

- There are different processes under these laws. Some of them overlap. The school and district are obligated to implement these laws even without a parent request. However, you will likely have to ask your school or district about their process for implementing Title II and how it works with the IDEA process and evaluations.

- Successful communication practices can be implemented in inclusive classrooms. Approaches for doing this are explained in the TIES Center's communication supports resources. Also available to teacher preparation programs is a CEEDAR Center resource.

This publication/material is available in alternative formats upon request. Direct requests to:

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