



Infusing Language/Communication Instruction into the Preschool Classroom: Extension Theme Learning Based on Finding Nemo

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Since children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can be quite different from one another, it is difficult to write a general article about enhancing communication/language instruction in the preschool classroom that would apply to all children. Instead, this article will take the approach of describing how instruction might be enhanced for several types of children around an interest in the movie, *Finding Nemo*. It is acknowledged that there is more flexibility in a preschool curriculum than in elementary, middle, or high school. This flexibility should be exploited to assist language/communication learning for the child with ASD.

JUSTIN A Nonverbal Child

Justin has no functional speech but uses a few signs and is beginning to learn to use the picture exchange communication system (PECS). One of the most important instructional strategies for him involves broadening his narrow range of interests. By broadening his interests, one is identifying new target items that he may wish to request. As a by-product, one may be identifying new situations for joint attention and reciprocal interaction.

Justin is enthralled with the video *Finding Nemo*. A natural extension might be to get him interested in the classroom aquarium, picture books about fish, and play with windup toys that move like fish in a pan of water. This gives him 3 new things to request- feeding the fish, specific books, and water play. If an adult supports the play, joint attention can be achieved and an interplay begun once he gets any of the requested objects. For example, with water play there are opportunities for vocabulary, concept building, and turn taking. There could also be an opportunity to learn how to use a Big Mac™ single message augmentative communication device for functional communication. Receptive vocabulary might include words like "feed," "aquarium," "wind," "switch," "stop," and "crash" (as a verb). Depending on the child's fine motor skills, the BIG Mack™ could be programmed to request that the adult "windup" the toys or alternately to declare turn taking by saying "My turn."

The key elements are adult preparedness for this teaching opportunity and adult availability for a short time to support language/communication learning.

BRADLEY A Quiet Child with Modest Verbal Abilities

Bradley also has an interest in *Finding Nemo*. He can name all the characters and repeat much of the dialogue. His knowledge of the story line is that "Nemo got lost." It is not certain if he knows what it means to be "lost" so this concept could become the focus of expansion activities. His teacher decides to do some group activities to build upon this concept. First, she deliberately loses some objects that the children can help her find because each is visible to all members of the group. The teacher talks about sometimes losing things when you have a hole in your pocket or your bag. She blindfolds one child and walks him around for all to see while small toys drop from a bag with a hole in it. She asks the boy if he knows where he lost each toy- he doesn't know. An essential idea she is

teaching is that we don't usually know where the lost object is. Sometimes we can guess and other times, we don't have many clues. We have to LOOK for the item. She talks with the children about losing things. The children report things that they have lost and whether they found them.

The teacher incorporates a discussion of feelings as each child reports losing an object and then finding it. The teacher uses a chart with pictured facial expressions for "happy," "sad," "scared," "mad," and "surprised" to provide clues. (She has previously taught these concepts throughout the school term). The teacher provides a clear and simplified synopsis after each child's report to assist Bradley in understanding the connection. Bradley is asked if he ever lost anything. (His mom has been asked in advance so the teacher can cue him if he hesitates to mention something from his life experiences). The next day the teacher brings in the DVD of *Finding Nemo*. She plays the section showing that Nemo's dad is upset when Nemo is gone. With help, they talk about how his dad might feel. They could be helped to discuss the visual or auditory clues that would suggest that he is upset. The teacher could show a small section about Nemo not knowing how to get home and discuss how he feels. She could end the lesson with a small clip showing Nemo being united with his dad and discussing how they felt. She would then summarize about individual emotions and losing things.

The following day she reminds the class about Nemo and his dad via a picture of the two. Then she changes the discussion to talk about how to not get lost in real life. The class creates a list with much assistance to include holding Mom's hand, not wandering away, and asking before going somewhere. She reminds the class of how their mom and dad would feel if any of them got lost. She reminds them that Nemo's dad was worried and Nemo was scared. She reminds them "lost" means you can't find something or somebody. Sometimes it takes a long time and hard work to find it again.

The key strategies in this series of lessons include capitalizing on the interest of the children and drawing upon their background knowledge of the movie. The goals, however, include using the information and motivation to aid comprehension of the movie and to help the children make a relevant connection to their daily lives. If the special education preschool is not conducive to accomplishing these goals within a whole class activity, then the teacher might consider using the activity with a smaller group.

ROBBIE

An Active Child with Modest Language Skills

Robbie also likes *Finding Nemo* and he has memorized some dialogue. He needs to be more active than Bradley so the teacher may need to teach the idea of "lost" in a different way. It will be important to be sure that the children do not think "lost" means just "hiding." The aide whispers to a very cooperative child to leave the room and go with the speech therapist who is waiting outside the classroom door. The child leaves and goes with the therapist to the general office where they talk about the decorations in the office. Meanwhile, the teacher acts surprised and says "Where's X?" Nobody knows. He is lost, so they will go look for him. The teacher helps the class peek into the cafeteria, the library, the speech room, and finally the general office. She repeats the notion of being "lost" many times. When they find the child, she talks about him being lost- not knowing where he was, and how everyone was happy that he was found. If the children didn't get the concept, the activity may need to be repeated the next day and periodically using different children and different "found" locations. The teacher also reads books such as "Where's Spot?" to reinforce the notion of looking for someone. Only when the children really have the concept clear might there be pretend play of being lost and found.

The key elements here were the acknowledgement of different learning needs and the imperative to teach an accurate meaning of the target word.

CURTIS

An Articulate Child

Curtis is very talkative. He also has an interest in *Finding Nemo*. Although he can benefit from activities that aid comprehension of the central theme of the movie, his interests can be fostered differently. For example, if he knows that the characters are different types of fish, his interest might be expanded into looking at books, stickers, and other materials about other types of fish. He could learn about fish by name, color, shape, habitat (salt vs. fresh water), and habits. There might be other children who would share his interest because of the Nemo movie and he would have a natural opportunity for supported interaction with peers. This knowledge might support playing the "Go Fish" card game where one would really ask for fish types. With adult support, this offers opportunities for learning social rules. This interest also supports the opportunity to play pretend fishing for picture cards with paperclips that will adhere to magnets as lures on the fishing pole.

The key elements are adult preparedness, setup of the learning opportunities, and coaching/support with a small group

Conclusion

Although this article is directed by the specific interest of several children with autism spectrum disorders, the same principles can be applied to other theme areas that might be part of a given preschool's curriculum. Communication/language skills can be fostered in many ways that can be embedded into the curriculum. The trick is to offer new learning in a way that is adapted to the individual learner.

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