

Guidelines For Including Students Who Do Not Speak :

Useful Strategies for Supporting Active Participation in School

*“ Not being able to speak is not the same thing
as not having anything to say. ”*

– Rosemary Crossley

A note on communication: All students who do not use speech as a reliable form of communication deserve to have an alternative communication system in place so that they can express thoughts, feelings, ideas, critiques, and requests. This may include the use of sign language, an augmentative communication device, strategies to teach a person to type or point to communicate, and/or the use of eye gaze or blinking to indicate choices. While it is the right of all students to have a communication system, many students go without any way to share their thoughts.

The strategies below are useful in supporting a student who has an effective communication system or a student who does not have a system in place. If a student does not have a system in place it is imperative that the team consult with a speech pathologist that is skilled in implementing augmentative alternative communication systems (AAC) that would meet the need of the individual child.

Keep respect and humanness first

- Never talk about someone as if they were not there. Always acknowledge the person’s presence and make sure that communication that happens around the child is respectful.

Some people may not be able to communicate that they understand what you are saying or that they are listening, assume they are listening and understand what you are talking about.

- Question your stereotypes—How someone looks, walks, or talks does not tell you about how they think and feel.

If a student uses a wheelchair, stutters, flaps their hands, or does not make eye contact this does not mean that they can’t learn high level academics, don’t desire to make friends, and do not want the chance to voice their independence. Work to open up opportunities.

- In conversation, refer to the person in a way that includes them in the conversation. For example, When Ms. Mayfield began to read the book, *Splish Splash* to the class she said, “Maya you are going to love this book, it is all about swimming.”

Maya is a student who does not speak to communicate. When Ms. Mayfield shared in front of the class that Maya will enjoy this book she teaches that Maya has interests and ideas that are similar to her peers. In doing this, Maya did not have to respond or say anything, but her active participation and competence were acknowledged and shared by her teacher’s public acknowledgement.

- Ask permission to share information with others.
Too often students with disabilities do not have any privacy, be sure to not share information on using the restroom, sexuality, health, family, embarrassing situations and/or relationships. Ask first and err on the side of privacy always.

Embrace a strength based attitude

- Embrace an optimistic attitude. Practice saying, “How can this work?”, “How can this child be successful?”
- Work with family members to identify the student’s strengths and design methods to include the student in the general education classroom using those strengths.
- Teach students to identify and use their own strengths
- When the going gets tough write down a list of student’s strengths and strategies to help you spring into action and begin to problem solve (see: www.paulakluth.com).

Please Act my Age >

Age appropriate talk and materials

- Talk in an age appropriate manner, using age appropriate content. Using a sing song voice or a tone similar to that used with a young child should be reserved for babies and toddlers, be sure to check your tone of voice and the content you are talking about.
- Be sure as a teacher to acknowledge the presence of a person with a disability in the same way you would acknowledge other students.
- Let students make mistakes, get in trouble and act out. Be sure they have the opportunity to talk and play with peers without adult interaction.

Learning to talk to someone who does not speak

- While teaching be sure to acknowledge the non-verbal student’s presence often. You should not go an entire lesson without saying, “Sean I bet you’ll like this part. I know you like to ski with your family” or “Megan I see you smiling. I am sure you will like learning about volcanoes.”
- Take every opportunity to teach peers how to talk to people who communicate differently. Talk about current events, age appropriate interests, things you like to do, places to go, events around school, also use their communication strategy to make LOTS of choices throughout the day: choose food to eat, materials to use, where to sit, what to read, what to play, also ask their opinion on topics.

Use communication methods efficiently and often

- If students use a yes / no communication strategy be sure to use this during a lesson. You can do this during a whole group lesson by saying, “Do you all think that $5 \times 5 = 25$?” Or do this in an individual way, “Was Harry a hero in the story?” This will allow the student to use their yes or no strategy and include them in the lesson. If they answer incorrectly then you can say, “Oh I don’t think that is quite right. Does anyone have other ideas?”
- If the student uses an augmentative communication system you need to be sure to have them utilize it throughout the lesson. Make sure the device is ready to go with content related to the lesson so that the student can participate.

Teach peers to support and understand confusing behavior

- Use partners during lesson activities. Model and encourage peers to talk about topics with each other. This can be done in cooperative learning groups or with peer activities such as think, pair, and share or turn and talk. (see: Joyful Learning: Active and collaborative learning in inclusive classrooms by Udvari-Solner and Kluth).
- Be sure to include the student in the academic curriculum in the classroom. Assume learning is possible and ask content related questions.
- Teach peers and others how to interpret potentially confusing behavior and support each other.

Assume benefit from academic learning and look for understanding

- Assume that every student will benefit from learning age appropriate academic curriculum.
- Look for evidence of understanding. This will occur in unique instances and times.
- Support students to show understanding using their strengths.
- Design adaptations and accommodations to support access to academics.