



Saved by the bell! Recess: Another opportunity to teach our learners!

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When you ask most elementary children the favorite part of their day, you are likely to get one of two responses: recess or gym. This is a time where they can play and talk with their friends, get some fresh air, and burn some energy. There are so many social skills that are required in that short period of the day that come naturally for many students and that don't require specific instruction (e.g. asking a friend to play, taking turns, knowing how to use the playground equipment, following the rules of a game, conversational skills, making comments, going along with what a friend would like to do, handling other children talking loudly and rushing past, etc.). For children with autism, this period of the day can represent a significant challenge.

Note: This document does not constitute clinical advice, but rather serves as an example of an effective practice for a particular student. Intervention plans should be based upon assessment, and evidence-based teaching strategies should be carefully selected according to the child's needs, and learning profile.

Several years ago, I was asked to support a school team with an 8 year old girl with autism who was nonverbal, significantly intellectually delayed, and described as withdrawn from her peers. Let's call her "Gabrielle". When I met with the family and the school team, they shared concerns that Gabrielle had few interactions with her peers, and that she engaged in a lot of repetitious and stereotypical behaviour throughout the day. Observing her on the playground, I could see that she walked closely by her educational assistant, or ran around the perimeter of the playground over and over while flapping her hands until the bell rung. Although nonverbal, she was quite adept at making requests using a picture exchange system. In general, she relied on the use of visual supports such as images and gestures for understanding information and making requests.

Defining the Goal

The goal established for Gabrielle based upon observation, assessment, and consultation with a multidisciplinary team was as follows: *At the beginning of each recess, Gabrielle will independently ask a friend to play using a communication strip and engage in the activity with the peer for at least 5 minutes by [date].*

When asked to "play with a friend", Gabrielle was to:

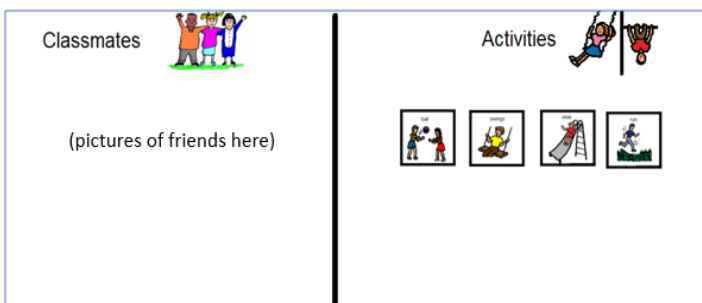
- 1- Go to her visual support
- 2- Select a picture of a friend, and place it on the communication strip
- 3- Select an activity and, place it on the communication strip
- 4- Approach the friend
- 5- Give the card, and point to each picture, (picture of classmate) "do you want to play" (picture of activity).

Preparation

The following process was established to help Gabrielle connect with others and have more variety at recess time, at least for a portion of the recess period.

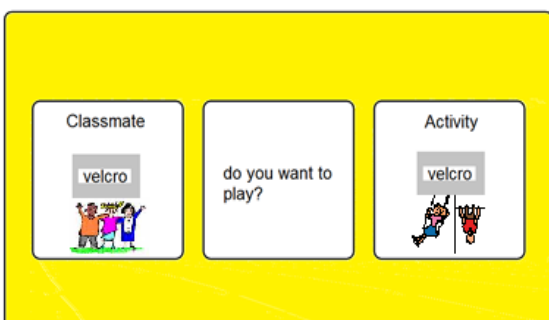
- 1- **Identify preferences** - We observed her at recess time and during indoor free choice time to make a list of her preferred activities. The purpose of the observation was to answer the question: *What does she choose to do when there are no demands?* We noted that Gabrielle liked to run and swing. By understanding her preferences, we could integrate them in our intervention as it would be then more likely for her to engage in an activity with a peer that is already preferred.
- 2- **Observation of other students at recess time** - We identified the activities that children in her class most commonly engaged in at recess that would also be within Gabrielle's ability to learn. We noted that many children her age liked to go down the slide, and play ball.
- 3- **Identify children who would like to be a peer buddy** - There were several children in the class who had demonstrated interest in wanting to play with Gabrielle, but they were unsure how to engage with her because of her challenges in communication skills, and her tendency to withdraw from peers.
- 4- **Teaching specific skills** – As part of her individualized program, Gabrielle had specific objectives to develop her play skills, including going down the slide and playing ball as these were popular activities with her peers. Outside of recess periods, Gabrielle's educational assistant would practice going down the slide and practice catching a ball, throwing a ball, bouncing a ball, etc. Over time, Gabrielle grew to enjoy these activities as she could do them independently, and would receive lots of praise and reinforcement for doing so.
- 5- **Teaching her to associate her peers by name and a picture** – Given that she was nonverbal, we knew that any request to play with peers would involve a visual support. Gabrielle learned her peers' names by associating a picture of a classmate to his or her name, and matching a picture of the student with the actual student.
- 6- **Provide some coaching to peers** – Before implementing the strategy, some coaching and role-playing with the peers was done so they would understand what they could expect for Gabrielle, how to respond when she asked to play, and how they could keep her interested in the activity.
- 7- **Development of visual supports** – A menu was made with the pictures of the classmates who wanted to play with Gabrielle at recess, as well as pictures of the activities that Gabrielle had mastered on the playground. She quickly learned to associate the picture with the activity.

Sample - Menu



On one side of the menu, pictures of classmates who wanted to play with her were placed on the menu with Velcro. On the other side of the menu were the activities that she had mastered and enjoyed doing at recess time.

Sample - Communication Strip



The communication strip was placed under the menu with Velcro, and was made up of three boxes. One box for the picture of the classmate, one box for the question, and a box to represent the activity.

Teaching Strategies

In order to help Gabrielle learn the process of asking a friend to play, the educational assistant physically guided her to do each step, and would fade her assistance and distance gradually until Gabrielle was able to complete the steps independently. The educational assistant was instructed to *not* provide any further verbal instruction to avoid Gabrielle from becoming dependent on her.

Because Gabrielle loved to jump off short structures, she would be shown with a picture that she could engage in her favorite activity after playing with the peer. Initially, she would only need to play for the student for a short period before being able to go jump, and then this lengthened over time on a gradual and random basis (e.g. sometimes she could go jump after playing with a peer for a minute, sometimes, after 90 seconds, sometimes after 2 minutes).

Progress Monitoring

The team was asked to keep track of each step of the process to monitor Gabrielle's progress, and to provide data in order to troubleshoot any step that required additional teaching or support. The educational assistant was taught to use the data collection system accurately and reliably.

Outcome

Gabrielle learned this process as part of her daily routine and became much more fluid in her requests to peers. Other peers who showed interest in playing with her were added to the menu, and additional activities were added as they were mastered. Gabrielle could choose which friend to play with, and the activity.

Some team members questioned: "It's her recess time, shouldn't we just let her be and do what she wants?" While that is a reasonable question, we determined that this time of the day was such a rich opportunity for her to learn the important skill of playing and interacting with peers. Peers loved to cheer her on when she played ball, and went down the slide. Eventually, she would choose to do these activities even without the communication strip.

From the planning period, to the implementation, the intervention required some time, and effort. By breaking the skill down, providing her with many opportunities for guided practice, fading supports, and providing lots of reinforcement, Gabrielle reached the goal.

Whichever skill you decide to teach, key steps are

- 1) define a clear and attainable goal
- 2) break the skill down into smaller steps
- 3) teach the skill
- 4) measure progress
- 5) analyze whether the intervention is effective
- 6) adjust accordingly

About Us

Autism Learning Partnership, a branch of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) in New Brunswick (Canada), is the sole provider of the Provincial Autism Training curriculum for preschool autism agency and educational personnel in New Brunswick. The Autism Learning Partnership provides bilingual, evidence-based, high-quality professional learning and resources to support families, preschool agency personnel and educational personnel in the province, and has a mandate to establish partnerships with organizations nationally and internationally.