Testing Accommodations and Equal Access

by Jean Durgin

Testing accommodations will become critically important to Virginia students with disabilities in the year 2004 when, in order to receive a standard or advanced studies diploma, all students must earn prescribed credits and pass a Standards of Learning (SOL) test for each course. This means the child who is now in 6th grade or younger, will have to pass a test of high school level competencies in order to get a regular diploma.

The IDEA '97 Amendments raise the standards for students by requiring access to the regular education curriculum. State and federal law requires that students with disabilities be given equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs granted to all individuals. For some students, taking the SOL tests in a different way will allow them to demonstrate their degree of learning without unfairly enhancing or compromising their performance.

Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments are intended to measure the achievement of students in the areas of English, Mathematics, History/Social Science and Science at grades 3, 5, 8, and in specific high school courses, and technology at grades 5 and 8.

A decision must be made for each student receiving services or accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The IEP or Section 504 team must specify the student's participation in the SOL Assessments:

- With no accommodations
- With accommodations that maintain standard conditions
- With accommodations which are permissible but do not maintain standard conditions
- Exemption from testing

Each student's parent should be an active participant in making these decisions. Accommodations used in SOL testing are those that the student generally uses during classroom instruction and assessment and must be identified on the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Management Tool. Questions to be considered are:

1. Does the student receive instruction in areas covered by the SOL assessments?
2. Does the student typically receive accommodations during instruction or classroom assessments in the content covered by the test?

If the answer to each question is YES, the next decision is whether a standard or nonstandard accommodation will be provided.

**Standard Accommodations**

Some accommodations allow a student to take the test in a different way without changing what the test is measuring. Examples are:

**Timing/Scheduling:**

- Time of day
- Breaks during test or multiple test sessions
- Order of tests administered

**Setting:**

- Preferential seating
- Small group or individual testing
- Special lighting or adaptive or special furniture
- Test administered in locations with minimal distractions or noise buffers
- Test administered at a hospital or at home
Presentation:

- Braille, large print or larger answer bubbles
- Directions that are read, simplified, interpreted, written or clarified for student
- Test items that are read, audio-taped or interpreted
- Using communication board, magnifying glass
- Amplification equipment (e.g., hearing aid)
- Templates, masks or markers to maintain place

Response:

- Student responds verbally or marks booklet and teacher marks answer sheet
- Abacus
- Arithmetic tables (if subtest allows a calculator)
- Brailler or Braille answer sheet
- Pencil grip or large diameter pencil
- Word processor, typewriter
- Augmentative communication device
- Spell check, spelling dictionary

**Nonstandard Accommodations**

Accommodations which are permissible but do not maintain standard conditions are those which significantly change what a test is measuring. Scores resulting from a nonstandard accommodation must be so identified. Examples are:

Presentation:
reading test items or using audiocassette version or interpreting (signing, cued speech) test items on reading/literature or research test

Response:

- dictation to a scribe (writing test)
- Use of calculator or mathematics tables on mathematics tests in which calculators are not routinely supplied to all students

**Exemptions from Testing**

Exemption from any SOL assessment should be considered only for students whose instructional program will not include the SOL's on which the test is based. The IDEA '97 Amendments envision students with disabilities having greater access to regular education instruction, which could lead to more special education students receiving regular diplomas. If a parent or student requests exemption from SOL assessments, the IEP or 504 team will consider the request and be certain that all parties understand the ramifications of the exemption.

For a complete explanation of guidelines for participation in the SOL assessments, request a copy of Supts. Memo No. 162 dated October 17, 1997 from your local school or the Virginia Dept. of Education, P.O. Box 2120, Richmond, VA 23218-2120.

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Focus on Early Childhood

Critical Windows of Opportunity for Learning

The brain research of the past two decades has provided solid scientific evidence of the neuroplasticity (the remarkable capacity to change and adapt to environmental conditions) of the human brain. The neurological research has shown that the brain is not a static, fixed entity from birth and that there are few preset limits to an individual's learning potential. Through the use of sophisticated brain imaging techniques, scientists have been able to document the energy levels in different areas of the developing brain (the developing brain is nearly twice as active as the brain of an adult). The results of this research has led to the notion of critical windows or periods for brain development (when synapse density and metabolic activity in specific parts of the brain are very high) in which the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning.

The theory of critical windows for learning is best illustrated by a Nobel prize winning study by David Hubel and Torsten Wiesel. In this study, Hubel and Weisel showed that sewing one eye shut on a healthy kitten resulted in permanent vision loss in the animal. The study concluded that the lack of visual stimulation during the critical period for vision development prevented the formation of the necessary neurological connections between the eye and the visual cortex of the kitten's brain. Once the critical window for vision development was closed, it was impossible to establish the neurological connections for vision (Markezich, 1997).

The idea of critical windows for learning has important implications for educators, parents and child care providers. It is now well documented that appropriate environmental stimuli is crucial for the brain to develop to its fullest potential. Timing the presentation of that stimuli is also critical. Several of the critical windows of opportunity are discussed below.

Vision skills have a window of opportunity from birth to 6 months of age. The permanent neural connections are formed by visual stimuli. If the developing child was deprived of light and a visually stimulating environment during this window, sight would not develop.

The critical window for the development of speech and language skills is birth to 3 years with the first two years being the most important. The vocabulary of an adult is determined to a great extent by the speech they heard during their first three years of life. The brain concentrates on the phonemes that make up syllables and words in the child's native language and builds connections that allow us to recognize those sounds and attach meaning to them as words. If the child is not exposed to language during this time, either due to a hearing impairment or lack of adequate auditory stimuli, speech will not develop properly.

The critical period of development for emotional skills occurs from birth to 18 months of age. During this time, a child's genetic heritage interacts with the environment to influence personality traits. A nurturing environment can help to build connections that foster emotional stability. In contrast, negative experiences, such as neglect or abuse, can result in a child who is anxious, fearful and unable to form healthy attachments to others.

Math and logic skills have a critical window of opportunity from age 1 to age 4. Exposure to quantitative concepts such as few and many, heavy and light, little and big, and thin and thick help to develop critical thinking skills in the developing brain. Sorting tasks, counting games and music also enhance the development of math and logic skills.

These critical periods of brain development illustrate the importance of a stimulating, enriched environment and age appropriate activities for the developing child. When critical windows of opportunity for learning are missed, it doesn't mean that a child will never be able to learn a specific skill. It just means that it will take more effort to learn that particular skill.

Early childhood educators need to be aware of these critical periods for learning. Early experiences have decisive and long lasting effects on the developing child. The results of this new research provide evidence that young children who are exposed to positive, stimulating environments can overcome a wide range of developmental problems and actually increase their lifelong learning potentials.

Reference
Assistive Technology-Inclusion

First Steps in Overcoming the Obstacles of Assistive Technology for Communication in the Classroom

Assistive technology for communication in regular classroom settings challenges the user of AAC technology as well as his/her school personnel "to be ready to meet a fast-paced nonredundant language environment very different from past experiences in 'typical' special education classrooms that often presented routine, predictable activity-based vocabulary demands." (McCloskey, 1995). Successful planning and implementation in an inclusive classroom is a team effort with the classroom teacher and the assistive technology team (parents, speech-language pathologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, vision specialist, school computer technology specialist) along with other support personnel involved with the student.

In order to ensure that the student has the communication tools needed in the regular classroom, several factors must be considered (Sturm 1989): 1) Assess the communication style and communication opportunities within the classroom to develop the vocabulary the child will need to participate, by considering the following types of questions: Does the child know the routine in the classroom?, Is the routine conventional or idiosyncratic?, How are transitions throughout the day handled?, What are the number and types of events within the classroom? 2) Assess the teacher’s and aide’s instructional language patterns, e.g., What types of questions are asked?, What types of directions are given?, What amount of processing and/or response time is provided?, Are opportunities for participation presented in ways that allow the student to prepare responses without causing the group to wait? 3) What are the vocabulary demands required of the student with respect to the curriculum (McCloskey, 1995): i.e., asking simple YES/NO questions, WH-questions which increase the vocabulary demand, and open-ended discussion questions with vocabulary demands high and a need by the student to generate language structure quickly and efficiently.

For students not "on grade level", the following are key points for their inclusion (McCloskey 1997): 1) Provide several opportunities throughout the day to experience successful communication interaction. 2) Include repetition of brief episodes of communication-focused interaction integrated into the daily routine. 3) Involve peer models in classroom activities, which benefits both students with and without disabilities.

Public schools are meeting the challenges of mainstreaming by partnering with rehabilitation facilities and special education programs (Scalise, 1996). Special education teachers are a valuable resource for the inclusive classroom teacher. Assistive technology resource centers such as the T-TACs statewide services to school personnel and a continuum of professional workshops and conferences may provide the starting points.

The following are suggestions from two mainstreamed high school AAC users, Kaye and Phillip, who developed their own ideas on successful inclusion: (Van Tatenhove, 1995):

**Ten Simple Suggestions: After you Find Out You Are Getting a Student into Your Class Who Communicates Using Assistive Technology**

1. Don't panic. Take a deep breath and relax.
2. Stand in front of your mirror and say "I am a great teacher." Say it 10 times and mean it. Remember, I was probably assigned to your class because you are a good teacher.
3. Take a week to get to know me before you plan for me.
   - Look for the ways I am like your other students.
   - Look for the ways that I am unique from your other students.
   - Talk to my past teachers.
   - Be grateful that I probably won't talk back or out of turn.
4. Write down everything that you think is going to be a problem, from medical worries to toileting to seizures to question-asking to whatever.
5. Bring your issues and concerns to the team for creative problem-solving. Be honest and lay your concerns on the table.
6. Request any special training that you believe you need. If you don’t ask for it, you won’t get it. What is the best way for you to get that training? (In a group, in writing, 1:1 with an AAC support team member, trial and error?)
7. Ask the AAC support team members to define their roles and resources. How do they think they can and will support you? How accessible are they?
8. Make a wish list of the equipment and technical support you think you need to better serve me. You might want to ask me what I need.
9. Give yourself some "breaking in" time. Don’t expect to be comfortable or have all the answers right away. Ask how I can gradually be made more and more independent in your class? After a couple of months, rethink how you are doing things.
10. Know who to call when you have trouble. Get all the phone numbers of important people and resources. Call them when you need them.

References


Association Special Interest Divisions, Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 4, 4-6.


Focus on Severe Disabilities

Don't You Understand What I Am Saying? (Functional Communication Training)

Behaviors exhibited by students with severe disabilities, such as aggression, can be confusing and often misunderstood. However, there is more often than not a reason for such behaviors that a functional behavioral assessment can help to elicit. Frequently, behaviors of non-verbal students are for the purpose of communication. And, in reality, these behaviors are effective because the students usually get what they want (or else they would not continue to use them). Sadly enough, it may be true that no one "listens" unless the person uses inappropriate behavior (Mirenda, in press).

How can educators use the link between behavior and communication to change behavior without a burden of added work and time? As a team, we can define the purpose of the behavior, determine a more appropriate means of communication, and begin instruction in a relatively short time. One commercially available and easy-to-use resource is the Motivational Assessment Scale (Durand & Crimmins, 1992).

The first step in changing behavior is identifying the specific behavior to be changed. For example, "Karen bites the staff" is more specific than "Karen is aggressive to the staff". Identifying the specific target behavior helps the team know exactly what behavior to monitor.

After determining the target behavior, a team must gather more information in order to determine the child’s intent or function of the behavior. For example, after interviewing the staff and family, the teacher identifies that Karen’s biting happens with only the educational staff after ten minutes of group work. In this instance, the function of the biting behavior may be to escape group work, possible because she has a difficult time working past ten minutes.

After hypothesizing about the intent of the student’s behavior, we can then determine the intervention. This intervention...
will be an alternative way to communicate what the aggressive act of biting has communicated. For example, if Karen’s communicative intent is to escape group work after ten minutes, then the communication message she needs to learn is “stop”.

The intervention plan would create a way for Karen to say or indicate "stop" or similar other statement that will achieve the desired outcome. When determining the new message, it is important to keep in mind that the message should be as easily communicated as the undesired behavior. If it is easier for Karen to bite then it is to reach for a switch, than it is more likely that Karen will continue to bite to communicate "Stop". The message should also be staff friendly. In other words, the statement should be easily interpreted and responded to by the staff. It should also be easily obtainable. For example, "can I sit beside you" will more likely be implemented than "Can I play". Why? Because in the realm of a classroom, it is easier to place a child beside you than it is to stop what you are doing and play with a child each time he may want to play (Mirenda, in press). Finally, the student’s motivation to communicate (Drasgow, et. al., 1996) and the staff’s willingness to implement the plan is vitally important (Meyer & Evans, 1995). If the staff and student are not motivated and the staff do not respond to the alternate communication planned, then the intervention will not be successful.

Implementing the intervention into the daily classroom routine is the most challenging step of the process. However, the steps are already familiar to special educators. Techniques such as massed trials, prompting, overcorrection, reinforcement, or extinction are second nature to teachers of students with severe disabilities. The use of a combination of techniques is recommended for optimal learning (Scotti, et. al., 1996). Also, implementation of the intervention is recommended in a naturalistic setting to increase generalization and learning.

Changing a student's behavior by introducing functional communication is only one step in making a permanent change in the life of a student with severe disabilities. Using a complete package of positive behavioral support that includes a change in the quality of life for a person with disabilities is current best practice.

If you would like more information on behavioral intervention, functional communication training, or positive behavioral support, please contact the T-TAC ODU office, check the web-site (http://www.ttac.odu.edu), or see the resource list below.

References


T-TAC ODU Resources

Motivational Assessment Scale. (1992) (ABM010)
Transition

The Present Level of Performance of What?

IDEA makes clear the mandate that transition planning be based on present levels of performance (PLP) as well as on a student’s needs, preferences and interests. However, because school professionals typically view the school’s role as an academic one, PLP sections of the IEP are often comprised of reading, math and ability levels.

Since the publications of Will’s (1984) definition of transition, which focused on moving “from school to employment,” the parameters of comprehensive transition planning have broadened considerably beyond the traditional academic realm to include increasingly diverse outcomes. In fact, Halpren’s (1984) widely accepted definition of transition as a change in status from behaving primarily as a student to assuming emergent roles in the community, suggests the need to conduct transition planning in a way that considers all aspects of adult life.

Transition service providers face a significant challenge. This challenge is to identify and assess critical areas of transition service needs including instruction, community experiences, employment and other post-school objectives and generate, from that assessment, the kind of information needed to assist students in making the transition to living, working, and educational environments.

Deciding what to assess and how to collect and use data in the IEP are important steps in establishing meaningful post-school outcomes for all students. The following suggestions for what to assess as well as recommendations of formal and informal assessment techniques may be of interest to the "best practice" transition service provider.

Suggested Transition Assessment Domains:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Communication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Living</td>
<td>Community Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Further Education</td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leisure Education</td>
<td>Interpersonal Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health</td>
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A Sampling of Available Assessment Procedures:

- Learning style inventories
- Personal future planning activities
- Structured interviews with students
- Structured interviews with parents, guardians, advocates and peers
- Rating scales of employability, independent living and social skills
- Structured situational assessments in home, community and work settings
- Standardized transition knowledge and skill inventories

As a way to manage all this information, teams should consider developing an Individualized Transition Portfolio. A transition portfolio may provide an effective means of summarizing ongoing assessment information about a student’s needs, preferences, and interests, and the present levels of performance he or she demonstrates at critical planning stages. In addition, this individualized portfolio might serve as a vehicle for communicating with students and provide a starting point for planning and developing IEPs. Schools may also find it a helpful compliance tool when documenting efforts to "take[ing] into account the student’s preferences and interests . . . (IDEA)

It is essential to view assessment as a critical component of the transition planning process and as an integral part of
the ongoing assessment effort for all students (Sitlington, 1996). For further information on transition assessment
techniques, you may contact our Region 2 and 3 T-TAC Transition Specialist, Tracy English at the T/ TAC William &
Mary office, (757) 221-1708.

References

Development for Exceptional Individuals, 17, 115-124.

Washington, DC: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

Clark, G., Patton, J., (1997). Transition Planning Inventory. Pro-ED, Austin, TX

Sitlington, P., Newbert, D., Begun, W., Lombard, R., Leconte, P., Assess for Success: Handbook on Transition

Library Items for Loan 1998

The following items are available for loan from the TTAC ODU Office

Augmentative/Alternative Communication

Burkhart, L. J. (1993). Total augmentative communication in the early childhood classroom. AA0758X-D
For teachers, parents, and therapists who are involved with children with limited expressive and/or receptive language
abilities. Some topics include: Sign language, instructional materials and light pointers, and voice output machines.

overlays). AA0004-D
150 displays with 8 symbols each to fit: TouchTalker, AlphaTalker, Ke:nx on Board, Message Mate 20, Mini Message
Mate, Key Largo, Cheap Talk 8, KigiVox, IntroTalker, Macaw, Light Talker, and Message Mate 40.

overlays). AA0005-D
155 displays with 9 symbols each to fit: Super Wolf, Hawk, Say-It-Simply Plus, Mega Wolf, Black Hawk, and PowerPad.

overlays). AA0006-D
87 displays with 32 symbols for: Touch-Talker, AlphaTalker, Ke:nx on Board, Message Mate 20, Mini Message Mate,
Key Largo, Cheap Talk 8, DigiVox, IntroTalker, Macaw, Light Talker, Message Mate 40, and IntelliKeys.

overlays). AA0007-D
87 displays with 36 symbols each to fit: Super Wolf, Hawk, Say-It-Simply Plus, Mega Wolf, Black Hawk, and PowerPad.

Elder, P. S., & Goossens', C. (1996). Engineering training environments for interactive, augmentative communi-
cation. AA0003-D
Clear steps describe a systematic approach to the integration of augmentative communication in domestic living, and
vocational training.

Goossens', C. & Craig, S. Augmentative communication assessment resource manual. AA0706-D
Contains guidelines for the assessment phase. Topics include: Obtaining background information, determining if the
person is a candidate for aided vs. unaided technique, factors in deciding when to recommend scanning vs. direct
selection.
Goossens’, C. & Craig, S. *Augmentative communication intervention resource manual*. AA0707
Provides information on: Early communication skills, making the transition from objects to pictures, early intervention with electronics, selecting vocabulary to be placed on communication boards, and designing a communication board display.

Communication is absolutely crucial to optimal development in several domains. Aided Augmentative and/or Alternative Communication (AAC) systems are frequently prescribed to mediate communication for non-speaking children.

Organizes all of the Mayer-Johnson picture symbols from Books I, II, and III.

**Audio/Visuais**

*Learning about learning*. 1994. AVO227-D
New notions of what makes learning happen in people's minds, including: Why student's prior knowledge of a subject affects learning; how they create knowledge as they go along? (21 min.)

*Children with special needs: Cognitive dev.*, ½", AVO056D
Milestones and activities parents can do to foster their child's development are discussed with Dr. T. Brazelton. (30 min.)

*Children with special needs: Emotional dev.*, ½", AVO055D
Milestones and activities parents can do to foster their child's development are discussed with Dr. S. Greenspan. (30 min.)

*Children with special needs: Language dev.*, ½", AVO054D
Dr. Priscilla Bollard, SLP, discusses milestones and activities parents can do to foster their child's development. (30 min.)

*Children with special needs: Motor dev.*, ½", AVO071D
Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, Francine Stern, PT, and Eunice Kennedy Shriver discuss milestones and activities parents can do to foster their child's development. (30 min.)

**Computer Software**

An incredibly flexible and powerful communication display maker. It is a graphics database with over 3,000 Picture Communication Symbols in clip art form. The program allows you to: 1) make a professional looking communication display in minutes, 2) quickly find pictures and paste them into your display with a mouse click, and 3) make the pictures any size and with any spacing.

Boardmaker includes: 1) assorted premade blank grids for making communication boards or overlays, and 2) a manual and video showing you how to use the Boardmaker to set up communication boards.