

**Communication
Readiness
Program
2017**

ABILITY



Down Syndrome Connection
of the Bay Area

The Down Syndrome Connection of the Bay Area (DSCBA) is pleased to have just wrapped up our fifth year of providing the Communication Readiness Program (CRP). Over the years we continue to adapt and hone the program to best fit the needs of our young children with Down syndrome and dual diagnoses. This year, in addition to participants with Down syndrome, we welcomed students with co-occurring conditions, including profound hearing loss, vision impairments, and autism. Our staff and volunteers worked to meet the individual needs of these and all of our 16 participating children. As is always the case, we learn as much as the children and their parents and educators.

Program Overview and Activities

CRP provides preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade-aged children, their parents, and their teachers with the necessary preparation, tools, and training to become ready for the coming school year from a communication, literacy, and socialization standpoint. This summer, the six-week CRP included Monday through Thursday class for a total of 16 children in two rented kindergarten classes at John Baldwin Elementary in Danville. The children were divided by age group: the "Seedlings" were ages 4-6 and the "Sprouts" were ages 5-7, divided primarily by the class grade each student would be attending in the fall. We maintained a 1:1 ratio of adults to children in both classrooms.

Classroom activities incorporated school readiness and communication at their core, and included use of low- to high-tech Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) devices, reading, writing, art, music, obstacle courses, following instructions, speech and occupational therapy, snack time, and speech and language assessments.



"Naya benefitted from the program academically and socially. She was able to learn how to interact and speak with peers and staff appropriately, learned to follow classroom routines, and was a sponge for the curriculum."

Assessments

DSCBA conducted pre- and post-program testing of each child using two new assessments: the Communication Matrix and Learning to Learn Behaviors Tool. The Communication Matrix measures all possible communicative behaviors in multi-modal communicators and accommodates any type of communicative behavior, including augmentative and alternative forms of communication, pre-symbolic communication, and typical forms of communication such as speech and writing. The measure covers seven levels of communication occurring during the earliest stages of communication seen in typically developing individuals.

The Learning to Learn Behaviors tool was used to assess each participant at the beginning and end of CRP this summer. This tool looks at academic readiness skills, which include joint attention and social referencing, imitation, purposeful play with toys, social play with peers, functional communication, self-regulation, and problem solving. These behaviors are foundational skills that prepare young children for learning and developing in all environments.

Outcomes

Participants in this year's CRP used a variety of communication modes,



including use of AAC, speech, gestures, and facial expressions. All participants made gains in academic readiness skills as documented by the Learning to Learn assessments, as well as through staff observation and feedback obtained from parents. For the majority of the children, the most dramatic improvement was seen in joint attention and self-regulation. Improvements in joint attention were observed by increased back-and-forth interactions and communication between students and their peers and teachers.

Dancing proved to be a key vehicle for facilitating joint attention between students. Everyday, the Sprouts would have a "dance party." Over the six-week program we watched as students approached one another to hold hands, dance, and laugh together. Self-regulation skills were taught to help students acknowledge when they were becoming frustrated and choose what tools they needed to refocus and regulate.

One example of a success story with self-regulation is

Continued over

Continued from reverse

Cole. When he came to CRP, he had difficulty sitting at the table during activities. It was clear he needed sensory input such as running breaks, jumping, etc. to feel ready to learn. The team put together sensory options for him that he was able to choose on the iPad. It became a routine for Cole to choose an activity prior to and during work time if needed. By the end of CRP, Cole was able to sit at the station tables for the duration of activities after engaging in his sensory breaks.

DSCBA continues to meet with the educational teams of each child in the fall, helping them understand the resource binder and recommendations that program staff prepare for each child's team. We are also completing a quantitative analysis of CRP based on 2016 data, with results anticipated by the end of 2017.

Graduate Student Interns

We welcomed five speech pathology master's students this year from California State East Bay's Communication Sciences program. CRP is becoming a model program for graduate students in speech pathology to get critical hands-on learning, and some of our past SLP grads have gone on to serve some of our past students as they attend Bay Area schools.

The use of SLP graduate students has become a key component of CRP. "We are utilizing them more and recognizing where they fit in," adds DSCBA Director of Programs Marianne Iversen. "They gain so much AAC experience and hands-on experience and responsibility." SLP grads helped run stations and assist the participants, helping us maintain the one-to-one adult to child ratio that helps make the program so impactful for each child.

"My child improved in verbal language abilities; he was able to utter two-word phrases and even short sentences..."



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