BRIEF OR NEW

A Personalized Communication Wallet

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Adapting activities and equipment so that they are age appropriate for clients is a challenge. In school systems and day training centers, as non-verbal students with significant cognitive limitations become older, their methods of communication must be adapted into appropriate and acceptable modes. This was the case with three male adolescent students.

One student, who was autistic and whose IQ was within the 20–35 range, had a communication key ring made up of Mayer-Johnson picture symbols (similar to stick figures in action) attached to his pants by a slinky cord. He sometimes used the key ring as a stimulatory toy, rather than a communication device, by twirling it. In addition, he often left the key ring hanging from his pants, which resulted in its becoming dirty and mutilated.

Two students with mental disabilities whose IQs were in the 35–55 range (one with right hemiplegia) used gestures, pointing, grabbing, and, at times, other maladaptive behavior to communicate their basic needs and wants, such as pulling their pants down in public to indicate a need to urinate.

Through occupational therapy assessment and intervention, it was determined that a personalized communication wallet could be designed to address these maladaptive behaviors. The design of the wallet required consideration of limitations in vision (one student was registered with the Commission of the Blind), fine and gross motor skills necessary for manipulation of the wallet, and social skills. The wallet became a concrete personalized communication tool that allowed for clearer communication in school and in community settings, such as fast food restaurants and museums.

Materials and Fabrication

The materials used in making the personalized communication wallets are inexpensive and easily obtainable. They consisted of a two-fold wallet made of durable nylon fabric from which the self-gripping fastener was removed to provide easier access for users with limitations in dexterity and manipulation. (A one-fold wallet could also be adapted for use.) Photographs were taken of the three students performing key activities of daily living, such as eating, working, and playing games; these photographs personalized the communication wallets so each student could readily identify with his own. A specific word for the activity was written next to the picture, so that the receiver of the message could immediately understand what was being communicated (see Figure 1). To assure durability, the photographs were laminated in heavy plastic. The student’s poor manipulative skills, which caused excessive and rough turning, required this adaptation. The number and size of photographs used in a wallet depended solely on the cognitive abilities of the person. A hole was punched in the wallet and photographs, and a key ring was used to securely attach the photographs to the...
wallet (see Figure 2). The students now had an inexpensive, portable, convenient mode of communication that was appropriate for use within the community.

Implementation

An extended training period was required to integrate the use of the wallet into each student’s daily routine. Students learned needed manipulation skills for getting the wallet into and out of pockets and opening and closing the wallet. Cognitive deficits and short attention spans required consistent reinforcement by staff to help the students integrate the picture and verbal word concept into their routine. Once the concept was integrated into their repertoire of behaviors, students communicated their needs more appropriately. For instance, when the students needed to use the toilet, they could take out their wallet, find the photograph of toileting, and show or point to the photo, instead of pulling their pants down.

Gradually, students incorporated the use of their communication wallets into a variety of daily life tasks. Positive feedback from staff and other students reinforced appropriate use of the wallet. This, in turn, led to an increase in appropriate behaviors and classroom participation.

Conclusion

Through the use of personalized photographs and descriptive words for the receiver of the message, the communication wallet described in this paper has enabled nonverbal, cognitively limited students to broaden their interactions and communication within community settings. More appropriate and acceptable behaviors have helped them achieve positive feedback from their environment. It is hoped that their use of the wallet will lead to increased confidence and increased interaction and independence within the community.