

The Power of Positive Interactions and Reinforcement with Children who are Deafblind

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Children who are deafblind need to gain a sense of success and be surrounded by positive experiences to feel empowered and reach milestones in their lives. Even as adults, if we lack confidence in a certain area of our life, we are less likely to venture into that realm. It is much easier to stay where we feel safe than to step out of our comfort zone and try new things. Multiple things have to be in place for us to do anything outside our comfort zone. The same thing applies to individuals with deafblindness. In this article, I will show how to create an environment that allows the space for a child with deafblindness to learn and grow using positive experiences and reinforcement.

Throughout my career in education, I have witnessed the power that comes from building children's self-esteem using positive reinforcement and setting them up for success. When I first entered the classroom as a teacher for deaf/hard of hearing students after teaching general education, I noticed the lack of confidence my students faced on a daily basis. I often heard things like "I'm a loser," "I'm stupid" and "I'm lazy". My goal was to close the gap between where they were currently performing and their current grade level. It appeared to be an uphill battle because anytime I worked with them on reading, writing, math, etc. the tears would start rolling, and they would tell me they couldn't do it and proceed to tell me how stupid they were or that they were losers.

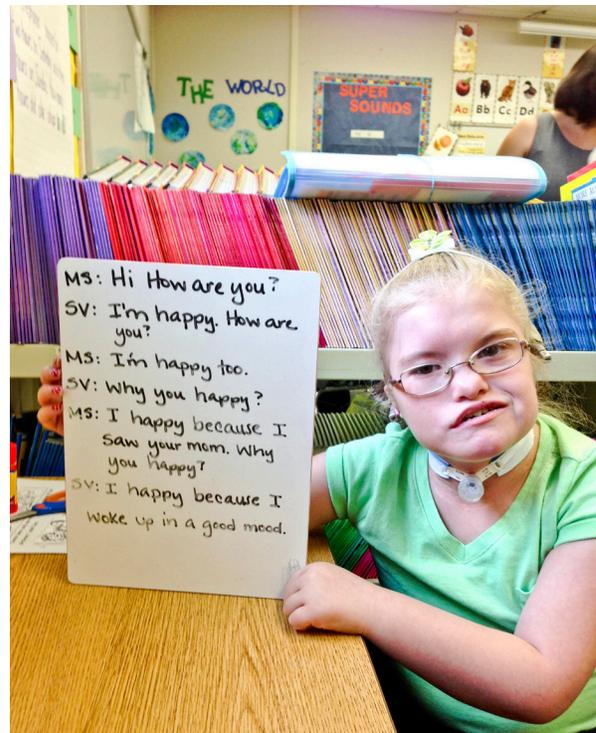
Because they had already resigned themselves to failure in their own minds, I realized that until the students believed differently about themselves, it didn't matter what they were taught. My number one priority became building their self-esteem and changing the way they described themselves.

We started off with positive things they could say to swap for the negative feelings from before. “I am smart” and “I can do it” became our new mantras. Along with the training and changing of the vocabulary we used, I set them up to perform tasks that I knew they would be successful at and praised them as they did it.

Learning became something fun instead of something scary. They knew they could trust me because I was consistent with presenting tasks to them they were successful at, using positive self-talk, and praise with everything we did. When I presented new tasks to them that would challenge their learning they never even realized it because we had already set the stage for them to succeed.

Within six months, these students progressed from being non-readers to having the ability to decode basic words. I was fortunate to have these students for three years of their elementary career in a regional self-contained classroom for children who are deaf/hard of hearing. The goal of the program at that time was to close the academic gap and get them back to inclusive educational placements in their home schools by the time they reached middle school. For that to happen, the students had to catch up on their academic skills and start mainstreaming before they were sent back. (Of course, inclusive placements aren’t dependent on being able to master grade level work, but this was my charge at the time.) By using the method of building their belief in themselves, they were able to do just that. By middle school, this group of students had become part of inclusive programs back at their home schools and no longer had to take what could be a two-hour bus ride to a regional program every day.

After my time as a classroom teacher, I then became an itinerant teacher and served multiple districts with students who are deaf/hard of hearing and part of full inclusion. The same principle of creating a positive environment to build self-esteem also applied to students I was working with in my new position. I had one girl that I worked with on communication weekly. She has CHARGE syndrome, and when I first met her she was not able to effectively communicate. She did use sign language, but she would only sign quickly and in front of her stomach where no one else could see what she was signing. This was another example of a student who did not have the confidence to communicate using the language she had learned. Instead, she resorted to pointing or waited until someone figured out what it was that she wanted or needed.



Her team and I worked on building her confidence surrounding her main mode of communication. It became an expectation that if she needed or wanted something, she had to sign it instead of pointing. At first, the child was unsure and was resistant to using sign language.

However, with consistency of expectations coupled with positive reinforcement every time she used signs to communicate, she began to feel safer using them. Everyone on her team and at home had to be consistent with our approach and expectations for this to happen. Now, three years later, this student is in middle school and plays in the school band. She no longer hides her hands in front of her stomach when she signs and she will even initiate conversations with those she is most comfortable with.

Three things had to occur in order for this to progression to happen. First, she had to feel safe in her environment. Second, she needed to be guided to use the language with a lot of positive reinforcement. Third, there needed to be consistent expectations with all team members including family. The combination of these three things led to the child gaining confidence in a skill she did not believe she could do. When all these steps are in place, it sets the student up for success and then they will be more willing to step out of their comfort zone to learn the next step.

A child who is deafblind only experiences the world as far as they can hear, see, and touch. With limited vision and hearing, the size of their world can also seem pretty limited unless we act together with them to expand it. One thing we can do is create an environment that allows the space for them to learn and grow by using positive experiences and reinforcement. Listed below are the steps that should be taken to do so.

1. Believe in their Abilities: The first step is for both us and the child to believe they can learn. Do not limit what we think they can learn based on preconceived notions.

2. Create a Safe Environment: The child must then feel safe in his or her environment. This can be done by building a relationship with the student and gaining his or her trust. It is important not to exhibit frustration or negative feelings while you are interacting because children will pick up on these emotions.

3. Consistent Communication and Environment: There needs to be consistency in students' environments with the people who are interacting with them, and the students need to be able to anticipate what is going to happen or come next in their day. This can be done by incorporating touch cues, name cues or name signs, and object or signed communication (depending on what the individual child needs) into their daily routines.

4. Time for Processing and Transitions: Children need to do things at their own pace. Most children who are deafblind need extra time for processing what is happening in their environments. There will need to be a beginning and an end to each activity; along with allowing time during transitions for them to process the next task. Transition time should be coupled with some sort of schedule that lets them know what the next task will be.

5. Skills Practice and Reinforcement: The child is now ready to learn and receive new input. Now that the child is ready to learn they need to feel successful at their current skill level. This can be done by learning what the child can do and creating a platform for them to perform

the skill. During the practice of the skill and immediately following there needs to be positive reinforcement. This can be done in numerous ways depending on the individual child. Excitement and praise usually work well, along with learning what makes the child happy. If you don't know yet what makes the child happy I would recommend asking family members because they know their children better than anyone else.

6. Build on the Skills: Once the child feels successful and is in a state of learning (not agitated, crying or sleeping) you can start introducing the next level of the same skill they were successful at and build on their prior experiences. Some examples are:

Example 1: If the child has mastered matching identical objects and has almost mastered learning how to match similar objects, the next step could be washing and sorting forks and spoons of various sizes used at snack and lunchtime and putting them in the appropriate containers. Not only does this build on their previous skill set, but it also gives them functional skills that will lead to independence.

Example 2: The child learned how to walk from point A to point B with guidance. The next step would be to let the child lead you to the destination they have learned. This can be done in stages (i.e., the first stage would be they walk outside the classroom door and give them time to determine which direction they start out—left, right, or straight).

7. Keep it Up: Continue creating a space of positive experiences and building on skills using positive reinforcement and consistent expectations and communication.

By continuing to create this space of positive experiences, it makes learning easier for the student, and they don't realize they are being asked to do a task outside their comfort zone because it happened gradually at his or her pace. Setting children with deafblindness up for success empowers them because they will believe in themselves.

Defy Limitations

During this past year's CHARGE Syndrome conference, we were all reminded about expanding your horizons and not settling when it comes to potential. A speaker with CHARGE syndrome said: ***“Don't tell me the sky is the limit when there have been people who walked on the moon.”***