

From the Titanic to a Carnival Cruise:

Hope for our most challenging population and the teams who work with them

**By Sherrell Almond, Diane
Boutilier, Shirley Frey, Jane
Korsten, Anita Nettleton, and
Heidi Van Dusen**

All aboard!

As professionals who have worked with individuals with severe multiple disabilities, we have felt like we were on a sinking ship when it came to developing communication systems. Our team operated as separate entities, but we were clever enough to word goals and objectives to make it look like we were all on the same ship with the same destination, after all we wanted to be. There were times when we thought we saw land, but we were sinking, nevertheless.

In 1995, all of that changed when we began learning the Every Move Counts program presented by Jane Korsten at Closing the Gap. What appeared to be a lifeboat turned into a Carnival Cruise and Jane became our cruise director. Now instead of wringing our hands and bailing water, we are enjoying the journey on which our students are taking us.

Every Move Counts is a sensory-based communication program. It is based on the idea that everyone communicates in some way. The program was developed for individuals perceived as unable to communicate due to severe multiple disabilities and who are functioning below the 18-month level in the area of communication.

The assessment targets six sensory areas: visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, vestibular and tactile. During a 10- to 12-minute session, the examiner will gain information on how each individual communicates and what types of activities are motivating. The assessment points out abilities versus disabilities, with no right or wrong answers.

After the assessment is completed, additional probing can be done to further determine pleasurable activities within each sensory area. From information gained from the assessment, the transdisciplinary team determines the type of symbols that will be used to represent the pleasurable activities and the response mode each individual will use to indicate they want to continue the pleasurable activities.

Team members have a very positive attitude about the impact of Every Move Counts on the quality of programming for students. We would like you to experience a bit of the carnival cruise we are traveling on together. Following are key points team members have identified as helping us to achieve success with our students:

Team involvement

One of the most difficult yet important aspects is working together as a transdisciplinary team. Typically, each member presents his/her own area of expertise and it

is the classroom teacher (captain) who is expected to put these ideas together in a manner that makes the ship run smoothly. In the past, the speech-language pathologist decided communication issues, the physical therapist decided gross motor issues, and the occupational therapist decided fine/sensory motor issues. We stayed within our own area of expertise, not realizing how to cross disciplines effectively.

Team members discovered the dynamic differences in student's programming with the initiation of more frequent team meetings. In these meetings, often held while actually working with the student, a variety of options were proposed by team members which could then be discussed. In this manner, consensus was arrived at and programs developed. Due to the unique learning styles of our students, there is no "cookbook" approach to programming, and team members were very cognizant of this. Therefore, everyone "brainstormed" to come up with creative ideas. If the ideas, when tried, did not result in improved programming, then it was back to the "brainstorming" sessions.

As with anything new, changes in attitude of people involved in the students' home and school lives must be part of the transformation in programming. Part of the success of the program is convincing paraprofessionals, parents and other school staff to "come on board" and

Address

526 Main St.
P.O. Box 68
Henderson, MN 56044

Phone

507-248-3294

Fax

507-248-3810

Web site

www.closingthegap.com

E-mail

info@closingthegap.com

This article originally appeared in the April / May, 1999 issue of *Closing The Gap*.

Check out the library: *Copyright © Closing The Gap, Inc. All rights reserved.*

www.closingthegap.com/library/

help make the program successful. This was relatively easy for our team members because Every Move Counts is research based in addition to being widely field tested. In addition, the program is very positive! Team members feel this a wonderful basis on which to build a communication program.

Assessment

As mentioned earlier, the assessment takes approximately 12 minutes to administer. Assessment results indicate what activities an individual enjoys and how they communicate that enjoyment. Now, rather than penalizing individuals for their limitations, we have an assessment that allows them to demonstrate what they can do. Responses may range from a slight body movement, such as a change in eye gaze, affect or body position, to a gesture or verbalization.

The assessment materials are common items, making them easy and economical to assemble. We found it helpful to make up a kit that was available at all times. The plastic container used for storing the items worked well as the tub for the water play part of the assessment. Other helpful hints we discovered along the way are: 1. a straw works well for tasting lemon juice (and any other liquids); 2. the individual being assessed may need a drink after some of the gustatory trials - be ready; 3. keep a couple of wash cloths and towels available, especially for the gustatory and water activities; 4. putting scents on a cotton ball and then in plastic film canisters works great for the olfactory portion.

We try to have as many team members present as possible for the assessment, but we would recommend at least two if possible. When we started, we struggled over how to score each area. We always video tape all of our assessments so we can review the tape if we are unsure of how to score a section, but for the most part, we now put down the score that we think it is and make a note to probe further. Probes allow the team to continue assessing different variables throughout the instructional process. Probing is a wonderful way for the team to continue to stay involved!

Programming

Given the learning characteristics of the target population, one-on-one instruction in the initial stages of intervention may be the most effective way to begin. To be able to request a favorite activity and manipulate

one's environment is always functional. Because of this, it is important that the procedures become a part of the daily routine.

We found that it was beneficial to start with Level I instruction in order to clearly establish the connection between the symbol and its desired object or activity. We have been amazed at the rapid learning curve some of our students have demonstrated because we started where they were at, not where we wanted them to be. "Learning curve" is not something we have typically discussed in a positive light about our students, but that has all changed since we have been implementing Every Move Counts.

Initially, we pair symbols with the most motivating objects or activities as determined from the assessment and further probing. We soon develop symbols for all activities the student engages in throughout the day as a way to communicate to the individual what is happening next. This provides a symbol-rich environment that is meaningful to them.

One of the most important things to remember when symbols are paired with objects or activities is that the reinforcement (object/activity) must occur within two seconds of contact with the symbol in order for the association to be made between them. This can be challenging, but is effective in building meaning for the symbols.

The manual is extremely helpful in providing ideas for goals and objectives using the procedures and sequence recommended by the authors. Our IEP's are now filled with goals and objectives we have adapted from the manual. The many flow charts have also been extremely useful in guiding team members to stay on course and when explaining parts of the program to those who aren't as familiar with the program. Continued brainstorming and work sessions with the team to put our thoughts into actions have been invaluable in helping the students to be more successful communicators.

Representational objects

Because our students are often non-verbal, they require alternative methods of communication. We have tried all of the alternative options, hoping they would work for our students. Nothing has been as successful as responding to their "every movement" and using objects that represent an activity, desired items, as well as significant people for each student.

After each initial assessment, a great deal of time was spent finding symbols to represent those reinforcing activities that had been identified. During discussions with the team on how to organize the many representational objects each student was accumulating, we decided to mount each object on a thin 3x5-inch board with Velcro. We have also color coded the boards according to the category of the attached symbol. The categories and color codes we chose are: leisure - blue, vocational - red, self-care - black, community - yellow, academic - green, and extra activities - brown. Because some of our students are deaf-blind, we added a tactual component to the symbols. The six textures used were blue non-slip shelf liner, red burlap, black needlepoint backing, yellow felt, bubble packing and smooth board. The background colors/textures are available for students who reach that level of communication. We then put them in plastic containers with lids. With Velcro strips attached to the top, the lids can also be used as communication boards for the objects.

Team members, including parents, search everywhere for objects; dollar stores, rummage sales, second hand stores, basements of their homes, junk drawers etc.

Documentation/Data collection

This very important aspect of the Every Move Counts program continues to evolve for team members. We realized early in our implementation of the program that data is essential for documenting skill acquisition, determining when to change instructional levels and selecting the optimal response mode. We adapted several of the data sheets contained in the Every Move Counts manual and we continue to do this. The further our students progress through the program, the more time team members spend discussing what type of data is critical and the most efficient way to collect data for the various aspects of our students' programs. As mentioned previously, we video tape the assessment and then periodically during programming. This has proven to be very beneficial for documentation of student's progress.

Generalization

One difficulty when implementing the program is generalizing the techniques into all settings at home and at school. Through our teaming, all team members have real-

ized the importance of being consistent. Another difficulty we had was how to let each team member know what needed to be addressed next and what had already been tried. We now have a binder with a section for each student, which includes the assessment, probes, data and blank sheets of paper. All team members can then write quick notes about what they would like to share with the team.

Parental involvement is also important. We have implemented the use of a remnant book. This book travels between home and school. It is a binder with medium sized baggies in it. In each baggy is a laminated piece of white tag board.

While each student is involved in an activity, the team member writes a short description about the activity on the laminated tag board. Then a piece of that activity (something to symbolize the activity) is sent home in the baggy. When the student gets home or to school, a conversation can be started about the activity while reinforcing symbolization with the object in the baggy.

Networking

As we started to implement the Every Move Counts program, we had a lot of questions. We realized the importance of networking with others who have already implemented the program. We would encourage you to communicate with others who have tried these techniques. We are always willing to answer questions and invite you to join our network. Join the Chat on www.closingthegap.com during the week of April 26-30, 1999. You can also contact us by using the following information:

Sherrell Almond,
<lmond@minot.com>; 701-857-4604
Diane Boutilier, <bout@minot.com>;
701-857-4680
Shirley Frey, <shifrey@sendit.nodak.edu>; 701-857-4680
Jane Korsten, <gerald@idir.net>
Anita Nettleton, 701-838-8483
Heidi Van Dusen, <hvanduse@sendit.nodak.edu>; 701-857-4680

We now have a research-based assessment that gives us the foundation on which to begin programming or probe more options. There is a sequence that will allow student to progress utilizing their abilities. We all have a common focus that results in our students having a more cohesive education.

Our IEP's have become more optimistic because our students are experiencing success and demonstrating the skills they have.

No longer do we feel like we have to keep avoiding the icebergs along the way – we are enjoying the trip!