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Parent Focus

January 2016

Behavior and Communication

by MSSD Central Office Staff

Communication is one of life's most important skills. Many students at Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled (MSSD) experience impairment in their ability to communicate. A communication disorder may be the primary disability or it may be secondary to other disorders and disabilities. For most students attending MSSD, their communication impairments are secondary to their primary disability. Communication disorders range in severity and type.

Regardless of their disabilities, all students want to communicate with the people around them. Some students have the use of speech. However, many students have little or no speech or language. Their attempts to communicate are their use of gestures, signals, sounds and behaviors. These attempts to communicate require us to take careful notice of what these communication attempts are really trying to say. In order for communication to happen there must be an exchange of information. Communication is a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding and connecting people to one another. For these reasons, MSSD staff is renewing our focus and efforts to understand the ways in which students communicate as well as understanding what students are communicating to us. MSSD staff is learning the newest science and methods for identifying ways to expand students' communication abilities. Our goal is to provide each student with the ability to communicate more effectively as we prepare him or her for life after completing school. MSSD is very excited about our renewed focus on communication and the new information we are learning.

One of the beliefs at MSSD is that "All behavior serves a purpose," and that purpose is communication. Students use any effective form of communication possible to get their message across to others. It is very common for students at MSSD to use their behaviors to communicate. Sometimes the behavior is very subtle, other times the behavior can be aggressive or socially unacceptable. When a student uses a behavior for communication, the behavior communicates one of two basic messages: "I want something" or "I want to get away from something."

Some ideas we can share with you about your child's behaviors and his or her communications

If your child becomes aggressive or exhibits a socially unacceptable behavior, how do you make it stop or go away? Typical responses from an adult would be to tell the child "No," take away something the child likes, or respond in a physical way, such as making the child sit quietly in a corner. These responses may stop the behavior for a while, but eventually the same behavior will return or a new behavior will take its place.

Why does a child continue to exhibit a behavior that is not appropriate, or is a socially unacceptable way of communicating a message? The child has learned that the behavior works better than any other form of communication he has tried. A behavior will only continue to occur if the behavior accomplishes what the child is seeking.

When adults use traditional responses to manage an inappropriate behavior, they rarely find out what the behavior was communicating. To really understand why the behavior is happening we must know what the child is communicating.

Remember, a behavior in one situation may communicate a different message than in another situation. As an example, knocking things off the kitchen table may mean "I'm done," knocking things off the coffee table may mean "Stop watching TV and pay attention to me," and knocking things off the desk at school may mean "I don't want to do this anymore."

Example of implementing the new behavior

Your child is constantly knocking things off the coffee table. You have tried the traditional approaches such as telling him to stop, threatening him, taking away something he likes, or using "time out," but the behavior still continues, no matter what you do.

What is the message?

The most difficult part is trying to figure out the message. It is useful to remember that the basic messages are either your child wants something or wants to get away from something. The problem is deciding what he really wants or what he wants to get away from. In this



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example, let's guess the message is "I want you to pay more attention to me." This may sound odd, but many children want any type of attention they can get, even if it is negative attention. Since this behavior has been constantly occurring, it means that the behavior is working for your child, because you consistently direct your attention away from your activity and respond to him.

Decide on a new way to communicate your child's message.

One new way of communicating could be having your child bring you a card with a picture of two people on it; this card means "I want to play or have more attention from you". Explain and demonstrate to your child that when he gives you the card you will stop what you are doing, and the two of you will play for five minutes. You will set a timer to indicate the end of play time.

Practice the new behavior until your child uses it most of the time.

Initially, your child may continue to knock something off the coffee table. You must continue to teach and show your child that he achieves the intent of his communication (getting to play) most effectively if he uses the card system. You need to focus on teaching the new behavior, and avoid commenting on the old behavior. If your child knocks things off the coffee table, quickly hand him the card and help him hand the card to you. Then say: "Oh, you want to play, let's go play" and go play. Don't say anything about what has been knocked off the table. Don't make him pick it up. You want him to see that the card will get him what he wants, which is your attention. It will take many times to change the old behavior. You need to remain calm during this process and provide opportunities for your child to be successful.

Extending the process.

Your child may seek your attention at other times during the day. By having these cards all over the house, your child can get to them quickly and easily and use them to communicate a need for attention when you are busy with something else. If your child has to look for a card and it takes too long, he will revert to the old way to communicate what he wants.

When using positive supports, a behavior is very rarely changed immediately. However, with opportunities for your child to be successful and consistent use of the positive supports, your child will learn a more appropriate way to communicate his wants and needs, and the inappropriate behaviors will be replaced with appropriate and socially acceptable behaviors.

Parent Focus

Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled
P.O. Box 480
Jefferson City, MO 65102-0480

Archie Derboven,
Superintendent

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Information concerning other available resources, programs, etc., is not to be construed as an endorsement by Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled for any specific product, organization, or philosophy.

Competition is Fierce at Autumn Hill School



Every month Autumn Hill School has a theme and each classroom decorates their door. A visitor judges the best door and the winning decoration is displayed in the hallway. Room 1 won for August with the "Missouri" theme (pictured left). Room 5 won for September with the "Artist" theme (pictured right).



MSSD Wellness Policy

By Leslie Woods, Central Office

The Wellness Policy for Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled (MSSD) can now be found on the MSSD Web page at <http://dese.mo.gov/special-education/missouri-schools-severely-disabled/wellness>. The MSSD Wellness Policy is based on national nutritional guidelines for schools. The MSSD Wellness Policy covers topics such as:

- Nutrition guidelines
- National School Lunch Program
- Fundraiser guidelines
- Student rewards
- Snacks (directly relates to the MSSD Snacks Policy)
- Classroom parties/celebrations/school events
- Nutrition education
- Physical activity in the classroom
- Physical education
- Communication with parents about health related topics

The MSSD Wellness Policy and needs of the students are reevaluated every two years (odd years) by the MSSD Wellness Committee. The committee is comprised of parents, teachers, nurses, school food service and other MSSD staff. Information for the wellness evaluation is gathered by the building administrators using the *School Wellness Policy Needs Assessment and Evaluation Tool* form. This form covers all areas of health and wellness within MSSD schools. Once the forms are turned in, the MSSD Wellness Program Coordinator prepares a summary of the information and submits it to the MSSD Wellness Committee. The MSSD Wellness Committee reviews the information and submits recommendations to the MSSD Wellness Program Coordinator.

The next assessment of the MSSD Wellness Policy will be in March 2017.

For additional information regarding the MSSD Wellness Policy or to participate in the MSSD Wellness Committee please contact Leslie Woods, Assistant Director for School Health Services by email at Leslie.Woods@dese.mo.gov or by phone (573) 522-6186.

The current members of the MSSD Wellness Committee are:

MSSD Wellness Program Coordinator – Leslie Woods, Assistant Director for School Health Services

Brenda Miller – Cook/School Food Service

Alan Duede – P.E. Teacher

Adele Littleton – Parent/Classroom Aide

Julie Rizzo – Classroom Teacher

Charlene Cann – School Nurse

Janice Gerken – Building Administrator

Bonnie Aaron – Assistant Superintendent

Stephanie Brooks – Director for Business Management

Spotlighting Our Students' Strengths at Lakeview Woods School

By Becky Brozovich, Home School Coordinator

For Disability Awareness Month October 2015, Lakeview Woods parents and staff were provided with "People First language" information. People First language focuses on defining persons who have disabilities by their strengths, not by what they are unable to do.

Students were provided a "Wellness Wednesday" activity by the Home School Coordinator who visited each classroom and provided a discussion about using positive, strengths-focused language. Students enjoyed listening to "I Like Me", a book about a pig who loves herself just the way she is. After a brief discussion of the character's attributes, each student created a poster with their strengths.

Posters of each student's strengths were placed on a "Wall of Fame" in the front hallway of the school for all to marvel at and enjoy.



Ozark Horizon and Skyview Schools Participate in the Buddy Walk

By Reta House, Building Administrator

On October 10, 2015, students at two MSSD schools participated in the Buddy Walk held at the West Plains High School Football Field in West Plains, MO. There were 400 participants, which was an increase from last year's walk.

Ozark Horizon and Skyview Schools sponsored a photo booth. Many fall decorations, including large ferns, bales of hay, pumpkins, gourds, fall flowers and foliage made up the backdrop for individuals with disabilities. Participants who wanted their pictures made with the fall background were photographed and their pictures were framed and given to them as a "thank you" for participating in the Buddy Walk. A table was also set up with a banner advertising both schools and flyers were available for participants and parents to find out more about our schools.

The Buddy Walk was a huge success, raising approximately \$10,000. The funds will be used to provide monthly activities for our "differently abled" population. A Halloween party was held October 31, 2015, a bowling party was held November 20, 2015 and the first annual Christmas Gala was held December 18, 2015.

The funds are also used to help support the Special Olympics teams and provide scholarships to Camp Wonderland and Camp Barnabus.

Ozark Horizon and Skyview Schools have been asked to participate in the 2016-2017 Buddy Walk as well.



Legislator Visits Mapaville School

By Stacy Buss, Home School Coordinator

Missouri State Representative Becky Ruth (R – Festus) visited Mapaville School on September 10, 2015. Rep. Ruth visited each classroom and had an opportunity to interact with several students. Rep. Ruth also attended an all-school assembly in the school gymnasium which had been decorated by the students for Patriot's Day. During the assembly, she talked about what it means to be patriotic. She stated that nothing could be more patriotic than the students at Mapaville School. She presented the school with an American flag and a State of Missouri flag. Both of the flags had previously been flown over the Missouri Capital Building in Jefferson City. Mapaville students then sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and rang their "freedom" bells for Rep. Ruth. Brad Mora, Mapaville School Building Administrator, presented Rep. Ruth with a sign for her office that had been made and signed by the Young Adult Students.

