

Communication Readiness Program



Down Syndrome Connection of the Bay Area



Communication Readiness Program 2016 Report

This was the Down Syndrome Connection of the Bay Area's (DSCBA's) fourth year providing the Communication Readiness Program (CRP). We have learned so much in four years about how to help children with Down syndrome and other special needs who are nonverbal or have limited speech intelligibility upon entering the school system.

Program Overview

CRP provides children ages four through seven, their parents, and their teachers with the necessary preparation, tools, and training to be able to communicate their needs and become ready for school from a communications, 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 Green Valley Elementary School in Danville. The children were divided by age group: the "Tadpoles" were ages 4-6 and the "Polywogs" were ages 5-7, divided 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 reading; writing; art; music; obstacle courses; following instructions; speech and occupational therapy; snack time; and speech and language assessments.

In terms of communication and use of Alternative & Augmentative Communication (AAC) systems, DSCBA provided the following during CRP in 2016:

- Communication boards and light tech devices (Step by Step): provided to all students (16)
- Light tech device (GoTalk 9) utilized in both classes for group activities: 16 students
- iPad with TouchChat app introduced and loaned to three students
- Low tech icon system created for one student
- Language system on iPad modified for three students
- Continued use of systems already in place for three students

"My son's ability and confidence in effectively using his communication device increased tremendously. The CRP team introduced him to a different vocabulary on his device and he quickly learned how to navigate it and he now engages much more in the different activities we do throughout the day by describing colors, identifying animals, counting items, and choosing which activities we do."

Following the summer program, DSCBA staff partnered with the schools into which each child was entering, working with each student's educational team to ensure a smooth transition into school, and that what they gained in the summer program is not lost.

An initial meeting with the child's educational team (typically including their general education teacher, special education teacher, aides, and other professionals) took place in which DSCBA provided the team with a personalized binder about each child, and explained what we learned about their student over the course of the summer program from a communication and school readiness standpoint. It is a valuable time for those working with the student in the classroom to ask questions and discuss any challenges they might be experiencing. DSCBA provides suggestions and resources to help teachers and aides assist the child to be engaged and participating, and how to address behavior issues.

Sometimes it's as easy as realizing that a child's refusal to participate in drawing time is because she has trouble with fine motor skills and cannot grasp the crayons. DSCBA is then able to provide adaptive crayons that are much easier for the child to hold, and can reduce frustration and negative behaviors.

DSCBA continues to be available for ongoing support all day Monday through Friday through our Help Center. Parents, educators, and other professionals are able to contact us and get information and help when they need it.

Outcomes

DSCBA will (funding proposal pending) conduct a quantitative research analysis of CRP through the analysis and presentation of pre- and post-intervention communication sampling data that we collected from this summer's program. We anticipate the results of this analysis by August 2017.

Qualitatively, DSCBA has identified the following impacts of the program:

- Use of AAC improved and increased participants' use of expressive language (making choices, expressing their needs, and sharing with their peers)
- Participants achieved improved linguistic, strategic, functional, and operational competence with AAC devices
- Verbal children increased their conversational skills
- Participation and behavior improved (such as ability to transition between activities, paying attention during story times, engagement in "closing circle time," etc.)
- Literacy skills increased with acquiring vocabulary and identifying site words

DSCBA provided training and assistance in using a variety of light, low, medium, and high-tech AAC devices, depending upon the needs of the participants, which were loaned or provided to participants.



The "Polywogs" group.

Outcomes, continued

AAC devices included:

- Little Step-by-Step Communicators
- Personal books
- GoTalkOne
- Pads: Touch Chat and Go Talk Now apps
- Speech Generating Devices: Accent 700

Participants also improved in their ability to understand and engage in the school/classroom routine (such as receiving and reciprocating verbal greetings, independently packing and unpacking their backpacks, etc.); self-help and daily living skills (such as toilet training); and other skills, such as being able to remain seated, pay attention, share, listen, and appropriate interaction with peers and adults.

Thank you to our amazing CRP teachers, therapists, assistants, and volunteers (too many to list) who implemented CRP this year, including:

Teachers:

- Mayra Joseph
- Kristie Kropp

Teacher's Assistants:

- Amanda Hall-Jackson
- Susan Coulson

AAC Specialists:

- Kati Skulski, M.S. CCC-SLP
- Celia Hughell, M.S., SLP-CF

SLP Interns from CSU East Bay:

- Amanda Burton
- Denice Rodriguez
- Carmelie Luistro
- Monika Ifah

Classroom Assistants:

- Sarah Reems
- Camille Hunt
- Rose Fruci
- Jo Kelley



“Sam will now point to things with just his pointer finger instead of his whole hand. He’s more engaged and has learned several signs over the summer.”

(above) Active story time helps with literacy.

(left) The children in CRP, with their helpers, learn numbers while singing a song.

Foundation Supporters

CRP was started with seed funding from the California Communications Access Foundation, and additional funding each year from a host of other private foundations and individuals. In 2016, CRP was supported by grants from the following:

- Disability Communications Fund (of the California Communication Access Foundation)
- Quest Foundation
- Marino Family Foundation
- Wells Fargo Foundation
- Lowell Berry Foundation

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Parent Testimonials



Parents noted that their children started talking more, learned new classroom routines and adapted to new teachers, expanded their vocabularies, and learned to use and enjoy technology such as the iPad.

With regard to improvement in communication, parents said their child had more willingness to repeat words, use spontaneous language, and use the iPad to communicate, as well as improved social interactions.

“I feel that my child benefited from the structure of the program. I also notice him watching my mouth more when I’m talking to him.”

Improvements included “greatly improved sentence structure and more expressions. She became more independent with her routine as well.”

“His confidence grew greatly – he is experimenting with a lot more words and starting to speak in more two- and three-word phrases.”

“I think using the Step by Step helped him to get in the routine of talking about things he did and learn how to do that in a more coherent way. Some family members commented that his articulation sounded better recently.”

“Sam is now frequently vocalizing along with several signs; not yet saying the words, but he is definitely getting my attention and communicating in a new, more productive way.”

