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Developing a Multidisciplinary Collaboration Protocol Between Special Education Teachers and Speech-Language Therapists for Children With Severe Intellectual Disabilities and Complex Communication Needs

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OBJECTIVE(S) AND METHODS

OBJECTIVES	METHODS
To explore effective forms of collaboration between special education teachers and speech-language therapists.	Review and analysis of scientific literature on collaboration in special education and speech-language therapy.
To identify approaches that support children with severe intellectual disabilities and complex communication needs.	Examination of existing models of multidisciplinary teamwork supporting children with complex communication needs.
To highlight the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in educational settings.	Identification of key principles that facilitate effective collaboration between professionals.



SHORT INTRODUCTION

Children with severe intellectual disabilities and complex communication needs (CCN) require coordinated and consistent support to develop functional communication and emergent speech skills. Special education teachers and speech-language therapists often work toward similar developmental goals. However, their collaboration is frequently informal and insufficiently structured. Lack of coordinated teamwork may reduce intervention effectiveness, limit the generalization of communication skills across environments, and increase the burden on families and professionals. Therefore, structured multidisciplinary collaboration is essential for effective support of children with complex communication needs.



RESULTS

- The literature analysis shows that effective support for children with complex communication needs requires structured multidisciplinary collaboration.
- Successful collaboration is based on shared terminology, coordinated goal setting, and regular information exchange between professionals.
- Clear differentiation of professional roles improves intervention consistency and reduces overlap or fragmentation of support.
- Speech-language therapists primarily focus on assessment and development of communication and speech skills, while special education teachers support the implementation of communication strategies in daily educational activities.
- Practical examples indicate that integrating communication goals into classroom routines improves the generalization of communication skills across environments.



KEY FINDINGS ON COLLABORATION

Interprofessional collaboration is necessary but not self-sustaining

The effectiveness of collaboration depends less on the model and more on:

- team competencies
- communication quality
- system-level support

There is a clear need for:

- stronger empirical research
- structured training approaches



THE ALLOCATION OF ROLES IN INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

Field	Speech Therapist	Special Education Teacher
Assessment	Analyzes the child's communication behavior, including prelinguistic cues, eye contact, joint attention, speech comprehension and ways of expressing intentions.	Analyzes the child's participation in educational and play activities, including level of independence and interaction with tasks and others.
Goal Setting	Determines the directions of communication development (e.g., initiating contact, maintaining interaction, understanding spoken language).	Formulates educational and functional goals and aligns them with the child's communicative abilities.
Support Planning	Develops strategies to support communication: modeling communicative acts, expanding the child's responses, and creating opportunities for communicative initiative.	Plans the educational environment and learning activities to support the use and development of communication skills.
Practical Work	Support the development of communication skills in structured interactions, including eye contact, joint attention, understanding instructions, and the use of gestures, vocalizations, or words.	Creates everyday educational and play situations that encourage the use of communication skills: waiting for response, encouraging communicative initiatives, and supporting interaction with peers.
Progress Tracking	Evaluates changes in communication behavior and the effectiveness of interactions.	Observes how communication skills are manifested in the natural educational environment and across different types of activities.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration exists on a spectrum:

consultative → *collaborative* → *interactive teaming*

No single model is consistently superior.

Pre-linguistic skills as the foundation of communication

Eye contact and joint attention are regarded as fundamental pre-linguistic skills that ensure the social orientation of communication and serve as precursors to meaningful verbal interaction.

From **a speech therapy perspective**, these skills are assessed as indicators of the development of communicative intent and a child's ability to interact, as well as predictors of further speech development.

From **a pedagogical perspective**, eye contact and joint attention are manifested in the child's everyday activities (play, learning, everyday situations) and can be purposefully supported through the organisation of the environment and the structuring of interaction.



CONCLUSIONS

1. Effective support of children with complex communication difficulties requires a systematic interdisciplinary collaboration between a speech therapist and a special education teacher.
2. A clear distribution of professional roles enables specialists to work complementarily: the speech therapist focuses on developing of communication skills, while the special education teacher creates opportunities for applying and reinforcing these skills in educational activities.
3. Shared goal setting and regular exchange of observations contribute to more consistent and effective support of the child's communication development.
4. Integrating communication goals into the everyday educational environment creates conditions for the transfer and reinforcement of skills across different interaction contexts.



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