

Chalk Talk – May 17, 2020
Roz McCarthy

Getting Creative to Support Special Needs Kids and Families

It's 8:30 am and the children are logging onto their devices. Young children may be having circle time with their teachers and classmates, doing math problems on-line, or researching animals for a project. Teachers are at their kitchen tables, Zooming with kids, presenting slide shows, or answering questions. It seems so normal now.

But suppose the children are non-verbal? Suppose they are on the autism spectrum? Suppose they are intellectually disabled? Suppose they have behavioral challenges and can't cope with stress?

In short, how do you teach young kids with special needs, who rely on close relationships with their teachers and lots of individual attention? How do you give that support through a computer screen?

"We need to stay connected to our students and families," said Yvette Goorevitch, Director of Specialized Learning for the Norwalk Public Schools. "We don't have a perfect system, but we're pushing the envelope as far as we can to deliver services to the 1700 kids with special needs."

Meghan Cave, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), works with children in grades K-5 with severe behavior problems. Using the science of learning behavior, she works to change children's behavior - modifying conditions to achieve correct behavior and reinforcing good choices.

"Just pointing out when someone does something right changes behavior," she said. "People want to perform better and not get criticized."

But now the children are at home and she's on a screen. When she was in school, she could get up close and force the engagement she needed. But now, she has to figure out how to get the kids so motivated and engaged that they want to connect with her on-line.

Because BCBA's are considered health care providers, she had access to information about how to provide services on-line. "I took lots of crash courses and webinars," she said. "We really wanted to learn to do the best for kids and their families."

Some of her kids can access academic skills through Zoom, and she uses lots of repetition and reinforcement with them. She created a Google Slide presentation on number identification. Children looked at slides with lots of numbers on them and they had to find the 1. When they chose correctly, they watched a funny video together.

“The repetition and reinforcement really works,” she said. “I have a child who is now singing the ABC song and using words to ask me for things three times as often he did before.”

Some children do not have the ability to access learning on-line. For those children, parents are providing the services, and Cave is on the screen coaching the parent.

“The interactions with parents have been so moving and inspiring,” she said. “It’s given me a new-found appreciation for parenting. I have a lens into their experiences. I celebrate successes with them and share the hard times.”

Cave supervises a team of six Registered Behavior Technicians, paraprofessionals who work closely with the children, jump into Zoom with her, take data, and support her work. If they alert her that a particular child is having a hard time, Cave can click a button and get in touch with the child immediately.

Before schools shut, Cave worked in a different school each day of the week. “I had to be on site to support a child. Now I have a new way of consultation without physically being there,” she said. “It’s opened up new ways to support families.”

Anne Marie Pineiro, Assistive Technology Specialist, works throughout the district to help children who are either non-verbal or who lack functional verbal skills. They must use different ways to communicate. Increasingly, technology is providing new tools for children, such as iPads with special apps.

Pineiro described one child who had not gotten his iPad before school closed in March. She emailed the parent and the team about the options, and they agreed that the iPad would be perfect for him. She put the app onto the iPad, got it to the family, and then did a Zoom session with the parent, demonstrating how to use it. The emphasis is on getting the child to pick words and pictures to make whole sentences.

“Now he’s using it at home,” she said. “The first thing he said was ‘I want a vacation.’ I had not even shown him vacation or where it was on the device. He will make a lot of progress.”

Pineiro works closely with parents. “The parents are really motivated and have been working extremely well on devices,” she said.

When parents need more help, she Zooms with them, sharing her screen to show parents how to use new programs, especially the reading and writing apps. “It’s really a team effort,” she said. She works closely with speech and language therapists, parents, and the English Language Learners department. “If a kid is bilingual, we may use a different device to translate into Spanish,” she said. “We have to figure out which app is the best for the child.”

These educators are learning lessons from remote learning that will have lasting impact. Cave thinks she will continue to send parents Google Slide shows she creates. Perhaps she'll do more on-line consultation.

“The biggest blessing has been to form a sense of a community with my staff,” she said. She used to have separate meetings with her staff in each school. “But in the future, we can hold virtual meetings all at once, and it will help us grow as a team.”

But for Cave, a really big lesson is about her own limits. “By 3pm, I never want to see a screen again!”

Lots of people can identify with that feeling.