## Teachers' Corner

### Instructional Strategies for Promoting Reading Comprehension in Non-Verbal Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

**Melissa A. Spence, EdD**
*California Lutheran University*

*Note. Dr. Spence was the winner of the 2016 DADD Practitioner Award*

Reading comprehension is a pivotal component of academic instruction. As students advance through school, there is a shift from learning to read to reading to learn; successful comprehension skills are imperative for students to access multiple academic areas (Grether & Sickman, 2008). Yet, students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) often struggle with reading comprehension due to cognitive processing (e.g., Theory of Mind) and oral language difficulties (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). This challenge is heighted when students with ASD are non-verbal or are not utilizing spoken language to communicate with others in a functional manner (National Institutes of Health, 2010). Further, teachers experience greater difficulty in teaching non-verbal students reading comprehension due to students having challenges in accessing curriculum in traditional formats (i.e., verbal responses, turn and talks with peers; Grether & Sickman, 2008). So, how can teachers best support the reading comprehension development of their non-verbal students with ASD?

## Instructional Strategies

### Technology to Aid Comprehension Instruction

Technology provides amazing access to expressive knowledge, allowing students to display greater amounts of higher-order thinking and increasing communicative opportunities. Technology is advantageous for both students and teachers; students are provided an opportunity to participate in reading comprehension instruction without reliance on verbal responses and teachers have a tool to access their students' reading comprehension knowledge.

Technology incorporates a variety of tools including voice output devices (VODs), Mac TVs, iPads, and interactive whiteboards. With a VOD, students push buttons with corresponding words, pictures, or a combination of the two and the device speaks that word or phrase, depending on how the device is programed. Students can also use VODs to type, click and drag pictures or words, and select from a variety of provided answer choices. More sophisticated devices allow teachers to upload information (e.g., graphic organizers, worksheets, pictures of key vocabulary words) via a flash drive so students have access to current instructional content and materials, allowing for greater participation in classroom comprehension activities. Interactive whiteboards can be utilized to complete character/setting maps, sequence a story's plot, and highlight answers within the text displayed on the board. A Mac TV enhances the instruction taking place with other technology. By connecting an iPad to a Mac TV, other students can view the instruction occurring on an individual device (such as an iPad) which may be more difficult for all other students to view due to its size.

### Using Choices to Elicit Student Responses

Not all classrooms have access to technology or perhaps a student has difficulty accessing technology due to fine motor challenges. Comprehension activities involving choice making bypass any difficulties which may arise from the use of technology and address a variety of student participation levels as changes can easily be made to the types of visual representation, the number of presented choices, and how students utilize them to engage in comprehension activates.

Choices should be provided visually rather than orally. Visual representations counteract two common challenges in instructing students with ASD. First, while not all individuals with ASD are visual learners, many do possess a knack for visual processing/ understanding over auditory (West, 2008). Second, a visual representation gives students greater independence, as choices can be accessed with or without an adult providing oral cues (West, 2008). The entire visual representation continuum may be considered for choices: objects, pictures, symbols (i.e., SymbolStix®, BoardMaker®), and words (word lists, sentences).

When choices are employed, students have the opportunity to access both text-based ("what" and "where" questions) and inference-based ("why" and "how" questions) comprehension by sequencing elements from a story's plot (placing picture/word cards in sequential order), independently answering questions by selecting an answer from multiple options, or engaging in matching activities. With matching activities, students match pictures to words, words to pictures, or words to written descriptions to indicate knowledge of characters, setting, and plot. For example, students may match pictures of characters or the setting to written names or locations or match written sentences describing an event in the story to a picture depicting that event.

## President's Message

**Elizabeth A. West**

Now, more than ever, we must continue to be allies and advocates to create equitable educational systems, practices, and outcomes. I believe education is a moral endeavor and educators have the power to transform society into what it can be. Public schools are the common space—the public space where all of our students come together to figure out how to live. An ideal school should promote the achievement of *all* children and also attend to their socio-emotional well-being. Teachers need to establish a sense of community within their classrooms where children are engaged in meaningful ways to foster this learning. Teachers should value inclusive environments and be committed to providing equitable educational experiences for the most vulnerable populations of children and youth.

Schools mirror society; our children are watching. What we do deeply affects what they learn about, who they should become, who has a right to be here, and how they should treat each other, now and in the future. Public education has always been about the development of each child as an individual to the fullest extent of his or her abilities for the ultimate benefit of society. What we do in schools matters and has a lot of influence over who our children become. Public schools should remain strong to play a positive force in society. I encourage you to continue to ask yourself what you can do to support schools, teachers, and the children therein. What would this support look like?

As you receive this newsletter, another academic year will be drawing to a close. I believe DADD can be the place to receive and provide supports, resources and advocacy. I urge you to stay connected, read the journals, attend the conferences and conventions, and reach out to our Board of Directors.

I look forward to the conversations and seeing you at future conferences.

## Executive Director's Corner

**Teresa Taber Doughty**

Late last year, I was asked to give a keynote address in spring 2017 for a local education foundation fundraiser. They want to hear about what is happening in education. At the time, I was excited to speak about our current initiatives and future directions for the field. And then came November 8th, January 20th, and February 7th. The sobering events on these dates caused me to stop dead in my tracks and really think about what is ahead for education as a whole—especially for professionals, students, and families involved in special education. It also made me rethink my topic for this keynote.

If you've kept abreast of the news over the last year, you are aware of the many changes proposed or occurring in the United States and in education. Some may be fine, but many may have lasting consequences for the students we serve, their families, the community, and how we function as a continually growing field. When looking only at education issues, it's easy to get bogged down in the turmoil. What will happen if the U.S. Department of Education ceases to exist as of December 2018 (H.R. 899)? How much funding will be cut from public education to support building a wall? What about IDEA, ESSA, and the protections they provide students with a disability? During the writing of this article, the movement to privatize public education is fully in motion. Will our government continue to support voucher programs that caused the segregated schools of the 50's, 60's, and 70's? (**http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2017/2017R/Bills/SB308.pdf**). This chaos doesn't even take into consideration repealing the Affordable Health Care Act and its impact on individuals with preexisting conditions, such as those with a disability. Each day seems to present a new challenge and concern.

Thus, I am now in a quandary about my keynote. While I could probably speak for days about my apprehension and unease, I sincerely want to be optimistic and help plant the seeds for where we can go. I want to encourage listeners to be hopeful and active in shaping our future. Recently, I told my dismayed colleagues that their focus should be on our local schools and communities, our local children and families, our local and state legislation, and the activities and plans for which we are currently leading. This is where we have power and can have considerable impact. As teachers, think about your influence for shaping curriculum in your own school, collaborating with families and adult service agencies to secure post-school supports for students, introducing and assessing innovative pedagogical approaches to instruction, and integrating technology for instruction and learning. Those in higher education may consider strategies for attracting the best and brightest to education, developing new models for preparing the next generation of special educators, collaborating with local school districts to support and retain strong teachers, and engage in research which could influence future legislation. This is where the excitement begins; the foundation for ensuring success now and into the future.

So, following much thought, I've decided that my topic for this upcoming presentation will be about hope and perhaps, blazing a new pathway in education. I'm titling it "2017 . . . It's Time for Transformational Education!" I'm going to focus on the future I want to see and of which I want to take part. While

# Visual Supports to Build Independence: An Evidence-Based Practice

**Meaghan M. McCollow**
*Central Michigan University*

While visual supports have, and continue to appear on lists of evidence-based practices for children and youth with autism spectrum disorders (ASD; i.e., Wong et al., 2015), this evidence-based practice extends its efficacy to other learners including those with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (i.e., Ayres & Langone, 2008). Visual supports encompass a wide range of materials and techniques, from static pictures and words to body language to video recordings and other technology (Hayes, Hirano, Marcu, Monibi, Nguyen, & Yeganyan, 2010).

## What Are Visual Supports?

Visual supports may be used for a variety of purposes including: increasing communication and social skills, improving behavior and academic skills, as well as developing and maintaining daily living skills. Specific skills might include turn-taking, making transitions between activities, completing a job task, washing hands, or turning on the computer. . . . Really, the list of possibilities is long. The purpose of visual supports is to remove prompting from another individual (e.g., teacher) and create more independence for learners (Mechling, 2007) without the reliance on verbal instructions (Pierce, Spriggs, Gast, & Luscre, 2013). In essence, using visual supports removes the reliance on verbal language and gives learners the opportunity to see what needs to be accomplished—instead of telling, you show. Indeed, using visual supports may be a logical first step in moving toward creating an opportunity for the learner to self-manage her/his own behaviors (Mechling, 2007). With the wide array of purposes for using visual supports comes a wide range of possible visual supports. Consider this: Do you use a daily scheduler? If so, you use a visual support and it may come in diverse forms depending on your preferences (e.g., daily planner, online/digital calendar, sticky notes). Likewise, visual supports may come in a number of forms such as words and pictures, tangible manipulatives, digital reminders, video recordings, or digital manipulatives.

The Council for Exceptional Children Standards support initial and advanced preparation for using visual supports in classrooms. These standards include modifying verbal and nonverbal communication to meet the individual needs of learners, assessing individuals with exceptionalities, and incorporating assistive technology- among many other skills (CEC Initial and Advanced Preparation Standards, n.d.).

## Types of Visual Supports

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of a variety of visual supports (see Hume, 2013 for examples). Listed below is a description of some visual supports and supporting evidence of their use for learners with diverse needs.

*Activity schedules* provide learners visual cues for completing activities or tasks. Evidence indicates these strategies are useful for increasing independence and engagement while also decreasing disruptive behaviors (Pierce et al., 2013).

*Written* or *visual information* provided to learners with ASD and other disabilities may be appropriate for increasing task completion and independence by reducing the need for learners to process, retain, and recall verbal instructions (Mesibov & Shea, 2011).

Decades of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of video supports for addressing the needs of a variety of learners (see Ayres & Langone, 2008 for in-depth review). A technology once cost-extensive and impractical for everyday use has become a much more accessible and cost-efficient strategy.

*Apps* are available to support learners in multiple domains (e.g., home, community, school, health, social, advocacy; Douglas, Wojcik, & Thompson, 2012). While evidence is still lacking on the effectiveness of apps as visual supports, it is likely that the use of technology such as apps will continue to grow (Douglas et al., 2012). The portability afforded in the use of apps on mobile devices makes these ideal visual supports which may be used across a variety of contexts.

## Providing Visual Supports

There are a variety of ways in which visual supports may be provided—from laminated checklists, dry erase boards, Boardmaker® symbols, visual timers, "finished" bins, and classroom schedules to the use of mobile technology utilizing apps for timers, schedules, video, and cues. For example, one learner may use a checklist (which might be laminated for continued use) to remember the steps for independently completing a writing assignment. Another learner may use an iPod® with a schedule app (such as *Visual Schedule Planner* by Good Karma Applications **http://www.goodkarmaapplications.com/**) that helps her remember where to go next.

## Conclusion

Visual supports comprise a wide-ranging system of supports for learners with ASD and ID – from pictures and words to environmental arrangements to video modeling and other digital technology. Visual supports are used in classrooms in an assortment of ways to support learners in independence and learning. It is possible the future of visual supports might include increased use of technology, for example augmented reality (Chang, Kang, & Huang, 2013; Escobedo, Tentori, Quintana, Favela, & Garcia-Rosas, 2014) and virtual reality (Hilton, Cumpata, Klohr, Gaetke, Artner, Johnson, & Dobbs, 2014). Future research should focus on the effectiveness of apps and other technology, including the development of a rubric for evaluating their effectiveness.

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## Students' Corner

### The Gift of Feedback

**Autumn Eyre**
*University of Washington*

Feedback is the process of evaluating and discussing the performance of an individual (Harms & Roebuck, 2010). Students receive feedback from professors, coaches, mentors, building administrators, journal editors, peers, and so on. This process can be an emotional challenge, especially when feedback is negative (Algiraigri, 2014; Harms & Roebuck, 2010; Krupić & Corr, 2014). While uncorking a bottle of wine or hiding under the covers might seem like ways to handle a particularly poignant journal reviewers' comment, here are some productive ideas for stomaching negative feedback.

### Focus on the Benefits

Feedback allows us to clarify goals, track progress, and improve the effectiveness of our work (Kirkland & Manoogian, 1998). In the teaching field, we know that observations coupled with feedback have been shown to positively impact teachers' prac-tice (Artman-Meeker, Fettig, Barton, Penney, & Zeng, 2015; Bethune & Wood, 2013; Fox, Hemmeter, Snyder, Binder, & Clark, 2011; Griffin, 2010; Kamman & Long, 2010).

### Tips for Accepting Feedback

Kirkland and Manoogian (1998) offers concise directions on how to handle feedback, such as, "Don't make excuses or try to explain your behavior. When receiving feedback, remain calm and be sure to say, 'Thank you' " (p. 19). Algiraigri (2014) sug-gests reminding yourself that you're expected to make mistakes and cautions individuals to be good listeners, utilizing feedback as an opportunity for improvement. Harms and Roebuck (2010) call for students to consider feedback a "gift" (p. 422).

### Students' Perspectives

I asked master's degree students at the University of Washing-ton how they handle feedback:

*I generally respond to feedback well and take the advice as something I can get better at, not something I'm bad at.*—Haley Fisher

*In the past, when receiving feedback, I've felt like I've done something wrong or that I made a mistake somehow. . . Now in grad school, I try to keep in mind that I am a student who is learning, and when one of my own students makes mistakes,*

# 2017 DADD Conference Highlights

This past January, more than 300 delegates, presenters, and exhibitors participated in DADD's 18th International Conference on Autism, Intellectual Disability, & Developmental Disabilities in Clearwater Beach, Florida!

*Highlights from the 3-day conference include:*

*Focused Training:* Pre-conference training institutes on *Ethical Considerations for Managing Challenging Behavior in Students with ASD and/or Intellectual Disability and Understanding and Utilizing Current and Emerging Assistive Technologies.*

*Self-advocate Voices*: Patricia Moody, College Student and Inspirational Speaker, provided the opening keynote address, *The Future Is Now.* Patricia wowed us with her heart-warming rendition of "Somewhere over the Rainbow"—check out the video clip on our DADD website!



**Opening keynote speaker Patricia Moody with her parents**
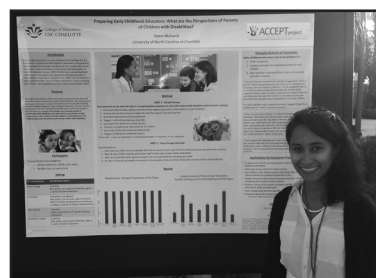


**Closing keynote speaker Robbie Clark with his mother, Maggie Clark**

Robbie Clark, a self-advocate with autism, provided the closing keynote address, *Making Sense of Autism,* along with his mother, Maggie Clark.

*Networking Opportunities:* Conference participants enjoyed interacting with researchers and colleagues at the three poster presentation sessions (75 posters in total), one on each day of the conference.
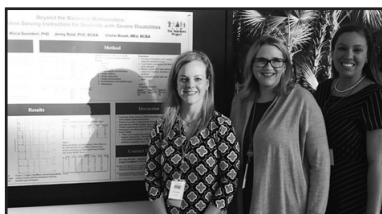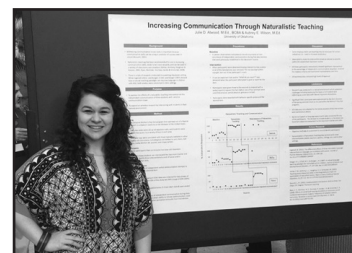


*Continuing Education:* DADD provides Professional Development Hours (PDHs) and BACB-approved continuing education sessions; many conference participants received BCBA CEUs at no additional cost!





*Student Poster Presentation Award:* Congratulations to Reem Muharib, who received the Student Poster Presentation Award for her presentation, *"Effects of Coaching and Performance Feedback on the Teaching Pyramid Model Implementation of Head Start Teachers."*



**Student Poster Winner Reem Muharib**

For additional highlights on the 2017 Conference, please check out DADD's website, **http://daddcec .org/Home.aspx** and/or contact Cindy Perras, DADD Conference Co-ordinator, **cindy.perras@ gmail.com**.



**Student Happy Hour**
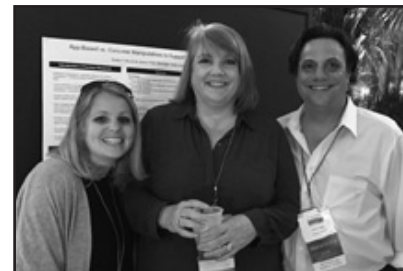


**Emily Bouck (past President), Teresa Taber Doughty (Executive Director), and David Cihak (past President)**

# Call for Nominations

DADD is seeking motivated and experienced individuals from the DADD membership for upcoming vacancies on the Board of Directors. Leadership experience and experience with DADD committees and/or Board of Directors is preferred.

Nominees must be (a) members at the time of nomination and throughout their term of office, (b) willing to participate for their entire term of office, (c) willing to serve as a chair of a committee as needed, and (d) willing to attend the annual DADD Conference and CEC Convention. Additionally, nominees for the Canadian representative position must reside in Canada. Nominations are requested for the following positions:

**Vice-President** (4 year term: Vice-President, President-Elect, President, and Past-President).The Vice-President acts in the place of the President-Elect with his or her authority in case of absence or disability of the President-Elect and shall act in the place of the president with his or her authority in case of absence or disability of both the president and the president-elect. He or she also serves as the division's representative for advance program planning for the Annual Convention, which will take place during his or her term as President-Elect, and serves as co-chair with the President-Elect of future special conferences sponsored by the division.

**Canadian representative** (3 year term). The Canadian representative will represent DADD membership and have responsibilities related to information-sharing, recruitment, monitoring and development. Specific responsibilities may include: support regional conference development activities; support and assist in developing new subdivisions; help monitor and provide support for subdivisions; assist in membership recruitment and retention and act as membership liaison to the Board of Directors; and serve on topical committees such as knowledge and skills, diversity, and practitioner engagement.

Nominations for these positions must be received by June 30, 2017. The person submitting the nomination and the person being nominated must be members of CEC-DADD. A brief bio of the nominee should accompany the nomination and include past leadership experience and experience working with DADD committees and/or BOD and discussion of the nominee's interest in being on the DADD Board and how the nominee proposes to advance the mission of the Division. Materials should be submitted via email to David Cihak at **dcihak@utk .edu**.

Watch for online voting in mid-July. Please contact Dr. Cihak if you would like a paper ballot. Results of the elections will be available in late August/ early September.

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### *Performance-Based Activities*

Performance-based activities provide a variety of ways in which students can demonstrate learning and practice reading comprehension components. Such activities include play, acting, dancing, singing, art, chants, and kinesthetic activities. Play or drama activities enhance comprehension concepts while checking for understanding. Older students can perform essential parts of a story and younger students may use toys to enact key concepts; neither activity requires verbal speech. Toys may substitute for objects and pictures. For example, each student is provided a picture or object representing a character, the setting, or some element from the plot. While reading as a class, students stand up or raise the object or picture in the air as that character, plot element, etc. is introduced or addressed in the story.

Songs and chants simultaneously enhance reading concepts and check students' understanding. Daily chants or songs before reading serve to reinforce important ideas, plot developments, or an understanding of the characters and/or setting; essentially, priming students for that day's reading. Further, music may be particularly effective for this student population, as music has been shown to be engaging for individuals with ASD (Simpson, Keen, & Lamb, 2013). Corresponding kinesthetic movements or activities (e.g., hand/body movements) that accompany the songs and chants increase opportunities for participation. While non-verbal students may not verbally sing along with their classmates, they can participate via humming, engaging in the corresponding kinesthetic movements, or use visual cue cards to "sing" parts of the song/chant.

## Conclusion

Reading comprehension instruction for non-verbal students with ASD is a challenge. Yet, providing quality reading comprehension instruction, in both the presentation and eliciting of information, is attainable with effective strategies. Technology, choice-making, and performance-based activities provide a good starting point to enhance comprehension instruction. Utilizing these strategies allows teachers to provide alternative ways to both present and elicit comprehension information so more students are granted access to pivotal instructional content.

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# Call for Papers

## 19th International Conference on Autism, Intellectual Disability & Developmental Disabilities

## Research-Informed Practice

January 17–19, 2018        Clearwater Beach, Florida



CEC's Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD), welcomes the submission of proposals for innovative and engaging presentations that link research to practice within the following or related topical areas:

- ○ Autism Spectrum Disorder
- ○ Assistive & Adaptive Technology
- ○ Early Childhood
- ○ Intellectual Disability
- ○ Mental Health

- ○ Multiple Disabilities
- ○ Paraprofessionals
- ○ Employment
- ○ Post-Secondary Initiatives
- ○ Transitions

## Proposal Submission Deadline:  June 1, 2017

Please visit the DADD website, www.daddcec.org, to access the proposal submission form; completed forms may be submitted to Cindy Perras, DADD Conference Co-ordinator:

**cindy.perras@gmail.com**

*it's completely normal and not something to feel bad or down about.*—Josie Stump

*I think that I deal with feedback well because feedback will sometimes be something that I am somewhat aware of. To then hear it from someone who is experienced and more knowledgeable than me is not only reassuring, but a reason to work and grow.*—James Mase

*Dealing with feedback can be a little scary but because I so badly wish to be the best at what I do I crave to know how I can be better. . . . After understanding that the people who are trying to give me good feedback are not there to ridicule me or put me down but to lift me up and partner [, providing me with] observations and feedback opportunities. . . . I think now I'd be bummed if I didn't get something I could work on or be better at.*—Jessie Oliver

## Conclusion

Negative feedback can lead to a disparaging emotional response if you let it. However, embracing feedback will allow you to demonstrate how you can learn and grow in your career (Smith, 2014). It's okay to take a moment to drink that glass of wine or eat a box of cookies, but then dust yourself off and get back to work! Individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities are counting on us!

To contact Autumn, please send an email to: **eyrea@ uw.edu**

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## Editor's Note
### Ginevra Courtade

I hope you enjoyed the highlights and photos from the DADD 18th International Conference in Clearwater! Join the fun and scholarship at out 19th International Conference-see the call for papers related to research-informed practice in this issue. Also, please note the call for nominations. We are looking for qualified applicants to fill the Vice-President and Canadian Representative positions.

Interested in writing for *DADD Express*? We are soliciting articles for: Teachers' Corner, and our EBP and Legal Briefs sections. If you would like to contribute, please contact me with ideas or questions (**g.courtade@louisville.edu**).

Look to our next issue for pictures of award winners from the 2017 CEC Convention. Enjoy your summer!

I will revisit education's past and present, I hope to inspire excitement about what's possible as the 21st century continues to unfold. How will we determine learner expectations, new ways of teaching, how students and teachers will interact, building a learning system that drives state leadership into positive action for education, and secure an educational foundation within each state that remains unwavering when leadership changes? These are all possibilities!

Finally, I want to urge you to continue your engagement in advocacy when possible. More than a year ago, I described how to be an advocate for education in a previous issue of *DADD Express*: (**http://daddcec.org/Portals/0/CEC/Autism_Disabilities/ Research/Publications/DDDExpress/DADD_15_Fall_ WebFinal.pdf**). As those who support meeting the needs of all children, I wanted to remind each of you that individually and collectively, we can make a difference.