Connecting with Students in Special Education is Essential While Learning from Home

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Coronavirus has forced Indiana schools to close and find alternative ways of providing instruction. Most school districts have plans for eLearning and/or distance learning to meet students' needs academically and to meet their individualized education program (IEP) goals. For some of our students with disabilities, getting online to collaborate with the class or handing in their work is overwhelming to figure out. Some students appear to have withdrawn from school completely. Yet at this moment, grades can still be used for credit and teachers believe students can do well. So, the question is how can teacher's best connect to students to support them in achieving success? Below are some suggestions:

One way is to actually talk to and see one another weekly. An assistant principal (Columbia City High School) shared that his students say it makes a difference that he calls them on the phone regularly. They need the connection. Think about which teachers the specific student interacts and connects best with at school. This could be a special or general education teacher, administrator, counselor, custodian, paraprofessional, related arts teacher, or a combination of people. One might be thinking, how can this occur without using my personal number?

There are many ways to connect with family members and students directly without giving out one's personal phone number. Each educator should choose the option that works best for him or her. Here's a list of options for phone calls, video conferencing, texting, and private chats.

Phone Calls:

- Google Hangouts (Android, iOS, tablet) can be used for video or voice calls with one person or a group, or can be used to send photos, emoji's, videos, maps, and animated GIFs. Turn any conversation into a free group video call with up to 10 people.

- Google Voice (Android and iOS, tablet) allows you to set up a voice number one can place and receive calls from anywhere in the United States. Advantage is all school messages are in one place and not mixed in with one's personal messages.

- WhatsApp (owned by Facebook) allows for messages, voice, and video calls using the internet rather than a mobile network. You can create a group chat.

Videoconferencing:

- Skype meetings (Android, iOS, tablet, computer). Cloud based video conference platform can be used with one or more people at the same time for meetings, webinars, lessons to teach, and live chat.

- Zoom meetings (Android, iOS, tablet, and computer). Cloud based video conference platform can be used with one or more people at the same time for meetings, webinars, lessons to teach, and live chat.

Texting and Private Chats:

- GroupMe app (Android, iOS, computer) is a messaging app to send direct messages and group messages from mobile devices without message limits or fees. Great for small groups to chat or send direct messages. The app will notify one's personal cell phone of a new message.

- Private Facebook Group (Android, iOS, tablet, computer). Educators can create a private Facebook group. Group messages through messenger can be organized to allow students to communicate with each other.

- Remind app (Only iPhone and iPad) can be used for texting, or for sharing files, photos, and content from websites. Can translate messages into more than 90 languages.

Just for fun, you can also use TikTok (free app) to develop short messages to send to students in your class/school.

As a last resort, if using one's personal phone; press *67 before dialing the number to make your own number private.

Once one of these options are set up, connect with parent(s) to get the best cell phone number to reach the student. Text the student to set a time that would be best to call. You should make the first call. Share with the student (and the family) the names of teachers that would like to stay connected with him/her. Make a plan for the times and days the group of staff members can call him on his cell; three or 4 days a week if possible. Then coordinate with the teachers which days' work best for them and plan on topics to talk about over the phone. Make sure parents/family members are informed.

Many students struggle with executive function involving organization, planning, and prioritizing. The student may have not been working for several weeks and may feel like it is impossible to catch up now on work. They may question why they should even try. Just starting or knowing where to start could be difficult to figure out. As a result, the plan during the call could include the educator reminding the student about successes in the past and examples of how s/he came back from being behind before. Listen for the message the student is sharing about where they are stuck and why s/he is not sure how to move forward. Assure the student they can work independently successfully. Together talk through each assignment using a work system (Hume, 2004). For example:

1. What work needs to be done (e.g., subject area). The assignment may be an essay, multiple-choice questions, internet research, or creating a project.

2. How many assignments or how much work needs to be done each day? Make a list, and have the student write them down or send the list electronically. What are the expectations for completion? How many pages? How many problems?

3. How will the student know when the assignment is finished? Share a rubric or systematic task list of information about each assignment.

4. When finished, where should the student send the work for feedback? This could take place via Google Classroom, an email to the teacher, or via mail. Once they have handed the work in, look for the student's work and provide feedback. Compliment the student for completing even part of the assignment. Small steps are important. Remind him/her can call, text, or email a question anytime.

Think about what motivates the student and what kind of reinforcer can be put into place in the eLearning or distance-learning environment. Because of the social isolation felt by many, some may be reinforced by making social connections via Zoom or Skype meetings. Using one of these platforms allows students to talk to many of their classmates and staff members at the same time. This can be set up as a social time to talk freely or used as a time to teach social skills. Some schools have developed

friendship groups at school, such as circle of friends or specific clubs. These groups can be used to implement peer-mediated intervention and instruction (an evidence-based practice) to teach social skills (https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/node/2). This is an opportunity to teach friendship skills related to what is needed during the coronavirus crisis. For example, lessons on the qualities of being a friend, what to expect in a friendship from others, ways to connect with friends ten feet apart, how to be sensitive to others needs, how to ask for help, and many more skills. For ideas on teaching social skills, go to https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/news-events/covid19-resources.html and scroll down for the article: Social Skills Resources for Online Learning.

Overall, it is imperative educators find a way to connect with our students regularly to support them during this crisis. Let's try to stay connected!

Resources

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