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Improving Communication Strategies for Adults With an Intellectual Disability

Nancy Lugo

A Capstone for the Bachelors of Art in Human Development and Family Studies

Introduction

Oftentimes, adults with intellectual disability (ID) lack communication skills and struggle to advocate for themselves. Given their poor communication skills, individuals with ID are more prone to experience low self-esteem, frustration, and social isolation that may affect their daily lives. To address the lack of communication skills among adults who have an intellectual disability, I created one 60-minute lesson about assertive communication for those adults who receive services at Social Vocational Services in Hollister, California.

Need Statement

Many adults with intellectual disability (ID) deal with communication difficulties which may limit their ability to advocate for themselves. Individuals with ID may experience low self-esteem, frustration, and social isolation (DeokJu,2017). These outcomes may have an impact on their daily lives. Because of poor communication skills, adults with ID may become more vulnerable and limit their opportunities for advocacy and social care (Smith, et al.,2019). 50% to 90% of individuals who have intellectual disabilities are estimated to have difficulty with expressing language or difficulty with word-finding (Chinn, 2016). Helping individuals to gain communication skills may have a positive effect on their daily lives by reducing frustration and increasing self-esteem.

Typically, individuals with an intellectual disability are those who have an IQ score between 70 to 75 and show limitations in their development (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2019). Individuals with intellectual disabilities are prone to experience vulnerability in social settings due to a lack of communication skills. Feeling vulnerable and not being able to express themselves can lead to stress and frustration (Hartley &

Maclean, 2009). For many individuals who have an intellectual disability, caregivers take an important role in their lives. Caregivers are often striving to have ID individuals become more independent. Learning communication skills will help adults with ID to be able to express their feelings, control stressful situations, and become more assertive (Hartley & Maclean, 2009). Informal support such as friends, neighbors, peers along with formal support such as services that focus on individuals' needs (Mccausland, Mccallion, Brennan, & Mccarron, 2017). Those who receive support from informal and formal group have a positive impact on individuals with ID who experience a lack of communication skills in their daily lives.

Assertive communication is the most effective way to communicate for those individuals with and without an intellectual disability (Brady, Bruce, et al, 2016). It is a skill that will help individuals to increase their independence and self-advocacy (Anderson & Bigby, 2015). Although there is a lack of research on adults with an intellectual disability who lack communication skills, there is training that can be modified for this specific population. Assertive communication training focuses on improving assertive behaviors that will allow individuals to be able to express themselves comfortably and stand up for themselves when individuals deal with social situations (Larsen & Jordan, 2017). In this training Larsen and Jordan include diverse communities and clinical populations, which have had positive and effective results for individuals to increase their social functioning (Larsen & Jordan, 2017). Given the assertive training provides the opportunity to individuals with non-intellectual disabilities to express feelings directly, feel comfortable and be able to stand up for themselves without feeling anxiety, or any unwanted feelings. There is a strong likelihood that individuals

with ID would benefit from this training because it will be easy to modify for this particular group.

Adults who have an intellectual disability may be more prone to experience self-esteem issues due to having communication difficulties (Brady, Bruce, et al, 2016). According to Smith, et. al, 2019, individual and environmental factors may influence a person's ability to effectively communicate, which can cause low self-esteem. Environmental factors have the ability to influence how well a person develops and maintain communication skills, such as active listening or how well individuals interact with others (Smith, et. al, 2019). In order to be able to help these individuals with ID it is important to understand their limitations. Communication skills are developed through individuals' interactions (Smith, et. al, 2019), this is why an individual's environment is essential to gain communication skills especially those who have an intellectual disability.

Given that adults with an intellectual disability have difficulty communicating, it is likely that they need help in learning effective ways to communicate. Learning new strategies in how to communicate with others without getting frustrated may help them feel less stress and better maintain healthy relationships with others. In order to increase their assertive communication, I intend to provide one, 60- minute lesson about assertive communication for those adults who receive services at Social Vocational Service (SVS) in Hollister, California.

Theory Development

Albert Bandura states that people learn from one another by observation, imitation, and modeling (David, 2019). Bandura's theory may explain how individuals who have intellectual disabilities are able to learn strategies in communicating (David, 2019). Bandura's theory

emphasized the importance of retention, which refers to how individuals can recall what was learned or what was observed. Individuals with intellectual disabilities already have a challenging time communicating, learning from others and imitating can help retain information and can have a higher probability to remember certain information. In my curriculum, I will be providing visuals and activities where participants will be able to observe and learn from the simplified content that is being delivered to them about communication. For individuals with ID, imitation may be an ideal way to learn how to better communicate with others. In my curriculum, participants will have the opportunity to imitate scenarios based on what they have learned about communication with the hope that after imitating the behavior, they will learn how to enact it on their own. Individuals with intellectual disabilities already lack some communication skills due to their disability. Oftentimes, it can cause stress due to not being able to express what they need (Hartley & Maclean, 2010). Individuals who are able to communicate well and gain skills to help to establish and maintain social relationships may also gain the support from others (Brady, Bruce, et al, 2016). The importance of identifying the benefits of effective communication may help ID individuals to feel confident and improve their abilities in communicating. In order to show Bandura's approach through my project I will be showing a short video that gives examples, where it provides real life scenarios that will help the participants to understand ways to better communicate with others. I will provide an environment where participants feel comfortable and provide positive reinforcement.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities may benefit from receiving communication strategies to better their communication skills with their peers and community (Schalick, Westbrook, & Young, 2012). My project will focus on adults who have an intellectual disability,

who will be able to identify the difference between aggressive communication and assertive communication along with learning a stress management technique. The hope for this lesson is to help this particular group to strengthen their communication skills.

Consideration of Diversity

Social Vocational Services (SVS) offers supportive living services to adults (23+) with developmental disabilities that are referred by their Service Coordinator from San Andreas Regional Center. This program is dedicated to helping individuals to live their lives as independent as possible in the setting and community they live in. Services in this region are provided for individuals who reside in Salinas, Morgan Hill, and San Benito County. Clients are given staff and support based on the level of need. Each client is provided with a staff that will help and train them with self-advocacy, behavior modification, independent living, communication, and/ or recreation (Social Vocational Services, 2019). Each year clients are evaluated to see what improvements they have made and to analyze if individuals with ID need more support or if they have learned enough skills and are able to not need much assistance from staff.

As of this year, the majority of the clients who are provided with services at Social Vocational Services are English speakers who are single. This program also provides services to a mother of one and a soon-to-be a mother. For example, most clients who need 24-hour supervision either have behavior issues, clients who take medication that needs to be signed off by someone, who is not able to feed themselves, who have been recommended to not be left alone. This program provides services to not just one category of individuals but with various challenges and intellectual disability from moderate to severe.

My project will be about communication in particular assertive communication and aggressive communication. This will be taught to adults who have an intellectual disability at Social Vocational Service in Hollister, Ca. My target sample will be 5 clients who are diagnosed with an intellectual disability. My participants are diverse ethnically. Based on observation and limited access to certain information two of the participants are Caucasian, and the last two identify as Latinos, one is European American, and the last two are Latino. This ethnic breakdown does not reflect all of the clientele at Social Vocational Services. SVS does not provide data to verify the clientele's ethnic background.

Learning Outcomes

I intend to provide one, 60-minute lesson to adults with an Intellectual Disability who receive services at Social Vocational Services (SVS) in Hollister, CA.

By the end of this project, participants will be able to:

1. Identify assertive and aggressive communication
2. Indicate one stress management technique to use in their lives
3. Demonstrate one example of assertive communication

Methods

My curriculum was taught while my participants received services from SVS, in which their staff made sure to meet on time at one of the client's home. My lesson was held from 4:00pm - 5:00pm on March 7, 2020. Before starting my lesson, I introduced myself and told my participants why I was there. I proceed explaining and passing out waivers to have their permission to take pictures of them during their participation. See Appendix A for the waiver form. I informed my participants why I was there, I did this by explaining my topic and the

importance of improving their communication skills by teaching them strategies they may use in their daily lives. My introduction included a reminder to the participants that they were not forced to participate but I encouraged everyone to do so. Before moving forward, I asked if any of the participants had any questions. Before showing a short video about active listening: how to communicate effectively https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW82k7lwI_U . As a group, we created a chart where half of the chart had “what we know about assertive and aggressive communication” which was done before watching the video, see Appendix B. The other half had “assertive and aggressive communication,” which was completed after watching the video. I encouraged participants to read out loud what we came up with as a group. To conclude this topic, I lead a 10 -minute discussion about what is assertive and aggressive communication with them.

Before starting our next activity, I lead a 15-minute discussion about miscommunication and frustration they might have felt with staff, or peers. After participants shared their experiences, I followed up by explaining briefly what frustration is and why they might feel this way. I then asked who had felt frustrated before, and asked if someone would share a time when they felt frustrated and what they did to manage their frustration. I then talked about techniques to deal with frustration and the importance of them. I then introduced the next activity which took about 30 minutes, where they had the opportunity to make stress balls. See Appendix C. I then gave directions and demonstrated how to make a stress ball as we discussed how a stress ball helps with frustration, along with discussing other techniques that help with frustration. I wrapped up this activity by asking for volunteers to share one technique they will use next time they feel frustrated.

For the remainder of the time, I gave examples of real life scenarios where the participants had the opportunity to apply what they have learned about effective communication. I passed out the last activity, a worksheet with two questions. See Appendix D. This was a great opportunity to see how well my participants understood the material I presented. I ended by thanking the participants for their time and participation.

Results

Learning outcome 1 was that, by the end of my first segment, participants would be able to identify what is assertive and aggressive communication. I believe this learning outcome was fully met. Before showing my participants a short video about communication as a group, I discussed what was assertive and aggressive communication. While leading this discussion, I noted that two out of four knew what was assertive and aggressive communication. After watching the video, all four participants were able to identify what assertive and aggressive communication looked to them. Many of the participants were able to relate to what they learned from the video, but, as we talked, many were able to relate to what assertive and aggressive communication to their past experiences. see Appendix B.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would indicate one stress management technique to use in their lives. While they were discussing miscommunication and how it can lead to frustration, all of the participants were able to share past experiences when they felt frustrated. I transitioned to discussing stress management techniques that can help them with frustration. Participants were more engaged when I used their own experiences, which I believe this helped them understand better and be able to think what they might do when feeling frustrated when they aren't able to express themselves. Participants were able to identify multiple

stress management techniques based on what they learned and what they knew already, See Table 1. Incorporating the stress ball activity, see appendix C, while discussing different types of stress management strategies helped participants feel comfortable sharing their own past experiences, which enhanced their participation and engagement.

For learning outcome 3, participants were to be able to demonstrate one example of assertive communication. I believe this learning outcome was fully met for many reasons. I did notice most of the participants had difficulty spelling words correctly and felt insecure. While going over and discussing everything participants had learned, I passed out a worksheet about communication and noticed one out of four clients was having a hard time spelling and would not write anything. I improvised and decided to go over the worksheet with everyone and made it more of a discussion and give scenarios where participants had to identify if it was assertive or aggressive communication. Four out of four participants were able to demonstrate at least one example of assertive communication. Since it was a discussion, I wrote down their responses as noted in Table 2.

Discussion

I believe this project was successful. Having a small group of participants helped them to be engaged and feel comfortable enough to participate when I asked questions. Before executing my project, I thought it would be somewhat difficult because I have known these participants for a few years and didn't know if they would take me seriously. They were very enthusiastic to help me, and I realized I learned a lot from not only my experience but I learned more about why the participants have a hard time communicating with others. Although there were a few things I would change about how I executed my project, I believe the participants identified what

assertive and aggressive communication was after watching the short video and discussing what they had just watched. Participants were able to indicate one stress management technique to use in their lives while working on the stress balls and giving examples about real-life scenarios directed by me. Participants were able to demonstrate one example of assertive communication based on what they had learned. They all had a positive response and attitude towards wanting to learn about communication.

I think Bandura's theory helped the participants to understand ways to communicate effectively with others. For example, the short video I showed it gave examples of what was considered aggressive and assertive communication by giving real-life scenarios. One thing I made sure to do while executing my project was give positive reinforcement. For example, when a participant would share an experience regarding aggressive or assertive communication, I would praise them for their participation. I also made sure all the participants got along which helped the participants remain engaged.

If I had to do this over again, I wish I would have more time with them. I felt rushed, especially towards the end. During my time with the participants, I noticed I spent a bit more time in some sections that were not required, such as the last worksheet the participants worked on see appendix D. For the future I will lead a discussion to make sure I stay on track. Another thing I would have changed was the video I shared. After showing the participants a short video about miscommunication, I believe the video was not entertaining for them. There were two participants that were losing interest in the video, due to their short attention span. I wish I would have taken that into consideration. I do believe what helped at the end of the video was having a discussion and writing down what they had learned about the video. Something else that I wish I

would have changed was not having to write. There was one participant that had a hard time writing due to his lack of writing skills. I noticed this made him frustrated and wouldn't ask for help which took away from his learning. But after participants shared what they had written down shortly after watching the short video, I noticed the participants were more relaxed. Overall, I do believe all of the participants walked away with at least one new communication strategy that I am positive they will use. I know this because when I see them at work they mentioned how much fun they had and how making a stress ball was something they haven't done before.

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Table

Table 1

List of responses about what stress management technique they will use

Responses	Number of times mentioned
Take a step back before the situation gets worse	4
Breath in and out	4
Talk to someone	2
Take a walk	4
Meditate	1
Use a stress ball	4
Write in my journal	1

*Table 2**List of the participants' examples of assertive communication*

Examples of assertive communication	
Be calm when talking to someone	Participant 1
Look up and make eye contact when someone is talking to you	Participant 2
Be nice and let someone finish talking	Participant 3
Don't feel afraid to speak up in what you believe	Participant 4

Appendices

Appendix A

Photo Release Form for a CSUMB Capstone Project

I _____ give my permission to be photographed by Nancy Delgado, for her capstone project. I understand that the images may be used in her presentation.

Participants Name:

Participants Signature:

Date:

Appendix B

Before and after results of what is assertive and aggressive communication Chart

Before Video	After Video
<p><u>Aggressive Communication:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being • Angry • mean • Saying mean things • demanding to do something • cant say your opinion 	<p><u>Aggressive Communication:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell someone what to do • mean words • rude • Disrespectful • Angry • Bad behavior • Not listening • Only your way • always right • Dishonest • raise your voice
<p><u>Assertive Communication:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How someone feels • expressing feelings • nice • happy • calm • understanding 	<p><u>Assertive Communication:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making eye contact w/others • listening to others • Direct • Do what is right • talk • No pressure • owning up to your mistakes • learning from your mistakes • Being open minded • Be honest

Appendix C

Stress Ball Activity



