

Myth:

People with severe communication impairments cannot learn literacy skills

Introduction

Think back for a moment to when you learned to read. When you started learning you had already gathered a lot of literacy knowledge over your early years. You looked at pictures to reinforce meaning. You used your speech to say the sounds of letters, and to break words apart and put them back together. You played with rhyming (e.g. big, pig, gig, sig). Even now, you may find yourself sounding out words aloud or in your head when you run into one you don't know. Speech can be a helpful tool, both when reading and when learning to read.

Light and McNaughton (2009) summarized available research, noting that individuals with severe communication impairment who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) historically have not had the benefit of reading instruction. These individuals typically read and write at levels well below their peers and many do not even have basic literacy skills. This information leads us to ask the question:

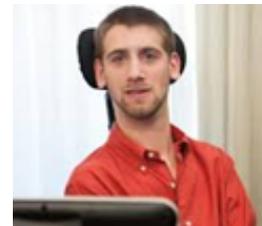


Can people with severe communication impairments learn literacy skills?



We do know that the ability to play with sounds aloud, and to sound out words is beneficial in learning to read. We also know that communication, language, and literacy skills develop in concert with one another (Sturm & Clendon, 2003). But are these factors enough to keep someone with a severe communication impairment from learning to read and write?

The answer to that question is an easy one: No! All over the world, there are individuals who have learned to read and write, despite having a severe communication impairment. These individuals speak different languages and have different conditions, but all have literacy skills that enable them to hold jobs, graduate from universities, and function independently. They use reading every day to enhance their participation and potential.



Since it is possible for individuals with severe communication impairment to read and write independently, we must look at other factors to understand why there is such a literacy gap between people with severe communication impairment and those without. There are two factors that contribute to this gap: differences in the opportunities to engage in literacy instruction and the type of instruction that is offered.



Koppenhaver's (2000) summary of three research studies indicates that "children's emergent literacy learning seemed much less dependent on cognitive capacity than on learning opportunity, modeling of possible uses of print and communication symbols, and access to supportive texts and technologies." Addressing the opportunity for reading instruction for people with severe communication impairment is an issue beyond the scope of this article. However, we can say that there are many countries where this is improving and there remains room for growth.

Let's consider the type of instruction offered. Dr. Janice Light and Dr. David McNaughton (2012a, 2012b) did just this in developing the Accessible Literacy Learning (ALL) curriculum. They used evidence-based literacy instruction and tailored it to the needs of individuals with severe communication impairment by eliminating the need for spoken responses, providing systematic error analysis (which is usually done based on verbal responses), and offering methods to make up for lack of oral production/rehearsal. Their research showed that learners of varying ages and abilities made significant gains in the following areas using the instructional methods prescribed within ALL:

- Letter-sound correspondence.
- Phonological awareness skills (e.g., sound blending, phoneme segmentation).
- Decoding single words.
- Reading sight words.
- Generalizing skills in shared reading activities.

This shows us that learners with severe communication impairments **can** learn literacy skills. Core First Learning is a unique approach because it targets increasing language *and* literacy growth. It is also grounded in evidence-based practices, emphasizing that literacy and language learning are conceptually reinforcing to each other (Erickson & Koppenhaver 1997).



While many factors influence the progress and progression of individuals in learning literacy, Light and McNaughton's research answers our question. Yes, people with severe communication impairments can learn literacy skills.

References

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