

## TASN ATBS Educator Spotlight Supporting Complex Communication through Collaboration

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Tanglewood Elementary, Derby Public Schools

TASN-ATBS is excited to spotlight Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) Lindsey Mohr and Special Education Teacher/SLP Kim Vortherms. This Derby duo attended the Supporting Complex Communication Needs Across Environments training sponsored by TASN-ATBS and Infinitec. Below they share valuable information about collaboration and outcomes for students with complex needs.

### **1. Why is collaboration between support staff and classroom educators important?**

I think we all want autonomy in our careers; we pride ourselves on independence. After all, we worked HARD to earn the degrees we have. But when a student is caught in the middle of two professionals wanting to “figure it out for themselves” who gets the short end of that stick? Unfortunately, the student does. In our school, rather than focusing on our own independence, we pride ourselves on our efforts to collaborate. The open communication we’ve established at Tanglewood Elementary in Derby, KS, and the ability to use each other as sounding boards when necessary didn’t happen by coincidence. It’s rare and special and we’ve used it to propel our students in achieving their goals.

### **2. What does collaboration mean for students in general? How does it support his or her communication outcomes?**

We know that repetition is key for learning new skills. As adults, we often need to do something over and over (and over) until it is committed to memory and it becomes second nature. The same is true for learning new communication skills. For a student, increased collaboration means increased opportunities to practice new skills, to work on new goals, and ultimately to master those goals. When a team, like ours, decides to work together for the benefit of the student, that student is provided an increased amount of support from all angles, an increased number of repetitions to practice, and ultimately achieve his or her goals.

### **3. How did the Complex Communication Training and Communication Support Tool modify your collaboration with your students’ educational team?**

The Complex Communication Training forced us to sit down, go through the communication support tool, and look at our collaboration and what that meant for students more closely. Yes, we communicate well and work together to help each other and our students, but by using the communication tool we were given an opportunity to organize and better format how we approach goal writing and working with our students to meet their unique needs, specifically our students using AAC devices. We were given the opportunity to maximize how we worked with our students. The communication tool helped us to really narrow in on where the student was struggling, in both the educational classroom and the speech classroom, then write goals that would marry those areas of struggle together. The training provided a guide that was easy to use and provided a wealth of usable information.

\*For more information regarding this tool and its use contact Lori Chambers [loric@tasnatbs.org](mailto:loric@tasnatbs.org),  
[Link to the fillable Communication Supports Tool](#)  
[Link to TASN ATBS 21-22 Training Flyer](#)

#### **4. What positive changes did you see, in regards to collaboration and student success, from attending the Complex Communication Training?**

The training emphasized the importance of collaboration when determining the communication needs of a student and then continuing this collaboration as the student becomes more adept at using the communication system. We understand the need to collaborate on a consistent basis, not just when determining goals, but when implementing these goals and targeting them as well. This increased awareness and working together, enabled us to provide the best possible service and training to our student and support staff. We ended up targeting goals throughout the student's day, rather than just in a 20-minute speech session.

#### **5. What was the impact of collaboration for our student?**

The student we used as a model during the training was new to Tanglewood Elementary and the functional classroom. He communicated primarily through behaviors and using an adult. He had many meltdowns daily as he tried to navigate a new classroom, new expectations and new structure. It was quickly decided that he needed significant visual supports to assist him throughout his day. A visual schedule, task strips, and a visual reinforcement system were implemented immediately. These did help decrease some of the challenges but he still did not have a way to communicate outside of using behaviors. We worked as a team to decide on what type of system would best benefit this student. Even though we had started the process prior to the TASN training, the training helped us become more specific in determining the student's specific needs to finding the best fit. It was determined that a categorical type of display would best fit his needs and so we started using Snap, Core First on an iPad with this student. He quickly learned several core words and was able to use these independently, or with minimal support, in the speech room as well as in the classroom. His inappropriate behaviors continued to decrease and he was able to communicate. His personality began to shine and we got to see the special child that he is. This student was given the power of words for communicating! He is now communicating both with his communication device and verbally. He is putting words together, trying to interact with peers and has become a real helper in the classroom. This child is night and day different from his first few weeks at school. The growth he has made is phenomenal. We do not believe he could have achieved this growth without the collaboration between the SLP, classroom teacher and support staff. His success definitely supports the need for collaboration on a regular and consistent basis. Just think what we could do for all our kids we could collaborate and not try to do it on our own!



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