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# Penn State receives federal grant to improve services for children with complex communication needs

Oct 20 2017

Penn State faculty members have received a \$1.25 million federal grant to address a shortage in speech-language pathologists and special educators with master's degrees who have the knowledge and experience in Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) practices, in order to improve school-based services and results for children, teens and young adults with complex communication needs.

Such children, including individuals with developmental disabilities like autism, cerebral palsy or Down syndrome, may not be able to meet their communication needs through their own speech. Due to challenges with speech, individuals benefit from the use of AAC and assistive technologies. AAC systems often include computers, tablets or mobile devices.

The five-year grant, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, will prepare 18 master's-level, fully credentialed scholars, nine in communication sciences and disorders and nine in special education.

Specifically, scholars will develop competencies in evidence-based practices related to instruction, assessment, collaboration and individualized support to improve results and services for children with complex communication needs who require AAC. The collaborative training includes shared courses, interdisciplinary group projects, practicum experiences with children who use AAC, and AAC-related research activities.

Jessica Caron, assistant professor of communication sciences and disorders at Penn State, and David McNaughton, professor of special education with a dual appointment in communication sciences and disorders, are the principal investigators for the project.

"The need for quality services and knowledgeable providers is especially important for children who require the use of AAC, as all teaching and

learning is realized through communication. If children are to achieve access to an appropriate education, they must be able to communicate effectively," Caron said. "This grant provides an exciting opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children who require AAC and their families, through the scholars' development of advanced competencies in AAC and devotion to translating these competencies in a school setting upon graduation."

McNaughton said, "This grant enables Penn State to prepare both speech-language pathologists and special education teachers with state-of-the-art information on AAC intervention, as well as the skills needed for effective teamwork. Successful AAC intervention requires collaboration between communication and education specialists, the family and the child. This grant supports our ability to teach key skills with preservice professionals using interdisciplinary learning activities, and will result in highly prepared graduates."

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**Source:**

<http://news.psu.edu/story/489395/2017/10/20/research/125-million-grant-improve-treating-children-autism-other-needs>

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