

The Role of Speech-Language Pathologists in Supporting Autistic People

The Position of Speech-Language & Audiology Canada

It is the position of Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC) that speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) play a critical role in enhancing the well-being of Autistic people and their families across the lifespan through evidence-informed communication services and supports. S-LPs must work in neurodiversity-affirming ways and in collaboration with Autistic people and their families.

Background/Rationale

The unique contributions of S-LPs are fundamental to effective and holistic program planning to support Autistic people and their families across the lifespan. Variations in social communication and social interactions are considered core features of autism (American Psychological Association, 2013; Fletcher & Watson, 2019). S-LPs have specialized knowledge in the assessment and support of social communication differences and disorders; therefore, they are well-positioned to address the needs of people with diagnosed and suspected autism. In fact, S-LPs are often one of the first health professionals to notice developmental differences that may be aligned with autism and to refer individuals for diagnostic testing and other services. Furthermore, speech-language pathology services are the most frequently accessed support for young Autistic children following diagnosis (Al Jabery et al., 2014; Denne et al., 2017; Salomone et al., 2016; Volden et al., 2015). S-LPs receive training that gives them a thorough understanding of the development of social communication skills as well as social communication differences. This knowledge puts S-LPs in a unique position to support both Autistic people and non-autistic people to have more successful interactions. Supporting positive interactions between non-autistic and Autistic individuals can contribute to the well-being of the Autistic person as well as their family and friends.

S-LPs should work in collaboration with Autistic individuals and families to deliver services that encourage autonomy and are aligned with their values and needs (Field & Hoffman, 1999; Wehmeyer et al., 2010). In the framework of neurodiversity-affirming practices (e.g., Brown et al., 2021; Prizant, 2022), S-LPs do not aim to “cure” or “treat” autism (Binns et al., 2021). Instead, S-LPs provide assessment services that allow for the identification of differences and challenges in the domains of speech, communication, language, literacy, play, feeding and swallowing, and enable informed and individualized delivery of supports. S-LPs also provide supports and consultation to those in Autistic individuals’ environments (e.g., caregivers, peers, colleagues) and can support the creation of environments that fit individual and family needs (e.g., by removing barriers to inclusion). Attending to participation barriers is of importance considering that many studies have indicated Autistic youth become increasingly isolated from their peers and community, experience more restricted independence and employment opportunities, and have more limited access to bilingual/multilingual opportunities and higher education than their non-autistic peers (Davis et al., 2021; Liptack et al., 2011; Shattuck et al., 2011). Finally, S-LPs also deliver evidence-informed services that focus on supporting a range of skill development areas based on individual preference and need, including the use of augmentative and alternative communication, comprehension, language use, literacy, social communication, bilingual/multilingual supports, play, speech production, and feeding and swallowing (Binns et al., 2022; Digard & Davis, 2021). Notably, there is no single most effective program or approach that can be used to support all Autistic people (Whitehouse et al., 2020); therefore, S-LPs are encouraged to make use of a range of evidence-informed supports that align with individual and family needs and values and with neurodiversity-affirming practices. The breadth of S-LPs’ scope of practice enhances their ability to tailor assessment processes and the selection of goals, strategies, and supports to each individual client and family. This is crucial given the heterogeneity of autism and changing client and family needs across the lifespan (Lai et al., 2020; Masi et al., 2017).

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