Myth:

Individuals can be too old to learn communication and literacy skills

Introduction

- "We tried to teach him to read but it didn't work."
- "She didn't make any progress."
- "He's not interested in books."
- "It is too late now."
- "You have to learn to read when you are young."

Have you heard statements like these before? They represent beliefs that build up barriers between people with disabilities and literacy learning. They result in people with disabilities having limited access to literacy materials, reduced exposure to meaningful, comprehensive literacy instruction, and inadequate time and space for learning. These beliefs are not based in evidence.

What does current evidence reveal? It tells us that it is possible to learn to read at any point in life. In fact, literacy learning occurs and continues throughout our lives whether we receive direct instruction or not.

Let's use ourselves as examples first. Our literacy learning did not stop when we stopped learning to read, or even when we left school. We have continued to:

- Learn new words.
- Deepen comprehension about favorite topics.
- Increase fluency with certain types of reading materials, such as manuals, research papers, newspapers, etc.

This ongoing learning also occurs in individuals with disabilities. Though their progress may not appear as significant or functional, exposure to environmental text and literacy activities over the course of their lives has often increased their literacy skills. They may be more able to:

- Identify pictures in books.
- Understand new words through exposure and conversation.
- Relate experiences to stories they hear.
- Identify environmental signs.
- Recognize letters in words.
- Attend to stories for longer periods of time.

All of these skills are foundational to learning literacy and direct instruction can build on these.

Research shows us that individuals who are able to benefit from direct instruction in basic literacy skills were not just young children. These individuals range in age and type of disability, including:

- Individuals who were 8, 12, and 13 years old, with cerebral palsy, multiple disabilities, and autism spectrum disorder (Light & McNaughton, 2012).
- A 54-year-old woman with cerebral palsy and cognitive delay (Ollie & Swanson, 2006).
- Individuals ages 9 to 14 with intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, or Down syndrome (Fallon et al., 2004).

Just like the younger learners, they made progress in their literacy skills and demonstrated gains in some or all of these areas:

- Learned letter-sound correspondences.
- Acquired phonological awareness skills (sound blending, phoneme segmentation).
- Learned to decode single words.
- Generalized their decoding skills use in shared reading activities.

Though we do not know how much any one individual can or will progress in his/her literacy skills, we do know that he/she will not grow at all if we do not try.

References

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Ollie, M. & Swanson, M. (2006, November). *Facilitating Literacy Skills in an Adult who Uses AAC.* Poster presented at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention 2006, Miami, FL. Retrieved from: http://www.asha.org/Events/convention/handouts/2006/1298_Ollie_Melissa