

Intentional Collaboration with Speech-Language Pathologists to Support Language Outcomes of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) often have comorbid language difficulty, and this difficulty with language is an important area of focus for their academic and social success (Chow et al., 2018). Children who are diagnosed with language disorders in school are at higher risk for social problems (Brinton & Fujiki, 1993; Chow et al., 2021), face substantial vocational barriers when they enter the workforce (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2018) and are more likely to report higher alcohol use, have contact with law enforcement, and exhibit aggressive behavior (Winstanley et al., 2018). It is not surprising that language disorders may contribute to some of the similar poor outcomes that children with EBD face (Lloyd et al., 2019). This may be due, in part, to the high proportion of students with EBD who have unidentified language delays (Hollo et al., 2014). Studies have shown that students with EBD struggle with comprehensive measures of language (Hollo et al., 2019), specifically in the areas of expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language (Chow & Wehby, 2018; Mackie & Law, 2010). The wide variety of domains impacted by language difficulties suggests that experts in language development should provide insight into accurate identification and appropriate intervention. As such, identifying and promoting effective collaborative strategies for teachers of students with EBD that support language development is important.

One promising collaborative relationship that may have high utility is one between special education teachers (SETs) and speech-language pathologists (SLPs). This may be particularly advantageous for teachers who have students with EBD in their classrooms. Given that language skills and problem behavior are significantly related in children with EBD (Chow & Wehby, 2019), with language delays (Curtis et al., 2018), and the typically developing

population (Chow, 2018), there is a clear need for teachers to become more familiar with how to support the language development of students with EBD. SLPs bring a level of experience in typical and atypical language development that is not present in or expected of SETs. Intentional collaboration aimed at improving SETs ability to deliver high-quality instruction that is sensitive to behavioral and language needs or by working together to ensure that the instructional content is aligned with the child's present level of performance is likely to improve outcomes for students with EBD.

Reciprocal Collaborative Benefits

Teachers can benefit from the expertise of SLPs, and a reciprocally collaborative relationship support the SLPs in their service delivery as well. For example, teachers learn classroom and behavior management practices in their preservice programs (Moore et al., 2017), whereas the overwhelming majority of SLPs do not (Chow & Wallace, 2019). SETs also likely have a stronger working knowledge of the curriculum students are currently learning. Establishing ongoing, positive professional relationships between these two important educators can support students with EBD in the general education setting, but also students receiving services from SLPs including students with learning disabilities, EBD, and other disabilities. Researchers have also argued that SLPs and teachers can co-develop goals for students in the classroom (Archibald, 2017; Wallace et al., 2021), which provides the individualized education program (IEP) team with opportunities for educators to see language, learning, and social behaviors in the naturally occurring classroom setting. This effort should be intentional in the special education setting. This engages both educators in an inclusive setting and allows multiple perspectives that include large- and small-group instruction, centers, and peer-to-peer learning and social interactions. From a relationship standpoint, collaborating on goals as well as forming

positive personal and professional relationships can help build community rapport and mutual respect that is crucial to successful collaboration.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight SET and SLP collaboration as a potential high-leverage relationship to support the outcomes of students with EBD. However, this collaborative effort is likely to have benefits beyond the assessment, identification, and support of language deficits in students with EBD. With teachers' help, SLPs can learn skills like effective behavior management practices and delivery strategies that are appropriate for the general education setting. This directly relates to ensuring that special education services are being delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which is mandated by federal law, and may also encourage more instances of SLP intervention delivery in general education settings when it is the LRE.

It is likely that current collaborations are underway, especially in contexts where SLPs and teachers have the time and resources to plan thoughtful, effective intervention approaches for students with EBD. However, given the under identification of language deficits in students with EBD, it is likely that a substantial number of students with EBD who have meaningful language deficits are not receiving services for this need. To provide students with EBD the language support that many of them require, it is important to assess the language skills of students with EBD to make a data-based decision of the potential language need (Chow & Hollo, 2018). With this approach, teams can identify potentially important areas for intervention that go beyond solely developing behavior interventions for students with EBD. Another avenue of additional support is active discussion of language and communication of all students with EBD in individual education program (IEP) team meetings. This will ensure that the IEP team recruits the expertise of SLPs in the context of IEP goal development. Actively integrating SLP expertise

and support of behavior specialists can improve the team's communication and precision of the IEP team decisions that support students with EBD.

SLP-Teacher Collaboration in the Context of the IEP Process

Part B of IDEA (2004) requires that a student with a disability has an IEP that meets their individual and unique needs. School personnel work with parents or guardians to create an IEP specific to their child's needs that aims to increase academic achievement and functional performance. The IEP process consists of six steps which includes 1) pre-referral/referral, 2) evaluation, 3) eligibility 4) IEP development, 5) IEP implementation, and 6) re-evaluation. This process is unique for each student and provides an opportunity for the SET, SLP, parents, administrators, and a general education teacher (and in some cases, the student will participate in the meeting) to work together to identify and describe student needs and goals, detail individualized services, and document educational progress. The steps in the process help teachers and related service providers to successfully implement an IEP as designed. This paper integrates intentional collaborative recommendations into each of the steps of the IEP process that SETs and SLPs can use and provides an example at each stage to illustrate this process. See Table 1 for a brief overview of considerations, benefits, and recommendations throughout the IEP process.

For illustrative purposes, this paper provides examples in practice using a scenario with a student, Wesley, who has been identified with EBD. He is a fourth grader who was identified with EBD because of his disruptive behavior in class, particularly during longer periods of academic instruction. Our examples cover all the stages of the IEP process but recognizes that some students (like Wesley) may already have been identified with EBD, while others may be just beginning pre-referral of any kind for the first time. Each student and scenario will be

different, but this paper provides examples of collaboration at each stage for a student who has already been identified as having EBD.

Pre-Referral and Referral

The pre-referral is the initial step that is taken in the IEP process as an attempt to improve the problem prior to referral. The pre-referral process is conducted prior to a referral so the SET and SLP make more informed clinical decisions to help determine whether there are underlying factors that contribute to possible speech/language deficits or disorders not related to the reasons they are receiving services for EBD. Teachers may be able to identify speech/language deficits in ways other than student engagement in problem behavior.

Pre-referral interventions and strategies are implemented as part of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in accordance with their local education agencies policies. The interventionist may vary based on local and state policies; in some cases, SLPs will implement and monitor pre-referral interventions, and in other cases, they will provide support to teachers who will be responsible for the interventions. In the latter case, SLPs will provide SETs with the materials, resources, and training necessary to implement language-supportive strategies and interventions with fidelity and accurate data collection. Interventions may take place in the classroom or require pull-out from SLPs, and data on the intervention and/or strategies is collected over several weeks to determine the effectiveness of meeting students' needs.

Students with EBD benefit from remaining in their LRE, and MTSS strategies and interventions may be less intrusive than a self-contained special education classroom or receiving traditional pull-out speech/language services (Sylvan, 2018). Teachers' implementation of language-supportive strategies is by no means restricted to children in the MTSS process or those with special education services, nor are these practices exclusive to children with language

deficits, though they may see the most benefit. It is noteworthy that teachers who operate outside of MTSS context may need to be more proactive in asking for support and suggesting SLP involvement. Table 2 provides a brief overview of several evidence-based language-supportive strategies.

The SET and SLP must be mindful of the distinction between language differences (e.g., English learners, dialectal variations) and disorder; disorder may occur within a dialect, but language differences are not inherently disordered. Together, the SET and SLP can ensure that they identify if any unaddressed characteristics of speech and language impairments that could be overlooked in students with EBD and whether a formal referral for a language disorder is needed. Over the course of several weeks, the SET and SLP will document any strategies, interventions, materials, and/or resources used to address that student's needs. If there is no improvement in the language outcomes of the student, the SET and SLP may submit a formal referral for the student for an evaluation. The full IEP team will hold a meeting to review existing data and if there is a need for additional data. Additional data may include any observations (e.g., engagement in social interactions and academics), special education, benchmark and state assessments, input from teacher(s), parent(s), and the student (if applicable), grade level expectations (e.g., expected performance versus actual performance), and behavioral data (e.g., attendance, referrals, etc.). Essentially, the team will be telling a story and describing the student's strengths, identifying potential needs, and bringing to light the need for an IEP to ensure the student has success for the school year. Collectively, the team will decide if the student with EBD requires a formal evaluation or if the existing data is enough to continue to the next step of the IEP process. The SLP's expertise may be useful in guiding decisions related to

assessment and provide information unknown to the SET; the SLP may rely on the SET to provide information about any diagnoses, family dynamics, behaviors, and other challenges.

Example in Practice. Children and youth like Wesley, who is a 3rd grader student identified with EBD, face many challenges that impact development including language and communication. During teacher-led group instruction and small group instruction, Wesley's classroom teacher recognizes that his verbal expression seems to lag behind his peers. His vocabulary is basic, and his sentences are often simple in comparison to his peers who are developing more advanced sentence structures. Because general education teachers and SETs in this school know to keep an eye out for language issues in their students with EBD, the general education teacher knows to complete a form that documents these language concerns and gives it to the SET and SLP. After the SLP reviews these language-related concerns, both (SET and SLP) work together to determine appropriate pre-referral interventions to improve Wesley's language targets in the classroom setting. Upon receiving parent permission, the SLP applies the MTSS model and Response to Intervention (RtI) that incorporates language strategies from Tiers I and II, to support Wesley's language development, and visual activity schedules to support his behavioral needs. These include teacher-implemented strategies, such as open-ended comments, wait time, expansions, and more (see Table 2). For example, Wesley's teacher modified her shared storybook reading of *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) to feature these language-supportive strategies. Whereas she previously used closed-ended questions to check for attention and comprehension (e.g., "Where did Charlotte and Wilbur go?"), she pre-planned open-ended questions to provide her students the opportunity to generate their own responses free of syntactic and semantic constraints (e.g., "Tell me about Wilbur's trip to the county fair," or "Why do you think Charlotte stayed behind after Wilbur left?"). Though the SET's class may sit

in silence when she asks the questions, she is mindful to provide appropriate wait time of up to 20-30 seconds. This feels like a long time to the SET, but it provides children like Wesley an opportunity to process her question and generate a response. Even if the students do not volunteer an answer to her question, they may use the extended wait time to think of possible responses in their mind, which also exercises their language. When a student answers her question with a response like “Wilbur won a prize,” the SET implements expansion by responding “Yes, that courageous pig Wilbur won a special prize at the county fair,” which conveys the same message while modeling more advanced vocabulary and syntax.

It is important to highlight the simultaneous support of language development and behavior for Wesley. The SLP can use effective language intervention (see Chow et al., 2020a) and low-effort behavior management strategies (see Chow et al., 2020b) to ensure that his behavior is being supported to set the stage for effective language intervention. Collaboration between the SET and SLP is essential in monitoring and facilitating Wesley’s language progress to examine whether the intervention was effective or if an evaluation may be needed. After eight weeks of RtI and progress monitoring, both the SLP and SET review data collected and find that Wesley’s vocabulary and syntax have not improved and that an evaluation is warranted. With these data (e.g., reported area of concern, documentation of problem, evidence that the problem is ongoing, background information, accommodations and interventions attempted, and summary of progress), the SET and SLP refer Wesley to the full IEP team for the next step of the process.

Evaluation

Evaluations are conducted to provide data on whether the student has a disability and can be found eligible to receive special education services. Upon referral, the IEP team may agree that a formal assessment is not necessary, and if so, the team may schedule an eligibility meeting

using existing data. If after reviewing these data, the team determines that evaluation is needed, the SLP should determine which assessment(s) are appropriate to assess the areas of concern for language that align with state and local requirements. The SLP may collect data from a variety of sources, including standardized assessments, non-standardized assessments/probes, criterion-referenced assessments, parent/teacher/caregiver measures, observation, and language sample analysis. The specific assessment battery may vary based on the needs of the student and the requirements of the local education agency, but best practice requires multiple and varied sources of assessment data, and the *de facto* norm often includes at least one standardized assessment unless contra-indicated based on student characteristics. During assessment, SLPs may assess expressive and receptive language, speech sound production, fluency, pragmatics/social exchanges, and/or other communication skills, based on the concerns of the IEP team. In the case of EBD and the overlap with social skills deficits, pragmatics and social exchanges are important areas of additional assessment and should be considered together with any social goals the student has on their IEP as a part of their behavior intervention plan.

Once the language assessments are completed, the SLP will score raw data and complete a report that shares the results of the assessment. The IEP team will use this report to help determine whether the student is eligible for language services on the IEP. When presenting the report, the SLP and SET will collaboratively present an overview of the student which includes language strengths and weaknesses and any supplement information from other areas (e.g., classroom data, other evaluations such as psycho-educational assessment). Once the evaluation of the student is complete, the team will determine if the student is eligible for language services on the IEP.

Example in Practice. After eight weeks of RtI, the SET and SLP agree that Wesley should be referred for an evaluation, and a meeting is held with the entire IEP team. The SLP suggests using the Comprehensive Assessment of Spoken Language-Second Edition (CASL-2; Carrow-Woolfolk, 2017) to evaluate Wesley's fundamental language skills, a language sample analysis, multiple observations across different settings during the school day to obtain a better understanding of Wesley's academic and social use of language, and reports from Wesley's parents and teachers to identify areas in which his language skills do not meet his academic and social needs. The SET and SLP will work together to schedule the observations and assessment at times that will not interfere with other academic content or behavior/social support. The SLP will observe Wesley twice, complete a detailed observation form during each session that indicates whether certain skills were observed as well as any additional comments, and may draw on support from the general education teacher or a paraprofessional if additional observations are warranted. The SLP may compile a portfolio of his scores, observations, background information, and work samples to present to the IEP team to determine eligibility.

Eligibility

The eligibility is part of the process to determine if the student qualifies for special education services. The IEP team, including the SLP, will review the evaluation results to determine if (1) the student meets the criteria for a disability category as described within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004; e.g., Speech or Language Impairment), (2) the disability impacts a student's performance, and (3) the disability requires special education services as well as related services. The team also considers the influence of factors that may confound the eligibility decision such as the lack of appropriate instruction or whether the student is an English learner. To ensure eligibility, the team should consider the following: (1)

comprehensive data across all areas (academic, cognitive, adaptive, emotional/behavioral, language, and social and motor skills), (2), multiple data sources (intervention data, MTSS data, parent input determining and planning for more intense level of service), and (3) evidence of appropriate delivery of math and reading instruction. The SET may depend on the SLP to give a clear and detailed description of why the student is eligible for SLP services and how it impedes on the student's academic performance and functional performance. The SLP will need the SET to document difficulties the student has by providing examples that involve difficulties with language. This information will provide sound evidence to determine the student's eligibility.

Example in Practice. At the IEP meeting, the SET and SLP will collaboratively present Wesley's portfolio of all evaluations, work samples, observations, and background information related to determining the need for SLP services for language. The SLP will provide documentation and explanation of Wesley's skills and deficits specific to language and communication across settings; The SET, perhaps in collaboration with the general education teacher, will explain how the presence and absence of these language skills affect his performance in the general education classroom. Given the necessary expertise and background experience to accurately interpret the results of language assessments, the SLP should ensure that their review of the results across the subdomains of language are presented in a clear, objective manner without jargon and to help provide data-based examples of the identified difficulty. At this time, the team should discuss how the language difficulties the evaluation identified intersect with any of the behavioral challenges that Wesley was exhibiting to merit EBD identification. It is this rich discussion that should lead to effective IEP development and implementation.

IEP Development

The IEP team, with input from the SET and SLP, will determine goals appropriate, realistic, and feasible for the team to implement. The IEP team will also determine the type, setting, frequency, and duration of services. This is where the SLP can contribute their expertise to the development of speech-language goals and any tools and supports that can improve the student's performance in an academic setting. If there are co-occurring behavior goals/needs, they should be considered together in planning supports. The IEP team will consider the special education placement (i.e., setting, frequency, and duration of services) to maximize the benefit of services while ensuring that the student is educated in the LRE based on their needs. During this process, the SET and SLP are encouraged to complete a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time -Bound (SMART) goals document for each area of concern based on the results of the evaluations conducted. While the document is not a part of the IEP itself, it guides educators and SLPs decisions when creating the goals. Goals will include (a) the date by which the goal should be mastered (following annual IEP date, (b) the direction of the goal, (c) the area of need, (d) level of attainment, and (e) the criterion or measurement of the goal (e.g., By 03/20/2022, when given picture cues and a verbal question, Wesley will connect simple sentences with "and" or "because" with 80% accuracy as measured by observation, across three consecutive sessions). Table 3 provides additional examples of goals that target both language and behavioral needs of the student. Goals should be informed by assessment, aligned with the student's needs and current level of performance, and measured in a way that lends itself to meaningful data and progress (Diehm, 2017). Once the goal has been written, the SET and SLP can share this document with each other and work collaboratively to align behavioral and language goals. This document will help guide measurable objectives and benchmarks that will help support the needs of the student with EBD. One example that can address both language and

behavior is for SLPs and SETs to use social pragmatic language goals (because of the overlap with social skills) to ensure that the students' behavior and language needs are being met. Any academic and speech/language accommodations needed throughout the school day and/or within the classroom will be discussed among the IEP team and added to the IEP if found to help meet students' needs (e.g., assistive technology). The SLP will contribute to sections of the IEP that involve strengths, weaknesses, and evaluations of the student in speech and/or language, and importantly, identifying and writing language goals.

Example in Practice. The SET and SLP review the results of Wesley's language evaluations and determine the appropriate goals according to the SMART goals template. In Wesley's case, while he demonstrated very low levels of receptive language, particularly in the areas of syntax and comprehension, he also demonstrated average to low expressive language across all domains. This suggests that Wesley potentially has trouble communicating, but that he may have some more severe difficulty in understanding what his teachers and peers are saying. The SET and SLP design procedures that focus on implementing language intervention that focuses on increasing Wesley's ability to effectively communicate with others and understand both spoken and written language. This aligns with his current behavioral goals that have been focusing on exhibiting appropriate behavior during whole group instruction. They hypothesized that Wesley may be exhibiting problem behavior in this setting because he is having trouble understanding the material (e.g., written directions or verbal directions) presented to him and he has learned that misbehaving usually gets him a time out, escape from having to complete the material or activity, and/or specific attention from his peers and teacher. Therefore, the focus is primarily on the behavior rather than whether Wesley completes the assignment. He has also learned that he rarely needs to listen to more instruction after he misbehaves, which is

reinforcing given his challenges with language comprehension. Their hypothesis aligns with the “academic failure hypothesis,” which suggests that underachievement (e.g., learning and communication difficulties) precedes the emergence of conduct problems (Hinshaw, 1992). This association between achievement and behavior may be related to frustration, lowered self-image, demoralization, or lack of school attachment. Indeed, children with language impairments are twice as likely to develop challenging behaviors than their language-typical peers (Yew & O’Kearney, 2013), which provides evidence for the predictive pathway from language disorders to problem behaviors seen in children like Wesley.

IEP Implementation

The SET and SLP will support the student with EBD to ensure appropriate progress and that this progress is being made in the LRE. Ongoing and consistent communication between the SET and SLP will facilitate any necessary adjustments. By collaborating, the SLP can promote generalization by sharing strategies and resources for the student to carry over into the classroom. For example, teachers may modify their instructional language by reducing the rate and complexity, reducing mazes (i.e., fillers, false starts, hesitations, revisions), and being cautious of abstract and nonliteral statements (Hollo et al., 2020). Teachers can implement additional strategies to support students with language disorders including wait time (allowing for active listening, models of thinking, and wait time activities) and scaffolding strategies (including generalization, reasoning, and prediction) (Chow et al., 2020a). In turn, the SET can share strategies that have been effective in the classroom with the SLP. Together, the SLP and SET can continue to update each other on any changes in academic and functional performance.

The SET and SLP will collect data to monitor progress to provide an accurate representation of the student’s educational progress; language and communications skills often

vary based on setting, so neither the SLP nor the SET may see the complete picture. The SET will rely on the support of the SLP, who have more expertise and knowledge on speech and language-related tools and supports (e.g., language-specific organizers, social stories, etc.), to ensure that they are being used appropriately across content areas. The SLP will work with the SET to guarantee that services are aligned with academic needs; targets and materials should be relevant to the student's education and be developmentally appropriate, and services should not interfere with core instructional content or material.

Example in Practice. During the IEP year, the SLP will document when service is provided as well as when they provide any training to the SET or paraprofessionals that work directly with Wesley. The SET will document instances when SLP services are implemented during academic content, and when the SET works with the SLP on how to manage Wesley's behavior effectively and proactively during language intervention delivery. Additionally, both will collect data on Wesley's goals to ensure that objectives and benchmarks are being met, or if the SET and SLP needs to adjust prompt levels until mastery is reached. They will regularly check to make sure they are using similar data collection forms to provide consistency and ease of understanding. This effort will help align progress monitoring as well as improve the efficiency of and communication during team meetings.

The IEP Goal Data Collection Sheet and Graph (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) is an example of how IEP data can be collected by both the SET and SLP. The speech language goal on the data collection sheet (Figure 1) focuses on increasing Wesley's expressive language skills that may be related to EBD; this area of need may be a partial explanation for his behavioral challenges. The goal is for Wesley to independently use two critical features to describe an object or picture when given an object or picture by a given date (e.g., 03/01/22). The SET and

SLP will record the date the session occurred, the number of correct student responses out of total opportunities given, the criterion of mastery (e.g., 80%), and whether a prompt or modifications were used. Due to Wesley's needs, the SLP will use prompts as a part of scaffolding to build upon Wesley's previous skills and to decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviors.

Additionally, there is a section for any fieldnotes to be recorded (e.g., the student had difficulties with one part of the assignment but excelled in another part). To calculate the percentage, the SET and SLP will divide the correct number of responses by the total number of opportunities and then multiply that number by 100. This percentage will indicate whether the student met criteria for mastery or not. Then, the SET and SLP will graph the percentage on the graph to give a visual representation of progress as well as to visually indicate any modifications. See supplementary materials for blank versions of documents.

Annual Review and Re-Evaluation/Eligibility

The IEP team will conduct annual reviews and re-evaluation/eligibility determination meetings as required under IDEA. Given the purposes of this paper, this paper does not go into detail about the procedures here but instead provides some consideration. Because eligibility cannot be changed at the annual review meetings, it is important to make sure that the level or dose of services, across behavioral and language needs are a focus of discussion. During this discussion, the team will determine by looking at IEP goal progress and permanent products gathered through the year to determine whether the student may need less or more services (e.g., less consult time, but more direct speech services or speech services increased to 30 minutes a week versus 15 minutes). It will also be important to decide which areas of intervention and in what sequence they might need to be delivered. Both SLPs and SETs have different experiences

and areas of expertise which can provide important perspectives not typically considered in isolation. At the re-evaluation stage, the team has an opportunity to determine whether, in our case, Wesley, is still eligible for services and under which categories. It is our hope that effective and early collaboration will increase the likelihood that Wesley's team will be able to conclude that less-intensive services are needed for him to keep making educational progress. If he remains eligible for services, the SLP and SET will provide the team with a detailed update on Wesley's progress and goals over the three-year timeframe, including any progress or challenges with his language skills.

In this scenario, we have provided examples in the context of a student who was already identified with EBD. In practice, educators encounter students with a variety of language skills and levels of behavioral functioning. It is important to recognize that the issues we cover in this paper can, and indeed likely, go beyond children who are identified with EBD. We encourage educators to consider applying these principles and practices around language assessment broadly to ensure students with language difficulties can receive targeted intervention as needed.

Conclusion

In the context of special education services and the IEP process, there is a high-leverage opportunity for SETs and SLPs to actively work together to support outcomes for students with EBD. Given the common overlap between low language skills and EBD, it is essential that language be a key part of the assessment and evaluation stages of the IEP process to ensure that no language disorder or potential disorder goes untreated. SLPs can use their expertise to integrate a focus on language and communication into IEP teams to help ensure a more comprehensive support system designed to improve outcomes for students with EBD.

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