Behavioral Science and Health Internship Report

I recently completed an internship as a Speech Summer Camp Counselor at the Pediatric Speech Therapy Clinic in Billings, Montana. I worked as a summer camp counselor for children with developmental disabilities such as Autism, Aspberger’s, Cerebral Palsy, Speech/Language disorders and cognitive delays. These disabilities make it difficult for them to express themselves and communicate effectively with others.

Many of these kids also have significant communication impairments that affect their ability to interact and progress in school, family and social settings. Some examples of these behaviors include difficulty staying on topic, no eye contact, responding with irrelevant information, poor turn-taking abilities, etc. We organized and implemented group therapy activities to benefit these kids and improve their ability to communicate effectively.

Through this experience, I gained practical knowledge of speech therapy procedures, methods, and requirements for future employment opportunities in the field of speech therapy. I gained experience working with a variety of speech disorders and was able to observe how speech and communication ability is affected by many different conditions and disorders.

Description of the Internship

The summer camp was held from June 6th – 10th. We arrived each day at 8 am to prepare for the day’s activities. We had two separate groups of children – one in the morning from 9:00 – 12:00 and one in the afternoon from 1:30 – 4:30. We used the hour and a half in between groups for charting, prep time and lunch. The morning group consisted of approximately 40 children ages 3 – 8 years old. The older group consisted of approximately 35 kids ages 9 – 14. We divided the kids up into six groups of 5 - 7 children and each group had one speech or occupational therapist and one additional speech aide volunteer as leaders.

We began each camp day with a warm up activity of “circle time” where we gathered all of the children together to participate in 15 minutes of singing with interactive movements.
This was effective in “getting their motors running” so they were alert and in the most ideal temperament for learning.

After the warm up activity, we moved on to separate stations. We prepared six stations each day which were set up in different rooms in the speech therapy clinic or outside and every 25 minutes we rotated our groups to a new station. Examples of the activities at each station include: crafts, water table activities, chalk, parachute, relay races, paint projects, etc. Through these games and activities we worked on problem solving, decision making, and communication skills.

Each group’s counselors had goals and skills information for each child in their group. We cued the children on the use of appropriate communication techniques and tried to implement skills practice in areas that they were currently working on in their regular speech therapy.

For example, in our morning group, we had a 4 year old boy with a language delay that was only able to say about 6 words. So, at each station, we cued him to name something or ask for something rather than grunt and point. By the end of the week, he would say “boo” for “blue” crayon, “goo” for “glue” and “pees” for “please”. This was significant progress for this child based upon his speech therapy history and it was really exciting. The therapist and I cheered each time he referred to something spontaneously!

Three other boys in our morning group had no cognitive delays but, struggled with articulation problems and were working on specific speech sounds in their weekly therapy sessions. We thought of ways to incorporate the use of these sounds (like “ch”, “s” and “th”) into our activities. For example, during outdoor activity time, we had the boys write “s” words in sidewalk chalk as they said them. We gave them individual help as needed.

Several of the kids in our older group had difficulty with problem solving and communicating effectively in different situations. Many of the craft stations required following steps to complete a project that would have been simple for kids in their age group (9 – 14) but, several of them had trouble completing the tasks without becoming frustrated. As counselors, we cued them to express what they needed and talked them through the thinking process of solving the problem at hand. We also, cued them to use strategies they have been taught to control their anger and focus such as deep breathing and “squeezing lemons”.

Our afternoon group included several children with delayed receptive and expressive language skills. They also have impaired pragmatic skills which greatly impact their ability to communicate socially. Their ability to perceive non-verbal communication such as facial expressions or more subtle clues that affect our ability to perceive others and communicate effectively is delayed. We tried to incorporate linking cause and effects pertaining to non-verbal
and verbal communication into our activity stations. We encouraged conversation amongst the children to practice these skills while participating in games and crafts.

**Relevance to Classroom Learning**

In addition to this internship, I was also taking an Audiology course from the University of Utah. In this class I learned about the anatomy and physiology of hearing and how it effects communication. The ability to obtain auditory feedback is crucial to speech development. I learned the importance of diagnosing hearing impairments early on. Several of the children in my summer camp groups used hearing aids and I was able to gain experience with speech issues related to hearing impairments and learn about the underlying causes of such.

I am also taking a Speech Science course this summer. This course has been enhanced by my participation in the summer camp internship because it gave me real life examples of children dealing with many of the disabilities covered in the textbook and in the lectures. As I take graduate courses, I will be able to pull from this experience as well.

This internship experience brought to life much of the information I learned in a Human Exceptionality course I took last semester. It really gave me a better feel for the struggles of those dealing with disabilities and gave certain terms much more meaning.

**Relevance to Career Goals**

My long term career goal is to become a certified speech pathologist. I would like to work with children in elementary schools. My internship experience has helped me to become acquainted with a broad range of conditions and disorders that require speech therapy. I thought that it was particularly helpful for me to see how speech therapy could be incorporated into everyday tasks, games, crafts, etc. From the child or parent’s point of view it may appear that we were simply playing a game, but I have learned to dissect activities into communication skills and I think that this will be a valuable tool for me as a therapist.

Through this summer camp internship, I also gained experience in patient charting. After each morning and afternoon session, the therapists and counselors took time to chart the progress of each child in their group. We had to describe language and speech skills that we worked on that day pertaining to each individual child’s therapy goals and recommendations for the future. I learned a lot about terminology and proper insurance billing practices in speech therapy.
I will be graduating in August with a bachelor’s degree in Behavioral Science and Health from the University of Utah. I intend to pursue a master’s degree in Speech Pathology. The experience gained through this summer camp internship will benefit me in applying to Master’s programs this fall. Many graduate schools expect applicants to have some practical experience in the field upon application. Graduate programs in Speech and Language Pathology also require students to complete 25 hours of observation of individual speech therapy. This is also a requirement for final certification from the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. During my time as an intern I was able to observe other speech therapy sessions before or after my internship shifts which added to the number of hours I have accumulated toward certification.

**Conclusion**

Through this summer camp internship experience, I was able to learn about a variety of disabilities that affect children and their ability to communicate. Working with a group of kids with such vastly different impairments really helped me to appreciate their personal struggles with tasks that come so easily to most of us.

Prior to this internship, I had very limited experience working with children in special education. I now have a better understanding of the impact that strained or limited communication ability can have on a child’s life and I am more dedicated and excited for the opportunity to help others overcome communication impairments to improve their lives. I think that this experience really helped me to put the importance of my future work into perspective.