



Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

Outreach Programs – Texas Deafblind Outreach

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Kersten's Story

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https://www.tsbvi.edu/images/newsletter/fall18/TX_SENSEABILITIES_FW_18_Spanish_12.12.2018_Optimized.pdf and

https://www.tsbvi.edu/images/newsletter/Spring19/TX_SenseAbilities_SP19_Esp_Web.pdf.

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Dr. Zeedyk's Work

In December 2017, a community of practitioners and families hosted a weekend at TSBVI for families and a day of training for educators with Dr. Suzanne Zeedyk. Dr. Zeedyk is a Developmental Psychologist and founder of [Connected Baby](#), an initiative and website formed in response to the last two decades of scientific study on how human brains develop and function. Dr. Zeedyk's research and work provide insight into how crucial relationships are for human health, happiness, and well-being.

Dr. Zeedyk traveled to TSBVI from Dundee, Scotland for the Annual Event Series: Studies in DeafBlindness for the Advanced Practitioner. Her one day presentation was titled The Biology of Connection: How Relationship-led Teaching Changes Brains, Bodies and Behavior. The themes of her presentation centered around the critical roles that positive relationships play in supporting our students' emotional growth and general well-being. Dr. Zeedyk helped the audience understand how early experiences shape a child's biology and their ability to self-regulate. She encouraged participants to make a shift in thinking. This shift is from characterizing moments when our students are "displaying challenging behavior" to framing events with biologically accurate language, such as "experiencing moments of distress". In other

words, the focus moves to the perspective of the student, who is having a rough time (the cause), instead of the perspective of those who are inconvenienced by the manner in which the student expresses their distress (the symptom).

How Does This Apply?

Sitting in the audience, I found my thoughts drifting to a former student. Her name was Kersten and when I met her, she was most certainly a person in distress. In fact, the people closest to Kersten, those who loved and adored her, would sometimes describe her in true southern vernacular, as “a hot mess”. During a typical school day, Kersten could be observed kicking chairs, throwing calendar boxes and classroom materials across the room, hitting staff members and attempting to pull their hair, head butt them, or bite them. Kersten also engaged in self-injurious behavior: banging her head on desks and tables, hitting herself in the face, legs and head, and scratching her face and nose, causing bleeding and scarring. Transitions from one classroom to another would often take 45 minutes and require the support of 3 adults to keep Kersten and near-by students safe.

Changes In Kersten’s Behavior

Fast forward several years later. After not working with Kersten for a few years, I stopped by her classroom to say hello. I was astounded to see this young girl who, just a few years prior, was hurting herself and others in ways that not only interfered with learning but demonstrated intense moments of distress. I saw no kicking, no hitting, no throwing or scratching. Kersten was happily going about her classroom routines. She was communicating easily and proficiently with her teachers. She was completing steps within her routines with very little adult support and a noticeable sense of confidence. She was participating in long, in-depth conversations about enjoyable activities that she had done earlier in the week. She discussed details about what she was scheduled to do that day, asking specific questions about who she would be doing them with and where they would occur. She was delighted to talk about an upcoming farmer’s market at which she and her classmates would be working. Kersten was also deeply engaged in a discussion about an upcoming doctor’s appointment. This topic seemed to be causing a mild amount of stress. She would occasionally halt the conversation by taking her gaze away from her conversation partner, rocking back and forth while placing her hands in front of her face. However, after a brief pause, she was able to work through it. She asked for confirmation about the date of the appointment, whom she would be traveling with, and what specific steps the appointment would entail. She looked like a totally different kid. I turned to her teacher and with raised eyebrows and mouth agape asked, “What happened?” Her response was simple. “Kersten has become a mature young lady”. She went from a “hot mess” to a “mature young lady”. Wow.



Figure 1 Kersten, left, enjoys the company of her friend, Becca, during a snack.

What Happened to Cause the Change?

This tale of transformation and growth begs an explanation. That explanation is rooted in (1) her team's understanding of the impact of Deafblindness on Kersten's social, emotional and communicative development, and (2) their quest to better understand challenging behavior as an expression of emotional distress. The team's ability to comprehend the value of relationship-based and child-led educational programming was crucial to this transformation.

Additional Background

I left out a few important details in my introduction of Kersten. When I first met her, she was a new student at TSBVI. TSBVI is a residential school. Kersten had left the community in which she grew up. She was away from her family and friends for the first time in her life. She found herself in a new school, in a strange city surrounded by people she did not know, who could not anticipate her thoughts or immediately provide her with a sense of safety and connection. Unfamiliar surroundings and faces were everywhere. Kersten was legally blind with poor acuities and distance vision as a result of bilateral corneal transplants. The transplants took place at a young age and did not heal well, resulting in corneal scarring and chronic dry eyes. Kersten had a profound sensorineural hearing loss that prevented her from gathering environmental and speech sounds. To expressively communicate, Kersten used a combination of facial expressions, gestures, pictures and sign language.

New environments and unfamiliar people can be a source of stress for any of us. Imagine how stressful these circumstances might have been for a 15-year-old girl with limited vision, hearing and conceptual understanding of the world!

Trust and Accurate Information

In addition to feeling homesick, Kersten experienced a great deal of stress for another reason. As an individual with Deafblindness, Kersten had difficulty gathering trustworthy and accurate information that was critical in allowing her to feel safe and secure. Any person would want to know when finding himself or herself suddenly in a new place:

- Who are these people?
- Where am I going?
- What is happening around me?
- What do these people want from me?
- How can I make sense of all this?

- Why am I here?

These are all questions Kersten may have been asking herself. Her ability to gather and receive information that would help answer these questions was compromised by her partial vision, hearing loss, and incomplete conceptual understanding. Without answers to these questions, how could she feel safe? How could she feel connected?

Progress

After a few months in her new surroundings, Kersten began to develop positive relationships with her teachers and some of her peers, and to settle into her new routines in the classroom and in her dorm. Within the support provided by her daily calendar, Kersten was able to participate in conversations that allowed her to anticipate activities throughout each day. She learned to use a weekly calendar to have back and forth conversations with trusted adults. During these meaningful conversations, she began to get answers to the questions that were of vital importance to her.

- Do I have to go to the health center today?
- With whom will I be painting my nails?
- On what day?
- When do I get to talk about my experience books?

Kersten was able to take the conversational lead by simply looking at a picture of interest. Her teacher would follow her lead by adding information about the picture and topic of Kersten's choice. Slowly, through these reciprocal and child-led conversations, Kersten's world became more predictable and a little less scary.

New Concerns

However, a new and concerning pattern emerged in her interactions with peers. During transitions to classes, Kersten would travel in hallways and sidewalks alongside her schoolmates. On occasion, and seemingly without warning, Kersten would toss her walker aside, lunge toward another student, raise her arms over her head, and attempt to strike the other students.

Team Efforts to Observe and Plan

Kersten's team gathered to discuss a plan to better support her, a plan based on understanding the root cause of her distress in relation to this behavior with her peers. They considered the impact of Deafblindness on her ability to connect to the people in her environment. One team member mentioned that Kersten had very few social interactions with peers, that she really only conversed with adults. Another pointed out that when she had observed Kersten in these distressed interactions, she did not seem angry at all. Instead, she seemed excited to have an opportunity to connect with a peer. She recounted that Kersten would smile widely when moving toward the other student and that it wasn't until she was very near that she appeared frustrated and lashed out. The team began to wonder what this could mean. They began to re-evaluate their previous hypothesis: did she intend to hurt her peers, or was this entirely something else?

As the team reviewed documentation of these distressed moments, gathered during a Functional Behavior Analysis, it was revealed that Kersten was having difficulty regulating her

emotions when she came into contact with other students using walkers or wheelchairs. Could it be that the true function of her aggressive actions was that she wanted to talk with them about their shared topic of walkers and wheels? That she wanted to say “Hey, I have a walker too. Mine is blue!”. Despite her desire to say these things, she found herself unable to do so. Could it be that these feelings of inability and disconnection were the cause of her frustration and aggression?

A Shift in Perspective

As consensus was built around this root cause of the behavior, her team began to view her not as a child that displayed bad behavior or was unable to follow the rules but instead as a child that was in need of various kinds of help, including:

- Help from her teachers in the form of information and instruction
- Help to experience success in her attempts to make connections with other people, and
- Help to practice and develop the communication skills needed to make friends
- Creating a Behavioral Intervention Plan

Kersten’s team made a plan to better support her desire for social connection. They set out to create an instructional routine that would allow her to successfully practice her conversation skills.

Kersten already had a daily living skills routine that involved making breakfast tacos on Friday morning. The team wondered if she would enjoy making a few extra tacos to sell to her peers. They set up a table in her classroom and placed it just inside of the entryway. The table would provide a natural barrier between Kersten and her customers for extra support, “just in case”. Kersten’s teacher created a script made of three blank index cards with drawings of sign language hand shapes for “Hello”, “One dollar, please”, and “thank you”. The script was designed to help Kersten have a successful interaction even when she felt excited, anxious or unsure.

When the first customer came, Kersten’s teacher modeled how to use the script to greet and ask the customer for the correct amount of money. After the money was handed over, the teacher handed the customer a taco before signing “goodbye”. When the second customer arrived, it was Kersten’s turn to act!

She smiled widely as the customer approached the table. Her teacher directed her attention to the first part of the script by pointing. Kersten closely looked at the sign drawing for “Hello”. She began to laugh as she slowly raised her hand in the air to sign “Hello”. When the customer signed “hello” back, she let out a shriek of delight. Her eyes lit up as she looked back at her teacher, seemingly in disbelief at what had just occurred.

Her teacher, trying not to act like this was anything out of the ordinary, directed her attention with a little smile to the next card in her conversation script. Kersten’s facial expression turned serious as she focused her vision on the card. She brought her gaze back up to the customer and slowly began to sign “One dollar, please”. She was hesitant and looked to her teacher for support. Her teacher calmly shook her head up and down, indicating an encouraging “yes”. The teacher modeled the sign language and Kersten mimicked the signs. The customer, after receiving some coaching of his own, slowly reached out, offering a dollar bill. The two students looked at each other as their hands met and the dollar bill moved from his hand to hers. Kersten

placed the dollar in a cash box, grabbed a foil wrapped breakfast taco and handed it to her young customer.

With a look of slight concern, Kersten quickly looked to her teacher for the next step. Her teacher calmly responded by looking at the next card in the script sequence and signed “Thank you”. Kersten brought her attention back to her customer and signed “Thank you”. As her customer walked away, Kersten looked again at her teacher, the palms of her hands gently resting on her cheeks. Her face lit up in a wide smile and her body began to shake with excitement. For a second time, she let out a loud shriek of joy. Her teacher reflected the excitement back to Kersten with her laugh and smile. Moving closer to Kersten while reaching out her hand, she touched the side of Kersten’s arm and moved it quickly back and forth in a rhythm that mimicked the excitement that they both felt over this transformative moment:

The moment when Kersten was able to experience the feeling of success in having a conversation with a friend.

The moment when Kersten was able to regulate the strong emotions she feels in social situations and become flush with pure excitement in the success of learning how to feel connected to the people around her.

Impact of Systematic Support

This very moment led to thousands of similar moments when Kersten was able to experience the type of social and emotional growth that many of her peers who are hearing and sighted experience without direct instruction and practice. As a result of that growth, Kersten’s moments of distress involving peers in the hallways declined and eventually became a thing of the past. Kersten was provided with opportunities for this growth by a team who took the time to create an individualized program and an Individual Education Plan that considered the impact deafblindness has on a person’s social, emotional and communicative development.

The team considered the possibility that her actions were not those of a misbehaving child but instead the actions of a child experiencing deep distress, that she was not a child giving them trouble, but a child having trouble. Their ability to focus their time and attention on a relationship-based and child-led educational program created an environment where Kersten was able to experience regular and consistent feelings of success, independence and connectedness - joy, the essence of a happy life. These are feelings that each and every young girl must feel to become that “mature, young lady” that her teacher described.

Theory of Self-Determination

Kersten’s transformative experience occurred as a result of a relationship-based and child-led program. This was a program that viewed the student simply as a young person experiencing a great deal of emotional distress, distress felt as a result of the impact that deafblindness may have on a person’s ability to feel successful, independent, and connected, all of which are important components of well-being. Healthy and happy growth and development that occurs as a result of the fulfillment of these feelings can be more deeply understood by looking at the Theory of Self-Determination developed by Richard Ryan and Edward L. Deci at the University of Rochester. Over the course of 30 years of research, Ryan and Deci have developed a theory of human motivation, personality development, and well-being. Their theory focuses on volitional or self-determined behavior and the social and cultural conditions that promote it. Ryan and

Deci's work states that healthy human functioning (regardless of where the individual is in their development) has a set of three innate psychological needs. Meeting these needs allows for optimal function and growth. These three needs are:

1. Competence - the need to control outcomes in the environment and experience mastery. The need to feel successful.
2. Autonomy - the need to be causal agents of one's own life and act in harmony with one's integrated self. The need to feel independent.
3. Relatedness - the universal want to interact, be connected to, and experience caring for others. The need to feel connected.

When people experience feelings of connectedness, independence, and success, they feel safe and secure. They feel calm and they feel able. Their bodies and brains are open to the type of adventure, exploration, and inquiry that are foundational parts of all learning.

Kersten's instructional program reflected her team's desire to support her development in the three areas that Deci and Ryan describe as essential. They recognized the difficulty she was having in regulating her emotions and viewed her dysregulated feelings as clear signs that she was in distress. They saw her for what she was - a young lady struggling to feel successful, independent and connected. Let's take a closer look at how this was accomplished and how it was captured in her IEP.

Fostering Feelings of Competence/Success

Fostering feelings of success for our students is essential in helping them build resiliency. A resilient person has an inner belief that they can do well, that they can experience stress and overcome it. This ever-important inner belief is formed from a collection of experiences that end well. It is formed slowly, over time, with opportunities to practice building skills and concepts with a level of support that ensures the task is completed and success is felt. An inner voice of resilience is formed when a person experiences moments of joy and pride in their accomplishments, no matter how big or small they may be. Each of these moments provides an opportunity for emotional regulation. States of distress, however, interrupt this biological process.

Kersten's team made a plan to be proactive in addressing Kersten's distress. They were able to recognize that focusing their attention on "extinguishing unwanted behavior" was not going to fulfill her need. Kersten needed to feel able. By helping her feel able, they sensed that her moments of distress would decrease, her moments of joy would increase, and that her inner resilience would begin to strengthen. Environments, activities, and people were all carefully considered in planning a successful school day for her. They focused on what Kersten would need in order to feel well instead of focusing on undesired behaviors. If she began to have difficulty during an activity, support would be provided to complete the routine while ensuring that Kersten did so with a feeling of success, even if she wasn't able to be as independent or focused as she may have been previously. They knew that by reducing demands and increasing support, they could help Kersten complete the planned activity. By ensuring Kersten had an opportunity to learn, build her skills, and maintain feelings of success, the team was fostering her resilience. They were helping her develop an inner voice that said, "I can do this".

The following strategies have been taken from Kersten's Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). They were designed to help her feel successful and to decrease her time spent in distress:

- Use a daily calendar and a two-week calendar with photographs and pictures to give Kersten important information about her schedule (daily schedule, choice time, weekly activities).
- Return to the calendar between each activity to “finish” previous activities and discuss what’s next, whenever possible. If unable to return to the calendar, carry pictures with you to allow discussion of each activity so Kersten is sure of her next destination and has accurate information about whom she will be working with.
- Plan activities that Kersten finds interesting and enjoyable. When Kersten is engaged in tasks she finds meaningful, she is less likely to feel distressed. Activities such as work, cooking, music, art, and PE have rarely caused Kersten distress.
- Create time in her school day for long and reciprocal conversations during calendar time. Begin each day with a calendar conversation and return to her calendar for extended conversations throughout the day. These conversations will allow Kersten to gather important information about her day, process it and ask questions. The repetition gives her continued reassurance about what is going to happen around her. The predictability helps her feel calm.
- Build a high level of structure into new routines. Expectations about her role are very important and need to be thoroughly planned ahead of time. Materials should be set up and in place before starting any activity. Her level of independence will be low initially but will grow over time.
- Develop consistent routines for each activity so that Kersten can anticipate what’s happening and better regulate her emotions. Each routine should have a clear beginning and ending, and it is often best to represent each step with a picture or photo. For example, when Kersten makes tacos, the first step is always to grate the cheese, and the last step is always to wash the dishes and place them in the drying rack. All of the steps in between are in the same order each time she participates in the activity. When Kersten has occupational therapy (OT), she does the same sequence of activities each time: 1.) Spin in the egg chair 2.) Spin on the spin board 3.) Rock on the rocker board 4.) Roller skate 5.) Swing. Each activity is represented by a photograph. Conversation time is set aside to discuss her routine before it occurs, while it is occurring, and afterward. Novelty and changes to the routine can be added (once the routine is established) by showing the changes to Kersten using pictures, drawings, and simple sign language.
- Ensure that Kersten has access to preferred materials for her bus ride such as signing flashcards, DVDs to look at, and photo books of her family and friends. The bus ride to and from school is an emotional time for Kersten; these materials support her safe travel.
- Teach Kersten a way to mark time such as setting a timer for herself during activities that do not have a clear beginning or ending, such as computer time or playing video games.
- Monitor materials and objects in Kersten’s environment as she may throw them when upset or excited. Supervise her closely in group activities and mealtimes. Clear away unnecessary objects or clutter.

- Provide clear information about “where”, “what” and “who” before asking Kersten to transition from one activity to the next. Set aside time for this discussion and support the conversation with pictures. Allow opportunities for Kersten to ask repeated questions about her upcoming events. Allow time for her to process this information before the transition begins.
- Attach a photograph or drawing on her walker with Velcro strips to give her information about her next activity. This has been an effective way to redirect Kersten when traveling with her walker, especially when Kersten is having a difficult time. Although Kersten can understand many signs, she has difficulty following signed instruction while walking or when upset.
- Communicate with other staff and students about how they can have successful interactions with Kersten. Let them know what is appropriate based on Kersten’s emotional state. For example, you could ask them to wave or say “hi”, look at a picture with her, or when Kersten is excited, upset or simply overstimulated, ask them to step back or give Kersten more space.
- Use body positioning when necessary to prevent her from lunging or pushing her walker into other students or staff when traveling (stay between Kersten’s walker and others). Redirect her attention to a picture of her destination.
- Keep a calm and easy demeanor when providing Kersten the support and guidance she needs to feel successful. We are her models for emotional regulation. She will learn to regulate herself by seeing us do so.
- Provide direct instruction in calming strategies such as deep breathing or yoga. If Kersten appears anxious or upset, invite her to sit down at her calendar station. Sit directly across from her. Take ten deep breaths while counting. Kersten will imitate you. After 10 breaths, sign “calm”.

Fostering Feelings of Autonomy/Independence

Agency, referred to in this article thus far as feeling “able”, is the ability of an individual to act independently and make meaningful choices, and also to have a say in what is happening to them and around them. Many of our students may be at risk for feeling a lack of agency when they need a lot of support to complete everyday tasks like dressing, bathing, and eating. When feelings of agency and independence are at risk, teams need to be creative and think carefully about what tasks or responsibilities their students may be most interested in learning. Starting with a list of their interests, compiled by the people that know them best, is essential.

A child-led approach helped Kersten spend time doing things in which she was interested, and this motivated her to actively engage in them. When her interests were honored and infused into her school day, she felt like a partner in her education. Kersten’s team gave her regular opportunities to make informed choices about how she would spend her recreation and leisure time, what she would eat in the cafeteria, what classmates she would engage in conversations with, and whom she would partner with during activities. When Kersten was motivated and the activities were set up so that she could be successful, she was able to complete tasks with a higher level of independence. From regular feelings of success came a growing sense of resiliency, agency, and independence. Kersten began to see herself as someone who could make successful choices and decisions that contributed to her sense of well-being. The following IEP goals were created to support these feelings of independence:

- In 36 instructional weeks, given two picture symbols placed on a choice board, Kersten will select a preferred recreation and leisure activity by pulling the picture off the choice board and placing it onto her daily calendar, in 3 out of 4 opportunities.
- In 36 instructional weeks, given a picture sequence, Kersten will increase her independence by completing a work sequence without prompts in 3 out of 4 opportunities (Kersten's work or vocational routines were selected from a list of interests that her school team and family worked together to create).
- In 36 instructional weeks, with picture symbols and staff encouragement from a trusted, familiar adult, Kersten will increase independence in two daily living skill activities by reducing adult prompts by 50%, in 5 out of 5 trials.
- In 36 instructional weeks, Kersten will demonstrate an understanding of new time concepts such as the names and sequence of the months of the year and holidays by signing, scheduling events, and initiating conversations using sign language and picture symbols, 100% of the time.
- In 36 instructional weeks, with the support of a trusted and familiar adult, Kersten will initiate conversations at her daily calendar on topics that are important to her by pointing to pictures, signing and/or requesting staff to draw the topic, 4 times per day.

Fostering Feelings of Relatedness/Connectedness

People tend to feel connected to the people around them, their friends, family and co-workers, when they are engaged in great conversations and when they work together to create shared experiences with a shared purpose.

Calendar Conversations

Kersten began each school day with a 30-45 minute conversation about her day. It included what she would be doing, where she would do it, and with whom she would be doing it. These were important things that she wanted and needed to know. Kersten decided on the order of topics to be discussed and led the discussion by using sign language or simply pointing to pictures of topics she was eager to discuss. Her picture symbols were stored in a binder that would sit on the lap of her conversation partner, giving Kersten easy access to them during the conversation. It was only after these discussions had transpired that her teacher would ask her to help move the picture symbols onto her daily sequence strip and discuss the order in which her day's activities would occur.

Kersten also discussed highlighted events that were scheduled on her weekly calendar; the team ensured that all of her conversations could last until her curiosity was exhausted. Conversations were supported by picture symbols paired with print and sign language. A set of blank 3x5 cards and markers were stored close by to expand the conversation with drawings if needed. Her teacher would start the drawing but look for opportunities for Kersten to participate by coloring something in or tracing a dotted word representation. Eventually, Kersten engaged in long conversations about important events that were represented with pictures and print on a monthly calendar. By infusing Kersten's interests into her school day, these conversations were motivating. By giving Kersten the space and time to initiate preferred and important topics, the conversations were student-led. Because her conversations included opportunities for each partner to "talk" and "listen", they were balanced and enjoyable.

Connection to Peers

Kersten's team also looked for ways to increase her sense of connectedness to her classmates and peers. She loved to make things. Over the years, she made a variety of items that were sold at a monthly Farmer's Market on campus. Pickles, screen printed shopping bags, smores, and cookies were among her favorite items to make and sell. Kersten, alongside her classmates, spent hours each month making these items. Then, one time a month, they would transport the items to an area where tables were set up to create an outdoor market. Other classes assembled to sell their wares as well. Sitting together, Kersten and her classmates sold their items to interested customers made up of school staff and peers. Support was provided to ensure the customer interactions were successful. Kersten and her classmates became part of a community of artists, artisans, chefs, and bakers. They were "makers", and what they made had value to others. These experiences at the market were powerful for how Kersten saw herself. She was a valued member of this community with important roles and responsibilities that were recognized by her peers and teachers.



Figure 2 Kersten awaits customers at a monthly market, ready to ask them if they would like pickles or pickled carrots.

When Kersten expressed interest in a new student who also happened to use a walker, her teacher saw this as an opportunity to support her feelings of connectedness and made a plan to help Kersten make a friend. Walkers were not the only thing the two girls had in common. They both loved butterflies. A time in both girls' schedules was created for them to get together on a weekly basis to make greeting cards. The cards were decorated with designs of the girls' choosing. More often than not, butterflies were the focus of the design pattern. Together, they would sit and sell their cards at the monthly market. Slowly, over time, through these shared experiences over a shared interest, Kersten made one of the strongest connections a person can feel, a special friendship.

The following IEP Goals were developed by Kersten's team to support her feeling of connectedness to her teachers and classmates and to the broader school

community:

- In 36 instructional weeks, given a script (pictures), Kersten will improve her social skills by taking at least two turns using sign language with less familiar people in 3 of 5 trials.
- In 36 instructional weeks, Kersten will improve her communication skills by using expressive sign language to report on past events and request objects, actions and information during functional routines in 3 out of 5 opportunities.
- In 36 instructional weeks, with picture symbol support and using role-play activities as practice time, Kersten will greet preferred peers with a wave, handshake, or high-five in 3 out of 5 trials.

- In 36 instructional weeks, with the support of a trusted, familiar adult, Kersten will initiate conversations at her calendar station by pointing to pictures of interest or by signing her preferred topic, at least 3 times per day.
- In 36 instructional weeks, during a weekly routine and in response to a picture symbol sequence book and guidance from a trusted adult, Kersten will take 4 turns with a peer to make a preferred item, in 4 out of 5 opportunities.

Helping Kersten make connections with people around her was an important part of her successful growth and development. Her team documented and discussed these memorable connections using experience stories. Kersten helped make these stories and was provided time to read and re-read them within her weekly schedule. Weekly time was embedded into her schedule for her to share these stories of connections with preferred teachers and classmates as well as her family. She was provided regularly scheduled time to read and reflect, to celebrate, and to help these stories of connection become the prevailing narrative of her own story - a story of a young lady striving to feel what we all desire to feel: successful, independent, and connected.

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