

Skills Demonstration Sample

Introduction

My Skills Demonstration gives an account of a wide range of skills which the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) must possess, in order to support children with special education needs (SEN) as follows:

- Relating Skills
- Practical Skills
- Interpersonal Skills
- Good Practice Skills

My course work, self-directed studies and placement experiences are also documented, to show how they helped me in my assignment.

1. Relating Skills

Case Study

For the purpose of this assignment and for confidentiality reasons the child's name has been changed to Anna.

Anna is a seven-year old girl with Down Syndrome. She was an only child up until recently when her baby brother was born. Anna is in a combined junior and senior infants' class in a mainstream primary school. Anna has fine motor issues and is non-verbal, however she is learning Lámh to communicate. She has a full time SNA to support her during the school day. Her SNA needs to prompt and assist Anna with toileting and eating.

Anna has had a series of ear infections resulting in a recent ear operation. There appears to be an improvement in her hearing as a result of the operation. She is now missing less school days and it is hoped this will improve her continued learning.

Anna's attention span is short and regular movement breaks need to be taken. Sometimes during these movement breaks she is taken to the school sensory room, which is a particular favourite place of hers. Anna loves music and during her time with the resource teacher musical jigsaws are used to help with learning.

The other students are very tolerant and understanding of Anna's condition. However, Anna can sometimes behave in a disruptive manner and lose her temper, usually when she is unable to communicate with her classmates.

Definition and Characteristics of Down syndrome:

Down syndrome is a chromosomal anomaly, caused by the presence of all or part of an extra 21st chromosome, which affects 1 in 454 children born in Ireland. This extra chromosome makes people with Down syndrome look and learn a little differently. (DSMIG)

The most common characteristics of someone with Down syndrome are as follows:

- Intellectual Disability
- Cranio-facial anomalies
- Speech and language impairment
- Low muscle tone
- Various medical and sensory issues, such as hearing, vision, heart and thyroid disorders.

There are also other character traits which are associated with Downs syndrome:

- Strong visual awareness and visual learning skills
- Ability to learn using written words
- The desire and ability to learn from their classmates
- Poor short-term working memory
- Lack of concentration
- Sleeping problems

The above issues are likely to restrict a student's ability to access the school's curriculum. However, children with Down syndrome have the right to be educated in their local school and given the appropriate support to help them learn effectively. (Buckley et al, 2006) states that children with Down syndrome benefit socially, academically and in turn their behaviour falls in line with their peers, when educated in mainstream schools.

Students with Down syndrome, when they are given the proper support in mainstream school, will benefit from inclusion.

The SNA must practice many important skills. A good communicator being one.

Non-Verbal Communication:

Communication can be defined as a two-way process which requires a degree of mutual understanding between the parties involved. Communication experts such as (Mehrabian, 1971) state that the majority of communication comes in the form of non-verbal gestures. Body language, Voice and Tone making up 93% of the total. In general, all students with SEN have great difficulty with communication at various times. They get frustrated as a result. So, it is extremely important the SNA displays

positive signs of body language so that the child with SEN feels that they are understood and cared for by the SNA. According to Cherry, (2016) facial expressions are very important as they are universally used and understood. e.g. happiness, sadness, anger and fear.

The SNA uses many forms of non-verbal communication such as facial expression, body language, eye contact and tone of voice while working with students with SEN. This shows the child that they can trust the SNA.

By developing non-verbal communication skills the SNA will improve their relationship with the student. Carl Rogers states, "the most important factor in the educational process is the relationship between the teacher and the student. He stressed that if the teacher could provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself or herself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, change and personal development will occur" (Rogers,1995).

Active Listening:

Active listening is a communication skill which mainly concentrates on feelings. The SNA must always make eye contact and may need to bend to the child's level to show that they are paying attention. Affirming the understanding of what is being said is very important. It is also important to remember what the child has said to you and to refer to this in your subsequent dialogue with the child. It is very important for the SNA to practice good active listening skills so that the child with SEN feels heard, respected, empathy and non-judged. When the SNA practices good active listening skills, difficult pressure situations can be avoided without the child becoming agitated. Good active listening is also important in helping issues with relationships, appeasing conflicts and disputes. (Mindtools, 2015) Active listening can be very helpful for the SNA when dealing with the multi-disciplinary team (MDT). (Flood, 2013).

At one particular time, during my placement, I used both non-verbal and active listening techniques, when helping Anna in a stressful situation. One morning, when Anna arrived into the classroom, she became very agitated as she approached her seat. However, I quickly bent down to her level, smiled and on making eye contact asked what was upsetting her. Anna seemed to react to my approach by calming down a little and although, she is non-verbal she indicated that there was a problem with her chair. Having helped her to settle at her desk on other occasions I realised that her

support cushion was not there. I located the cushion and confirmed to Anna if that was the cause of her upset. She nodded assent and the situation was diffused. For me, I felt that my positive body language helped to alleviate the volatile situation. Also, I think it was important that my active listening showed Anna that I cared about her plight and that she could trust me to help her. Going forward, I feel that it is important to make sure the cushion is placed on Anna's chair every morning before she arrives so as to ease her stress levels.

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2. Practical Skills

(b) Lámh sign language was the alternative communication approach chosen to help Anna with her communication difficulties. Learning Lámh was the best choice for Anna as the benefits would be hugely helpful for her to communicate with others in her school and at home. Improving her communication skills with others would improve her confidence, self-esteem and in turn would help her to become more independent.

Generally, people do not communicate by words alone. Body language, facial expressions and gestures all form part of the communication process. Many children with SEN find it very difficult to express themselves verbally. They can become very agitated when they cannot communicate with others. Their frustration can be lessened by providing them with an alternative way of communicating. (Lámh, n.d.)

Lámh is a manual sign system developed in Ireland in the 1980's, for children and adults with intellectual disabilities and communication needs. Lámh signs are based on Irish Sign Language and natural gesture. When using Lámh, only key words in a sentence are signed and are accompanied always with speech. This teaches the child to associate various important concepts with speech sounds. Speaking and signing together helps the child with information they can hear and see. Using Lámh has been shown to support communication skills and can help the child's speech to develop to an extent that signing may no longer be needed. (Flood, 2013)

As children with Downs syndrome tend to have delayed speech and language development, Lámh is often used. Children with Downs syndrome benefit from visual teaching approaches, using practical, concrete materials and doing something instead of speaking. They also like a repetitive learning approach. Lámh signing reflects, needs, interests, educational, work and leisure activities.

Benefits of using Lámh:

- Encourages Eye Contact: Using Lámh encourages eye contact and attention to movement. These are skills that are important for speech development.
- Develops Vocabulary: Using sign assists people to develop vocabulary and language skills. They have a means to try out and practice how language works.

- **Helps Self-Expression:** Many children and adults with communication needs can understand much more than they can express verbally. Signing can provide a means of taking part in conversation.
- **Motivates to Try Out New Words:** If their speech is unclear or limited, the Lámh user may be more easily understood when they use signs. When you are understood you are delighted to realise you have been successful and are more likely to keep on trying new words and saying more.
- **Promotes Attention to Movements:** Using gestures and making signs comes earlier for many children than saying the corresponding word. For many people using Lámh, it is easier to recognise and make gestures with their hands than it is for them to make speech sounds at first.
- **Reduces Frustration:** Lámh users may be more easily understood when they use signs with speech. When a person uses sign, the listener can have a better chance of understanding the message. Frustration is reduced when people are provided with a way of communicating. (Lámh, 2011)

Lámh is always used with speech and should be used consistently by all those who communicate with the child to encourage the child to use the signs (Lámh, 2011).

It was felt that Lámh was the best suited alternative communication approach for Anna as the above benefits would help her to communicate with others and as a result help her to become more independent.

Task Preparation and Implementation:

It was felt that agreement with Anna's parents was very important so that the work carried out in school could be continued at home. Observations needed to be carried out to identify the level of support necessary for Anna to embark on learning Lámh. Direct observation is a method of capturing data in the natural setting of the classroom, home or playground when the child is unaware that they are being observed (Synergy and the Open College, 2018). This method of observation was used as it was felt that Anna's SNA could easily perform this task while assisting Anna with her normal daily routine in the classroom.

During the observation process it was noted that as Anna seemed to be more alert in the morning time it was more beneficial for the introduction of the new Lámh signing process to commence as early as possible. Anna was a child who enjoyed her food so another good time to implement the new process was straight after break time or lunchtime. Plenty of praise and encouragement should be given when Anna worked well. As Anna responds well to visuals, a number of pictures were downloaded, printed and laminated. The rules for signing and the basic Lámh signs were placed on the classroom walls. It was hoped that the other students would become familiar with these signs and in time would learn to sign along with Anna. A copy of these were also sent home to Anna's parents. As Anna has a short attention span it was agreed that sessions needed to be kept short, with positive reinforcement used as encouragement in the process. (Flood, 2013) A simple reward chart was drawn up so that Anna could choose her reward when she had worked well.

Signing Rules:

- Always speak and sign simultaneously so that the child can link the sign to the word.
- Use appropriate facial expression and body language to emphasise what you want to communicate e.g. when asking questions.
- Make the sign accurately at all times even if the child is not making the sign accurately.
- Face the person to make sure you have their full attention.
- Always use your dominant hand for one-handed signs. In two-handed signs, the dominant hand does the moving.
- Do not hold things in your hands when signing.
- Make signs within the signing space. This normally extends from the waist outwards and includes the face and shoulders.
- To indicate more than one, make the sign twice.

(Lámh, 2011)

Before the implementation of the task, the SNA together with the class teacher sat down with Anna and using appropriate language explained the process of learning Lámh signing. The class teacher also explained the process to the rest of the students

in a child friendly way. Some video footage from the Downs Syndrome Ireland website was used as assistance. (Down Syndrome Ireland, n.d.)

The actual task of implementing the use of Lámh with Anna was mostly left to her SNA and I. Basic greetings and need request signs were used to start. Anna needed plenty of encouragement and repetition of the signs from her SNA before she responded to making the signs herself. The learning process continued throughout the day in small bite size sessions. However, Anna's SNA continued to use Lámh constantly when she was communicating with Anna. The SNA and I used basic Lámh greetings with each other and the rest of the students in the classroom. It was felt that this would help everyone to become more familiar with using Lámh. During the rest of the week the learning process continued in this way. Repetitive signing and continuous praise and encouragement was given to Anna when a good effort was made. Anna responded well to this process.

Task Evaluation:

It was amazing to see how quickly Anna learned some of the Lámh signs. At the end of the first week she was able to sign greetings and request her basic needs. It was totally amazing for me to see how happy Anna was when she was praised and rewarded for her efforts. I felt that continued practice will improve Anna's signing skills and will ultimately improve her confidence. American Speech, language and hearing association states that augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods improves a persons social interaction, school performance and feeling of self-worth (Synergy and the Open College, 2018).

There were times when Anna became a little frustrated when she used Lámh signing to communicate with her classmates. Anna expected them to understand and respond to her signing. This made it clear to us that it was very important for the other students to be taught some basic signs as a matter of urgency, so that Anna could communicate with her peers.

Although Anna's parents agreed in principle to reinforcing her learning of Lámh, in practice this did not happen. Her mother was not able to commit as the arrival of a new baby was taking up a lot of her spare time. However, having discussed the issue

again with Anna's parents, her father has now enrolled on a Lámh course and her mother has committed to enroll when the baby is a little older.

For me, the most significant aspect of the learning process for Anna was the start of a new chapter in her life. She can now communicate her needs to her SNA and teacher. Continued learning of Lámh by Anna and those around her at school and home will certainly open up new horizons for her. As a student SNA, it shows me that the learning process, no matter how small, can help a child to improve their independence and be a stepping-stone onto bigger and better things in their lifetime.

3. Interpersonal Skills

The Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) is made up of a group of professionals from both within and outside the school. They work together to support the needs of children with SEN. Most schools facilitate parent involvement in the education of children with SEN. Under the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provision is made for parents to be involved in the assessment process of their child's learning needs and also involvement in preparing their Individual Educational Plan (IEP). (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007)

The MDT is made up of the following:

- Special Education Needs Officer (SENO)
- Educational Psychologist
- Learning Support Coordinator
- Teacher
- Resource Teachers
- SNA
- Parents/Guardians

The SNA plays a vital role as part of the MDT while supporting children to develop independence with their self-care and communication skills.

The role of the SNA within the MDT is as follows:

- Helping with maintaining records on the child's progress
- Involved in evaluating a support programme for the child
- Involved in the Personal Pupil Plan and Individual Educational Plan meetings when required

- To provide feedback in relation to the child's progress with work set out by the teacher, behaviour plans, integration support and any other related care needs. (Synergy and the Open College, 2018)

My Interpersonal Skills in Placement:

Interpersonal skills can be defined as “the skills you need and use to communicate and interact with others” (Skills You Need, 2020). Interpersonal skills usually include skills as follows:

- Communication skills: Includes both verbal and non-verbal communication
- and listening skills
- Emotional intelligence: Understanding and managing your emotions and the emotions of others
- Team-work: Working with others in teams or groups in either a formal or informal way
- Negotiation: Working with others to find a mutually agreeable outcome
- Conflict and mediation: Working with conflict and disagreement in a positive way
- Problem solving and decision making: Working with others to identify and solve problems

(Synergy and the Open College, 2018)

While I was in my school placement, I used many interpersonal skills as part of the MDT. Good communication skills and working as part of a team figured highly on my list of interpersonal skills. On my first day I was rostered for yard duty. I was required, along with other staff members to supervise the children playing in the school yard. I was allocated a section of the yard to patrol. Particular attention was needed as part of the yard was closed off due to an adjacent building site. It was very important for me to actively listen to the instructions of the teachers so that the children all returned to the school safely (Flood, 2013). I felt that I communicated and interacted well with the staff and children on this particular occasion. I also felt a great sense of pride and achievement that my first team task had passed off without any issues.

Most of my time in my placement was spent in Anna's classroom. There I had to interact closely with her SNA and class teacher. I regularly conversed with the SNA about Anna's progress and where appropriate I voiced my opinions as to any issues. At times, I felt emotional in this regard and I had to use emotional intelligence in order to remain objective and non-judgemental. I realised that I was only getting a snap shot of Anna's daily school routine. Other staff members had been working with Anna longer and had more insight into her progress. I also needed to understand that people have different points of view and I should look at things from their perspective. Everyone was working towards what was best for Anna (Skills You Need, n.d.).

I felt I developed a good professional relationship with the SNA whereby I felt very comfortable asking questions in relation to my studies as a SNA. While working as part of the MDT, I believe that I used my interpersonal skills very effectively in supporting Anna to improve her independence with her self-care needs and communication skills.

Personal Pupil Plan (PPP):

According to the Department of Education and Skills (2014) circular on the SNA scheme, all schools must prepare a PPP and also include a care plan for all students requiring the support of a SNA. Schools must have a definite policy in place to manage and deploy SNAs. A team approach should be adopted in the development, implementation and review of the PPP. From 2015/16 onwards, all applications for a SNA must be accompanied by the student's PPP, outlining any special care needs and how the SNA will assist the student in this regard.

It is very important that the SNA is involved in the preparation of the PPP. The SNA spends most, if not all of their day with the child, so is the best person to evaluate the care needs required by the child. The SNA can also highlight the child's strengths and weaknesses which need to be taken into account when preparing their PPP. All members of the MDT can liaise with the SNA regarding any information they require to support the submission of the child's PPP.

Personal Pupil Plan

To be completed by the class teacher and SNA(s)

Student's name	Anna	Age	7
Lead teacher	Teacher	Class/year	Junior/Senior/2019
Start date of plan	Sept 2019	Review Date:	December 2019
SNA(s)	SNA		

Student's strengths and interests :

- Enjoys music and rhyme
- Enjoys food.
- Enjoys Sensory Room.

Priority personal care concerns:

- Depends on prompting and assistance for toilet and lunch breaks.
- Issues with fine motor skills, fastening buttons/zip on coat.
- Constant SNA or adult supervision.

Possible reasons for concerns :

- Anger and frustration due to lack of communication skills.
- Problems with swallow which may cause concerns around choking.
- No sense of danger.

Targets for the student:

- Anna will learn at least 10 Lámh signs relevant to her needs by Xmas hols.
- Anna will be able to zip her coat independently by 20 October 2019.
- Work on improving fine motor skills using tweezers, peg boards and threading activities.

Strategies to help the student achieve the targets:

- Use more visuals to help with self-care routines.
- Improve Lámh signing by more practice with classmates and other school staff.
- Increase use of skills to help improve fine motor issues.
- Continued encouragement and praise for efforts.

Staff involved and resources needed:

- SNA
- Class teacher
- Resource teacher
- Other school personnel
- Speech and Language Therapist
- Any extra available resources.

Signature of parent(s)/
guardian(s)

Signature of teacher

Signature(s) of SNA(s)

4. Good Practice Skills

The SNA needs to implement good practice skills so that they work in a safe and professional manner while ensuring the rights of the child are respected.

Independence:

Promoting a child's independence is one of the main roles of an SNA. It helps encourage positive self-image and self-esteem for the child. The child will be more confident in trying new skills. It is very important to get the balance right between assisting the child just enough while allowing the child to be independent. Over helpful parents and SNA's can make a child's condition worse. The United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006 Article 24) outlines the importance of independence, to a child with SEN in reaching their full potential. Each child with SEN should have a regularly updated individual education plan (IEP). (Flood, 2013) Improving the child's independence is usually detailed in their IEP.

While in my placement, I helped promote Anna's independence by observing and assisting with her lunchtime routine. Anna had issues with chewing and swallowing. So it was difficult to keep the balance between safety and allowing independence. However, I allowed her to choose what she wanted to eat and encouraged her to take a drink at intervals during her lunch. When her lunch was finished, I felt a great sense of pride that the routine passed off safely and that Anna's confidence seemed to be increasing each day.

Inclusion:

According to Flood (2013) inclusion allows for all children with or without disabilities to fully participate in all aspects of mainstream school life. It is not enough for a student with SEN to receive inclusive education, if needed, the school must be willing to change or modify their system to meet the child's needs. The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act, (EPSEN, 2004), relates to special needs education and allows for children with SEN to be included in mainstream education systems. There are many benefits of inclusive education, some of which are as follows:

- All children are accepted and respected as equals
- Improved social and communication skills
- Children can attend local school with their siblings
- Friendships between students with SEN and their peers develop
- Children without special needs learn to be more understanding of differences

There are also barriers to inclusive education, some of which are as follow:

- Negative attitudes of personnel
- Lack of proper staff training
- Lack of funding
- Physical environment
- Language and communication difficulties

During my placement I observed a policy of inclusion amongst various classes. One such arrangement was, some of the senior infant class children and children from the ASD unit were rostered on a daily basis to a designated play area. This play time gave all children a chance to integrate. However, I noticed that the senior infant children generally played in their own groups and the children with SEN played mostly on their own. I would hope that in time and as the children became more confident with this set up, integrated play would happen. (Catapano,n.d.; Synergy and Open College, 2018)

Children's Rights:

The United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (UN,1998) (UNCRC) provides for protection, promotion and fulfilment of children's rights. The rights of children can be broken down into four main areas:

Survival rights: which relates to the right to life and basic needs of a child.

Development rights: a right to education, play, leisure, access to information, freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Protection rights: safeguards the child against all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Participation rights: allows children to express opinions in matters affecting their lives. (Synergy and the Open College, 2018)

Article 23 of the UNCRC relates to Children with a disability (Children's Rights Alliance) (CRA), 2010)

While working as a student SNA, I felt that I was very aware to keep the best interest of the child utmost in my mind. Although I was only in my placement a short time, I felt that the school policies always had the best interest of the students as a priority.

Confidentiality:

It is very important for an SNA not to disclose any information in relation to the child outside the school environment. (Flood 2013) As an SNA the personal file of the child containing any special reports or assessments will be available for your information. It is very important that this information is only discussed in a confidential manner within the school environment. The Data Protection Act 1998 and 2003 states that all organisations including schools, have a duty to keep all personal records, both manually and electronic, stored securely. (Synergy and the Open College, 2018) The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) defines data as any information, including documents, video footage or genetic material, that relates to and identifies an individual. Data protection is about safeguarding the privacy of data subjects (Synergy and the Open College, 2018). All schools are subject to GDPR legislation. There may be times when the SNA feels that the health or safety of the child is being compromised but there is a conflict regarding confidentiality. The school will have a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) who will deal with the issue

While on my placement, I found there was information relating to the child with SEN left on view in the classroom. I brought this to the attention of the designated SNA, she immediately addressed the situation with the class teacher. Although this information should have been hidden from view, I felt that the lapse on this occasion may have been as a result of the huge workload of the SNA and the class teacher.

Child Protection:

Child protection is so important to all staff dealing with children. Children with SEN can be particularly vulnerable, and all staff should be vigilant in keeping them safe and protected from harm. All staff must also be aware of how to deal with any allegations of possible child abuse.

There are four types of Abuse:

- Neglect
- Emotional Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse

The Children First Act (2015) and The Children First Guidance (2017) set out the statutory obligations and best practice procedures for everyone involved in providing services to children. The key principles of these are:

- Provide for compulsory reporting by key professionals
- Raise awareness of child neglect and abuse
- Provide for co-operation and sharing of information between agencies when Tusla (The Child and Family Agency), is assessing child protection issues
- Improving child safeguarding policies within organisations dealing with children (Synergy and the Open College, 2018)

When I started my school placement, I was very impressed with the school's child protection policy. All student SNAs and any adult volunteers were required to read and sign a Stay Safe Programme and child protection procedures, before helping with any of the classes. During my placement I did not encounter any child protection issues.

However, as I have completed Child First Tusla eLearning Programme, I felt that if an issue of child safety or welfare did arise the proper channels were in place. The name of the DLP was displayed in the school entrance and a copy of the child safeguarding statement, policy and procedures was on display in the school's reception for all to observe.

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