

# Communication

“Communication is the key to learning, for much of what we learn depends on interactions with others. Communication is an essential skill that for many individuals with severe disabilities can be very difficult. Even expressing very basic needs can require significant effort for an individual who must overcome physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities to do so. Educators must help all individuals communicate by providing appropriate motivation, keeping expectations high, and letting those with disabilities realize that what they have to say is valued.” (Downing, 1999)

## WHY IS COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT?

- So that individuals can communicate and get their wants and needs met
- So that individuals understand what is happening to and around them, can question if they don't understand, and have choice and control throughout their days
- So that all individuals have a rich and enjoyable social life
- So that individuals can demonstrate understanding of instructional concepts

## BASIC BELIEF STATEMENTS:

- To be human is to communicate
- It is impossible to NOT communicate
- The only prerequisite to communication instruction is BREATHING
- Behavior = Communication
- Good communication instruction is strength-based and builds on current skills
- Identifying the student's deficits is the EASY and often the least helpful part of the puzzle
- The most important part of teaching communication is learning to be an astute observer

## BASIC COMMUNICATION

### RECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION

- Is the process of receiving and understanding a message
- Includes any behaviors that indicate an understanding of what was directed to a communication partner

### EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

- Is how one conveys a message or signals to a communication partner
- Is typically accomplished through behaviors that include writing, speaking, signing, body language, facial expression, and gesturing. These behaviors are often demonstrated in combination to communicate effectively.

*“A majority of students with significant cognitive disabilities have limited ways of expressing themselves or understanding the world around them. They do not use or understand symbols and the rules of language. Instead, they rely on their own bodies and current contexts to communicate.” (Snell, 2000)*

### NONSYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION

- Is how we communicate with our bodies in relationship to current context
- May include: facial expressions, body movement, eye gaze, and gesturing
- May be referred to as pre-linguistic, pre-language, and nonverbal

**It is critical that educators learn to be astute observers to determine the forms and functions of their student’s communication.**

### SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION

- Establishes a one-to-one relationship between the symbol and the object/person/activity
- Is when each symbol stands for or refers to the real thing. An example is the written letters of the word dog refer to a real dog.
- May include: written words, manual signs, systems with Braille, pictures, line drawings, and speech words

## **FORM VS. FUNCTION**

- **FORM** – The behavior a student uses to communicate
- **FUNCTION** – The purpose or intent of the communicative behavior

## **FORMS OF COMMUNICATION**

(Sample forms of communication that a student might use)

### **Facial expressions**

- Opens mouth to indicate “more” when asked “What do you want?”
- Smiles or grimaces
- Raises eyebrow to indicate disagreement with a peer’s answer to a mathematics problem

### **Vocalizations**

- Cries to indicate displeasure that a peer is not in class that day
- Makes soft “u” sound when listening to favorite part of a story
- Makes loud “a” sound to signal peer to turn off a CD

### **Body movements**

- After checking the calendar box, shakes limbs to indicate transitioning to favorite class
- Turns head away from mathematics worksheet to indicate they are finished

### **Switch activation for physical control**

- Touches yellow plate switch labeled with a picture and word symbol, to move a PowerPoint book to the next page
- Pulls strings on switch to turn on lights at the math center

### **Switch activation for social control**

- Touches a switch with voice output recorded message “Come here, please,” to get a peer’s attention
- Activates a buzzing device to indicate correct answers on a social studies small group quiz

### **Touch Person**

- Touches peer’s shoulder during a science lab to indicate they need to start the next step of an experiment
- Touches peer’s face to ask, “Will you be my partner?”

### **Manipulate person**

- While showing the student three possible answers to a mathematics problem using manipulatives, the student pulls the adult’s hand toward the manipulatives representing the correct answer
- Pushes adult’s hand toward picture on a graphic organizer to show the main character of a story

### **Touch object**

- When presented with three objects, touches Indian headdress when asked, “What did Indians used to wear?”
- Touches the color of crayon to use next on an art project

### **Extend objects**

- Extends paper to indicate he is finished with his test
- Extends picture of selected classmate to show preferred partner on activity

### **Simple gestures**

- Waves “Hi”/ “Bye”
- Gestures “mine” by patting chest

### **Pointing**

- Points to desired book when given a choice of two books for a reading lesson
- Points to Unifex cubes to indicate the need for manipulatives on a mathematics problem

### **Two/Three choice communication systems**

- Uses eye gaze to look at one of four objects attached to a plexiglass frame to use during a science experiment
- Touches one of three switches to pick desired peer to work with on a language arts project
- Activates one of two switches with attached objects representing gym class/art class to indicate which class is coming next in the schedule

### **Complex gestures**

- Gestures, “Want” to choose a cooperative group with whom to work
- Shrugs shoulders to indicate, “I don’t know”
- Shakes head, “No” or “Yes” to answer discussion questions in class

### **Object cues – representational objects**

- Chooses and extends one of five small objects from his wheelchair tray that represent aspects of a novel to indicate an answer to a question about the book
- From a chart, the student pulls off the object that represents the next step in an activity to prompt his cooperative group members

### **Pictures, photographs, and line drawings**

- Out of two or more pictures, selects picture of pig to indicate the main character of fictional story
- When presented with line drawings of three different shapes, student points to line drawing of requested rectangle
- Student presents adult a picture of the mathematics teacher from a chart of pictures, when asked what subject/class is next

### **Picture symbols/picture systems**

- Student uses picture symbols to fill in a graphic organizer to outline the sequence of events from a story
- Student uses picture symbols to follow a sequence of steps when working on a science experiment
- Student selects the appropriate Rhexus picture out of three choices that represents the correct answer on a comprehension test

### **Verbal – speech words**

- Student reads sight word list
- Identifies peers to line up next by speaking their names

### **Sign Language**

- Uses sign names to identify desired peers to work with on an English literature project
- Uses “Help” sign to ask teacher for assistance on a mathematics problem

### **Written words/numbers**

- Writes name on the top of papers
- Writes the numbers 1-5 underneath the corresponding piles of manipulatives
- Writes own phone number on a job application

### **Systems with Braille**

- Student labels all materials with own Brailled name to help find own books and notebooks
- Student is taught to find correct classrooms in the school by finding Braille label

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