

# STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

## FACILITATOR NOTES

**Time: 1.5 hours (material here is more than enough – may have to only use parts)**

**Note: Excerpts from the Video “Bringing out the Best” are shown. It is available through Research Press, Champaign IL.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, are the foundation for education in terms of:

- Social interactions
- Educational performance
- Behaviour

Developing Functional Communication Skills:

- is pivotal to learning, because so much of what we learn depends upon interaction with others.
- leads to a student’s improved self-concept and self-esteem.
- Reduces frustration resulting in behavioural problems
- Increases active participation in activities and routines
- Helps to make learning active rather than passive
- Changes attitudes about a student’s potential

There is often the feeling that students with severe multiple disabilities who do not speak do not really communicate. It depends on how you define communication.

## II. DEFINING COMMUNICATION

**What is Communication anyway?**

*Activity: Have participants work together and come up with definitions of communication. Write definitions on board, and discuss.*

*Alternate Activity: Handout different samples of alternative ways of communicating and have participants work in pairs to get message across (see Materials)*

*Handout Sheets: Definitions of Communication*

There are many definitions for communication. Please refer to your handouts to have a look at a few of them.

Some of the important points in these definitions include:

- Any time that one person gives or receives information from another person. Communication is **interactive** and involves **at least 2 people**.
- It's the most **efficient** and organized method for transmitting information. For most people that means speech or writing. For students who are most nonverbal, it may be a combination of vocalizations, gestures (including some signs), and pictures.
- There needs to be a **purpose or reason** to communicate, such as needs, wants, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states.
- Communication is used to exchange information, make requests, socialize, and interact with others.
- Communication skills foster **independence** and **control** over the environment
- Communication partners need to be **sensitive to and respond to a variety of signals**. A person will stop trying to communicate if their signals are not being recognized and responded to.
- Communication **may not necessarily be intentional** on the part of the sender. This is true for all communicators. Have you every said or done something that was taken the wrong way by another person. We all learn to modify our communication behaviours depending on their effect on others.
- Communication is not just speech. Any number of non-verbal modes may be used, such as facial expression, or body language. According to Linda Hogdon in her book, Visual Strategies for Improving Communication, communication is:
  - 55% Visual – things we see like gestures, facial expressions, body movements, objects in the environment
  - 37% Vocal – intonation patterns, rate, and intensity or volume
  - 7% Verbal
- Communication also involves:
  - Establishing or shifting attention
    - Taking in information
  - Processing information
    - Storing information
  - Retrieving information
    - Sending information

For the normally developing child, communication is a process involving reception of language, processing of language, and expression of language – at first spoken, and then through reading and writing. With infants parents first imitate their motor movements and vocalizations that in turns leads to the infant producing more movement and vocalization resulting in a reciprocal interaction. Eventually the infant becomes the initiator in the exchanges. As he matures, he no longer waits to be spoken to, but spontaneously names objects, asks questions, and eventually express need, wants, and ideas.

For children with multiple disabilities this learning is disturbed. It may or may not be the case that the reception and processing of language is intact, but the inability to express themselves sets off a pattern of actions that have an adverse affect not only on

communication development, but also on social, emotional, and intellectual development, including organizing ideas and thoughts.

When a child has difficulty responding vocally to his parents' speech, the parents in turn often decrease their speech output to the child. They also tend to anticipate and meet the child's needs before a request of any kind could be initiated. This in turn decreases the number of opportunities for communication and communication development takes a downward spiral. Eventually the child may learn to be passive and helpless.

Our challenge is to help students to communicate as best as they can in order to have control in their environment and to be able to have social relationships with others, in order to prevent loneliness and isolation from others. Students with severe-profound multiple disabilities may not have full access or control of all the ways that most students communicate, but that does not mean that they have nothing to say, nor does it diminish their need and right to communicate. The premise of today's talk is that "every person regardless of the severity of their disabilities, has the right and the ability to communicate with others, express every day preferences and exercise at least some control over his or her daily life. Each student, therefore, should be given the chance, training, technology, respect, and encouragement to do so." (Williams).

#### **Summary of Communication:**

1. Involves at least 2 people – Communication is a social behaviour
2. Needs to be a means of communication – Communication can involve a variety of modes (speaking, gesturing, using pictures, etc.)
3. Needs to be a purpose to the communication
4. Efficient, understandable, functional
5. Gives independence
6. Gives control
7. Human communication and its effects on others begin long before a formal, spoken language system has been acquired
8. Everyone can communicate and meaningfully interact with the environment; there are no prerequisites to communication skills

*Optional Activity: Having said that, let's look at some video segments of students who are nonverbal and see how they are communicating.*

### **III. MODEL OF AUGMENTATIVE/ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION (AAC)**

#### **What is Augmentative/Alternative Communication?**

- Combination of strategies that allow a person to communicate a message
- AAC is meant to augment what a student is already using to communicate.
- Individuals will communicate by whatever means are the quickest and easiest for them (vocalizations, body language, symbol systems). AAC adds to other ways of communicating to make them more understandable or to provide more

information. When the non-verbal student is able to successfully communicate a message by whatever means, and probably using a combination of means, then it is naturally reinforcing and will likely be repeated.

- The Bill of Rights written by the National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities is in your handout package. It serves as a model for developing the communication skills of the severely disabled. Also included is a model of communication from the Augmentative Communication Team from the University of North Carolina. This handout makes a point of saying that a child will not attempt to communicate unless there is a reason and the attempts are met with some success. We need to consider this when helping students to develop their communication ability. We also need to know what the student may want to communicate about - preferences are often on the top of the list.

### ***Handouts: Bill of rights; Model of Communication***

#### **IV. INTERVENTION STRATEGIES**

Communication behaviour and its effects are initially acquired in contexts that feature purposeful and responsive interactions between competent communicators and communication learners.

All communication involves at least two people. Both the student and the communication partner need to be **involved** at some level. There needs to be a *means* of communication as well as a *purpose* for communication. In your handouts, there is a list of some of the main reasons that we all use to communicate. It is called WHY DO WE COMMUNICATE? There is also another list that describes some of the most common means or modes of communication called HOW DO I COMMUNICATE?

***Handouts: WHY DO WE COMMUNICATE?; HOW DO I COMMUNICATE?***

##### **A. How Does Your Student Presently Communicate?**

Start with compiling **Personal Dictionary**. Students with multiple disabilities have unique ways of communicating. A *Personal Dictionary* is a composite of the different reasons for why they communicate (functions or purpose), and different ways that they use to communicate (means or modes). Common functions include directing the actions of others to direct the action or attention of others: make requests (food, attention, escape, objects), protests, greetings, asking and answering questions, commenting, and labeling. Modes of communication include speech, vocalizations, sign language, pointing, gestures, body language, pictures, objects, written language.

***Handouts: Creating the Personal Dictionary; Blank form; Sample form***

## B. Creating a Communication Goal

It can be challenging to develop a communication goal and objectives that is going to be meaningful in the long term for a student.

First, take a couple of minutes to consider the student's strengths, needs, and motivators (probably included in the IEP). We need to identify, strengthen, and build upon the student's existing communication skills.

When working with students with severe communication disabilities, the focus is often directed toward developing *expressive* skills, with relatively little attention directed toward developing *comprehension or receptive* skills. Understanding the communication of others, trying to figure out what is happening or not happening, handling changes and transitions, and interpreting cues and signals in the environment can all be areas of difficulty.

## C. Receptive Communication Assessment

- What forms of communication does the student understand?
  - Gestures/body language
  - Cues from the environment (e.g., coat to signal it's time to get ready to go)
  - Speech
  - Manual signs
  - Printed material
  - Signs, logos, pictures
  - Writing
- Determine any *sensory challenges*. Students often have difficulty filtering background noise from foreground auditory information. There is often difficulty with shifting and re-engaging attention.
- What are specific comprehension skills like? Can he match? Sort? Colour/number recognition? Knows the functions of objects?, etc.
- How does the student communicate and why? (use the Personal Dictionary for information)
- Formal assessment tools are usually not appropriate. Informal assessment includes observing the student with a variety of people and in a variety of environments, and interviewing people who know the student well.

*Handout: Language Comprehension Checklist*

## D. Strategies to facilitate receptive communication skills

- Use visual supports

Visual supports help to reinforce a student's comprehension by assisting language processing, organizing thinking, and overall clarifying communication.

Support can be used to identify:

- What is happening on a regular basis
  - What is happening that is new or different
  - What is the sequence of events
  - What is changing or different
  - When is something going to happen? What are the choices?
  - Who is coming?
- 
- Visual schedules can be in the form of pictures or objects or both. Please refer to the handout in your materials **Visual Schedules**.

*Handout: Language Comprehension Checklist*

### **E. Developing Expressive Communication Skills**

There is a handout in your materials called STEPPING STONES TO DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS. This is a general framework for selecting expressive skills to work on with the student. Although they are all basic skills, they are very functional in that we all use these skills, only in more sophisticated ways. For example, we all communicate that we are aware of others by looking at them, or speaking with them. At the end of the handout, there is a checklist to identify those communication skills that the student already demonstrates and the ones that he is presently working on.

*Handout: Stepping Stones to Developing Communication Skills*

Some common communication objectives include:

- Attending to a communication partner (including giving eye contact)
  - Requesting and Choice making
  - Initiating communication
  - Responding to initiation from others
  - Greetings and closings
  - Turn taking
  - Asking and answering questions
  - Developing breakdown and repair strategies (including persistence and repetition).

Frequently occurring problems:

- Takes a long time for student to create a message. Average rate of oral English speech ranges between 100-200 words/minute/ Average rate for non-vocal communicators is 5 words per minute using a letter board and 1 word per minute using a scanning device. Communication partner loses interest; interrupts; or changes topic.
- Need to formulate a message as quickly as possible means that polite forms and grammatically correct forms may be omitted

- Often what is on a communication board determines what is asked and what the student says.

## **F. Expressive Strategies:**

- Be patient!
- Respond to all of your student's communication attempts. Treat random actions and sounds as intentional communication. Your responses to his actions and sounds will help your student understand that those sound and actions have an effect on others. Review the handout in your materials called, **ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATION PARTNER**.

### ***Handout: Role of the Communication Partner***

*Activity: Show video excerpt from "Bringing out the Best". Show overhead of summary:*

- put things in view, but out of reach*
  - give small portions*
  - create a need for help*
  - offer choices*
- Maximize modes of communication that the student is already using to make message easier to understand. For example, pointing (fast, good for indicating needs); head-shaking (good for yes/no).
  - Students learn best when they are actively involved and motivated by the activity. They are most likely to learn new words and concepts when they are presented in the context of their own interests and concerns.
  - Teach functional vocabulary in naturally occurring contexts that the student will need to use it. Use specific words and avoid saying "this" and "that".
  - Functional communication is a set of skills and behaviours used to effect and respond to one's environment or to express oneself. Functional communication must be:
    1. Consistent
    2. Reliable
    3. Constant – across people and environments
    4. Repetitious – used over and over
  - Use routines – they are predictable, reliable, and create anticipation. They provide opportunities for choices.

*Examples:*

    1. *Model waving "hi" or "bye" at appropriate times rather than having the student imitate actions out of context.*
    2. *Rather than asking student to point to pictures on request, hide objects, then encourage labeling using the pictures as they are 'discovered'*
    3. *Have student put items 'in' or 'on' things as part of the activity (e.g., cooking activity – put flour in bowl; put cookies on sheet.*

- Teach how to use the gestures, signs, pictures, etc.

### G. Prompts

- Involve prompts to help students develop communicative signaling within the context of a familiar routine. The prompts should be faded as soon as the student can complete a step independently.
- May contain the following prompts:
  - Pause
  - Environmental Cue
  - Expectant Delay
  - Gesture/point
  - Model
  - Indirect Verbal
  - Verbal feedback
  - Partial Physical
  - Full Physical

With verbal prompts, try to avoid direction models, such as “Tell me ‘I want juice’”. Instead, use an indirect model in which the adult provides a verbal model, but doesn’t ask the student to imitate (e.g., “Do you want to read a book or listen to music?” “If you need help, let me know.” “Tell Joey you want some more.”)

Another way of providing an indirect verbal prompt is to say something that gives the student a general idea of what can be requested (e.g., “I have something special in my bag”; “This book looks funny”)

### H. Choice Making

*Activity: Ask participants to turn to choice making page with different fonts and ask them to circle the one that they like the best. Point out that not everyone chose the same font. We all have different preferences.*

#### *Handout: Page with different fonts of Choice Making*

- Choice making is important in developing personal autonomy which defines who we are and what we value as individuals. Choice making for a student with special needs **power and control**.
- As communication partners, we are responsible for creating opportunities for choice making by offering choices directly and coaching others (e.g., peers) to offer the student choices.
  - For students just getting the concept of making a choice, select a preferred object and a non-preferred object to choose between.
  - Ideas for choice-making include:
    - Food (snack or lunch items)
    - Music to listen to
    - Musical instruments
    - Position (wheelchair, stander, regular chair)
    - People (who to sit next to)

- Art (materials, colour choices)
- Books
- Computer programs

A study by Houghton, Bronicki, and Guess (1987) found that classroom staff typically responded at extremely low rates to student's expressions of choice or preference - ~ 15% of the time during structured activities, and 7% of the time during unstructured activities. However, when the students were asked to express a preference or choice, they did so about 99% of the time. We must all be intentional about giving the opportunity to make choices.

*Handouts: Choice Making Questionnaire; Choice Making Summary; Choices... Choices; Choice Making List; Choice Making Data Sheet*

### **I. Physical Considerations**

Role of posture and influence of head and arms movements need to be considered.

Eye-hand coordination for picture or object choosing can be very difficult.

Cross mid-line can be difficult.

Stabilization often helps.

Need input from OT and PT

If using sign language, need to consider the physical demands of using signs: handshape (position/isolation of fingers); location; movement (active range of movement; bilateral or unilateral; motor planning (affects speed and accuracy of sign production); sequential motor movements); orientation; relationship of sign to body (toward or away, face, body, midline)

Easier signs:

Movement toward body

Performed at, or toward, but not across, body

Are within the signer's visual field

Performed with the forearm in neutral or pronated position

### **J. Voice Output**

- For nonverbal students, having a voice opens the door to participation, inclusion, independence, and fun. Students should have frequent opportunities to communicate with a VOCA.
- There are many simple low cost voice output devices which are commercially available.

*Activity: Demonstrate BIGmack, Step-by-Step Communicator, Voice Pal Plus, Partner 4, etc.*

- Use messages that make a difference for the student. Some ideas include:
  - Greeting classmates; staff; visitors
  - Respond to attendance call
  - List day's activities or schedule

- Asking for a turn
- Giving an announcement over the PA system
- Giving steps of a recipe
- Assign weekly or daily classroom jobs
- Sharing a joke or riddle of the day
- Asking for a song during circle time
- Talking about something brought from home
- Cheering class mates while they're playing basketball
- Complimenting others
- Asking for more of something enjoyable
- Commenting while reading a book (e.g., turn the page; read it again; I can't see)

In your materials, there are two handouts, one **LET THE SWITCH DO THE TALKING: STRATEGIES FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS** and the other **LET THE SWITCH DO THE TALKING: STRATEGIES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS** that contain lists of different ideas for using voice output devices.

#### **K. Yes..No...Maybe So?**

Answering yes/no questions are deceptive in their apparent simplicity

Questions serve different many different functions:

Examples - Do you want your juice? Acceptance/rejection; in the here and now

Did you go swimming today? Confirmation/denial; in the past

Typically developing children have difficulty reliably answering yes/no questions before the age of 30 months. By about 18 months, they recognize a yes/no question and respond, but usually in the affirmative because that is what is expected as a response. The typically developing child is introduced to “no” in terms of prohibiting his action. Children with severe disabilities hear the word “no” much less.

When asked a yes/no questions, typically developing children give some kind of feedback about whether or not they understood the question. Communication partners of children with multiple disabilities frequently have to guess whether or not the question was understood.

When asking a question, make sure that it isn't rhetorical, and that you show that you expect some type of response.

#### **L. Integrating Communication Objectives in the daily schedule**

*Make the most of your time. Ask yourself, “Does the student have a reason to communicate in this situation?”*

*Handout: Communication Objectives*

Ideas:

- Use a Visual Schedule, either two-dimensional or tangible

*Refer to Handout on Visual Schedules*

- Arrival time
  - Greeting peers and staff
  - Making a choice about who the student helper will be for the day using photos to choose between
  - Using a Step by Step Communicator to request removal of outdoor clothes, or removing items from a back pack.
  - “Forget” to help student take off his coat so that he has to make a request.
- Reading Activity
  - Choosing between books
  - Choosing a classmate to read with
  - Requesting that a page be turned (using gesture, vocalization, gaze, voice output, etc.)
  - Requesting “more” stories
  - Repeating a line in a story with voice output device
  - Answering questions about story by pointing, using gaze, facial expression, etc.
  - Using a picture communication board to comment on the story or to make requests (e.g., "That's scary"; "That's funny"; "Read it again.")
- Social Studies
  - Use a voice output device to call on peers to answer questions. For example, ask peers to identify the capital city of a province.
  - Use a switch activated spinner to ask students questions. For example, have the capital cities arranged around the spinner circle, and have students identify the province or territory that goes with the city.
  - Use a voice output device to direct peers to move from location to location on a map.
- Math
  - Use a switch activated spinner to select numerals to create math calculation problems for peers to compute.
- Circle or Sharing Time
  - Attach a souvenir to the top of a BIGmack that has a message about the souvenir to share with the rest of the class.
  - Use a voice output device or picture communication board so that student can ask peers questions, or comment on topic.
- Cooking
  - Use a Step by Step Communicator or a picture communication board and have the student direct peers in a multiple step recipe.

- Ask the student to get one of the needed items, but have it in the wrong place. For example, ask the student to get the wooden spoon, but have it in a different drawer.
- Science
  - Use a Step by Step or a picture communication board to give directions for a science experiment.
  - Present objects that are unexpected. For example, if the science lesson is on marine life, suddenly present an octopus or have it appear from concealed or unexpected places (have the octopus descend suddenly from a string on the ceiling).
  - Give student a puzzle to do that relates to the science topic. Have some of the pieces missing so that the student needs to ask about them.
  - Play a “Trivia” game with a spinner and switch
- Lunch
  - Use a place mat with picture symbols to make comments or requests.
  - “Forget” to give student part of her lunch.
  - Give student carton of juice rather than juice in a cup.
  - Put part of the lunch in a container that is tightly sealed so that student needs to request help.
- Recess
  - Use picture boards, wristbands, or pictures/digital photos on a key ring for choice making between recess activities (swing, slide, etc.), who to play with, or making comments.
  - For indoor recess, use Step by Step to direct peers in a game situation (Simon Says).
  - Ask student *where* he wants to go outside.
  - Present unexpected actions in order to elicit a response. For example, if it’s an indoor recess day, play with battery powered cars, and “accidentally” drive a car off of the table. Or, say, “make the car go”, but the batteries are missing.
- Art
  - Withold some of needed materials, such as a brush, in order to elicit a request.
- P.E.
  - Engage student in turn taking activity such as a bean bag toss. Wait for student to communicate “my turn.”
- Dismissal
  - Use voice output device to relay a message about events of the school day to the home setting.

- Personal Care
  - Violate object function or manipulation (pretend to brush teeth with comb; put shoe on hand, etc.) with goal of eliciting a protest

## **L. Vocabulary**

Not the same as for typically developing children. Vocabulary needs to be functional, such as

- Needs: bathroom, go, foods, beverages, tv, bed etc .
- Feelings: sick, tired
- Places: school, home, store, church
- People: family, friends
- Pets
- Concepts: up, down, day, night, cold, hot, big, little

## **L. Internet Resources**

There are several very good internet resources for facilitating communication skills for nonverbal students. Please refer to your handout for a list of some of the major sites.