

What is Communication?

If only this child had a way to communicate! But what do we mean by “communication”? The first thing that comes into mind is speech – talking, like you or I do.

But speech isn’t the only way we communicate. We also...

shrug our shoulders
sigh
frown

point our fingers
yelp
yawn

roll our eyes
smile
giggle

All of these things communicate a message. Sometimes we are communicating on purpose, but sometimes the communication is involuntary, and even involuntary communication is useful. For example, you yell when someone steps on your toes, which usually gets them off your foot!

Involuntary communication is the earliest type of communication. As infants we all used it. From the reactions of others to our involuntary behaviours – cries, smiles, eye gaze, we learned that we could have an impact on the people in our environment. From this seed developed our understanding and use of volitional communication (communication “on purpose”). At first this consisted of gestures and vocalizations. We reached towards a favourite toy, held our hands over our head to ask our parents to pick us up, pushed away the spoon with the strained peas, whined when we were tired, and giggled when we were amused. Gradually our communicative repertoire grew. Our motor skills improved, including our ability to control the motor movements necessary for speech. Also, we figured out that a word can stand for something like an object, action, or person. These accomplishments are the foundations of the development of speech and language.

Sometimes this sequence hasn’t happened, and a child does not speak.

- Maybe the child has not yet made the connection that his or her actions can affect other people or make things happen.
- Or perhaps the child can communicate purposefully, but doesn’t understand that symbols such as spoken words or pictures can “stand for” things (*juice, ball*), actions (*eat, listen*), or other concepts (*happy, under, sorry*).
- Perhaps the child has difficulty controlling the muscles of the voice box, tongue, lips and mouth area to make words.

Any or all of these factors can be reason why a child does not talk.

Even if speech has not developed (and furthermore even if it is unlikely that speech will develop), the child is still communicating. We might not be recognizing the communication, but it is occurring!

There are a number of reasons why we might fail to recognize a child’s communication attempts.

- Sometimes we have focused our attention on one thing so narrowly that we fail to recognize that the child is communication by another means. We’re waiting for the

child to wave hello, but he's already "greeted" the person with a big smile and eye contact.

- Sometimes we just don't want to hear the message the child is giving! We're asking "Do you want some soup?" and waiting for the child to tell us "yes" by opening his mouth. He's already told you "no" by turning his head away!
- Sometimes the child is communicating and we are responding to that communication, but we don't recognize or "count" it as communication. The child closes his eyes and puts his head down, letting us know that he's had enough. We stop what we've been doing (responding to his actions), but we may not realize at the time that communication has taken place (successfully from the stand-point of the child!).
- Sometimes children with severe physical disabilities can have difficult controlling motor movements for communication of any sort. For example, it may take a child several seconds to organize the motor act of reaching toward a desired toy. We might miss this communication if we don't give the child time to respond.
- Sometimes the child's posture, gestures, or facial expressions may inadvertently give the wrong message. For example, the child who drops his head is described as bored, when in fact he is very interested in what's going on, but just had difficulty holding his head upright.

All communication involves two people. *Both people* have to pay attention to each other and cooperate so that communication can occur.

- Both of you need to know how to start the communication - "get the conversation going" by getting the listener's attention.
- Both of you need to know how to give you message in a way that the other person will understand.
- You both need to respond to your communication partner", taking turns to keep the communication exchange going.
- Finally, you both need to know how to end the interaction.

Of course you have the skills necessary to do all these things in your conversations with speaking people, but you may have to develop special skills to do these same things with a child with multiple disabilities. Both you and your child will need to learn how to communicate together.

Summary – Key Points:

1. Communication is not just speech.
2. All types of communication can be valuable and appropriate.
3. Everyone can communicate.
4. Successful communication involves two people.
5. You can learn skills to help you communicate successfully with your child.

S. Blockberger, M.A., SL-P(C0)
Neuromotor Program
Sunny Hill Hospital for Children
Vancouver, BC, Canada