

EMPOWERING THE STUDENT AS AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR

Students who are non-verbal all or most of the time use alternate or augmented ways to communicate, such as using gestures, sign language, picture boards, and voice output devices. Research has demonstrated that augmented speakers tend to be:

- passive, seemingly unmotivated to communicate. This may be due to a history of failure. **We have to ensure that all of the student's communication is recognized and responded to, so that he doesn't give up.** Adults and peers in his environment need to be aware of the student's Personal Dictionary and know how to interpret and respond to his communicative behaviours. Adults and peers need to avoid limiting opportunities by anticipating the student's needs and wants. Communication partners also need to be aware of inadvertently being unresponsive to the student's communication attempts and do not always anticipate what he needs, so there is a reason for him to communicate. If facilitators have difficulty noticing the student's attempts to communicate, teach him a way to establish attention. Start with motivating contexts (e.g., mealtimes, music), and before engaging in the activity, watch for the student's ways to signal that he wants to start the activity (e.g., vocalizing, gesturing). He may also be able to use a call buzzer, or a voice output device to let the facilitator know that he wants attention. Be creative in "forgetting" to come to him assistance before he communicates. For example "forget" to turn the iPod on. Respond immediately to the student's attempts to draw attention to himself. If he does not respond, despite sufficient time to do so, prompt him to respond (e.g., use verbal cues, physical prompts, and models). Fade the prompts until he is spontaneously and successfully getting the facilitator's attention in a range of contexts.
- assuming the role of respondent rather than initiator. **We need to give the student ample opportunities to initiate rather than just respond.** Communication partners need to avoid anticipating needs and wants, and dominating and monopolizing conversations by initiating most of the topics. Think of activities/materials that encourage initiation. Consider whether the outcome is motivating enough to the student to encourage continued attention and participation in interaction. Use materials that have a number of detachable or separate parts, so that the student is required to request them (e.g., blocks, puzzles, Lego, balls, dolls, teeter-totter, air hockey, pegs and



pegboards, LiteBrite, fishing games, bowling). In the Communication Reference Section is a handout on Communication Temptations that may give some ideas for encouraging initiation of communication. Observe the student carefully and respond to his lead. Initially, this lead may be subtle, such as looking in the direction of a desired object. Gradually, expectations can increase, such as the student vocalizing and looking at the desired object. Give sufficient time for the student to initiate. Wait silently for up to 10 seconds.

- communicating a limited number of functions (i.e., needs and wants). **The student needs to be able to communicate for a variety of reasons, including commenting, sharing information, giving opinions, sharing emotion, enjoyment, etc.** Communication partners need to comment briefly, and avoid asking a lot of closed-ended or 'wh' questions. Pause after a comment and wait for up to 10 seconds to give the student a chance to respond. **Wait, signal, and expect a response.** Notice what the student needs to be able to communicate about, so you can help develop appropriate vocabulary. Refer to the Purposes of Communication included in the Communication Reference Materials for information.
- taking fewer conversational turns - communicating at a low rate. **We need to be sure that the student has opportunities for conversational turn taking. He needs to learn to initiate, maintain, and terminate conversations.** Provide materials that foster turn taking, such as computer games. The communication partner should keep his/her turn brief. Provide comments about the activity. **Provide models so that he gets ideas of messages to send.**



- limited in opportunities for peer to peer communication. **The student needs to be able to communicate with his peers, not just with the adults in his life.** He needs show interest in, and responsiveness to, others and draw them into interactions. Peers need to see that the student is a kid, first and foremost, just like them.

Emphasize shared likes, such as watching TV, going on outings, listening to music, recess time. Provide materials/activities that can be used interactively.



- adversely affected by severe sensory impairments which may prevent them from *knowing* that a topic for communication exists, or even that a potential communication partner is present. **The student is not able to see things as well as most people. He needs**

people around him to bring things to him, wheel him up close to things, people, etc. and to talk about what is happening around him.

Communication partners also need to say when they are going to leave.

Communication partners may need to touch the student gently on the arm before starting to talk with him so that he is prepared to look and listen.

People and materials should be presented at eye level, approximately 18 inches to 2 feet away from his eyes. Use materials with contrast, against an uncluttered background, and use back-lighting (back to the windows).

Materials may need some adaptations (e.g., a spoon rather than tweezers for getting the 'insects' in the bug bed; ball with sound; reduced background lighting with LiteBrite). Keep in mind that the student's visual processing may fluctuate considerably. If the student has Cortical Visual Impairment, make sure to inform peers and teachers about what this means. See the handout in the Communication Reference Section for information that could be shared.

- inhibited by the use of AAC devices which are often awkward, and inhibit spontaneous conversation. Using a voice output device or picture communication can be cumbersome. It takes time to figure out how to use them most effectively. Communication partners need to know how to use and feel comfortable with AAC devices. **The student needs to use augmentative communication devices that complement his existing means of communication, not complicate them.**



- The augmented speaker is often placed in a position where classmates are asked to volunteer to work with him/her. Try reversing the situation. By organizing a tempting activity, classmates can volunteer or sign up during various periods throughout the day or week to spend with the student (e.g., swimming, horseback riding). Another suggestion is to arrange a craft or other activity that relates to a science or socials theme. A centre can be arranged in a corner of the class and classmates may sign up to work in the centre with the assistant and the student (e.g., decorating Valentine cookies, making a miniature Haida button blanket, etc.)

In the Communication Reference Section there is a handout, Getting Past Learned Helplessness for Children Who Face Severe Challenges: Four Secrets for Success that supports the need to encourage active participation.