STEPPING STONES TO DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The use of formal communication systems such as a picture symbol board or a voice output device, such as a "Dynavox" or a "Vanguard" has allowed non-speaking persons greater opportunity to improve the frequency and quality of their communicative interactions with others. However, students with multiple disabilities are often working on developing basic, functional communication skills that do not involve the use of formal systems. The following is a general framework of functional communication skills that can be used to provide a foundation for a communication system. The teacher should first work with the speech-language pathologist to determine which of these functions the student is presently using. These functions are the basis for the student's Personal Dictionary. If there are 'gaps', then these skill areas are focused on as functions to teach, generally beginning with the first function in the list that the student does not presently demonstrate. Remember that these functions may be communicated in a variety of ways, such as smiling, laughing, frowning, crying, averted gaze, increased body movement or tone, increased respiration, 'shut down', etc.

Awareness

- Shows awareness of another person, activity, object, sound or voice

e.g. Jan turns toward the teaching assistant as she enters the room.

Attention Seeking

- Initiates social interactions.

e.g. Todd vocalizes to get attention of another child.

Preferences – Likes/Dislikes

The student should have at least one mode/signal to indicate a like or preference and one mode/signal for dislike.

- Indicates feelings (happiness, sadness, pleasure, displeasure)

e.g. Todd smiles when he sees his mother coming for him.

- Indicates pleasure/attention during an activity/event.

e.g. Joy smiles after her mother speaks to her while she is being cuddled.

- Indicates displeasure or withdrawal

e.g. Michael grimaces when drinking cold liquid.

- Shows pleasure for objects or activities that can be represented by an object.

e.g. Todd smiles, increases physical tone, and looks at the tape recorder when music is being played.

Acknowledgment

- Shows responsiveness to another person's communication

e.g. Michael smiles when another person comes up to him and comments on his new coat.

Responds to his/her name

e.g. Sean vocalizes when he hears his teaching assistant say his name.

Requesting Continuation of an activity once it is started, then discontinued; Signaling "more"

- Shows desire for an object or activity to continue.

e.g., When oral stimulation activity is interrupted, Todd uses an "oo" sound to say that he wants 'more' of the activity.

Requesting/Rejecting Assistance/Object/Action

- Requests assistance from another person

e.g. Michael uses whining vocalization to request a position change.

- Requests affection

e.g. Sara raises arms to request a hug

- Requests an object or activity ("I want")

e.g. Sean looks towards the TV set and vocalizes

- Rejects an offer of assistance, object or action

e.g. Joy looks away when her assistant offers to help her.

Acceptance/Single Object or Activity Choice

- Communicates that whatever is happening is okay or enjoyable.

e.g. Todd smiles at another student to let her know that he is enjoying hearing her read a story.

- When offered an object or activity, the student uses a signal to indicate acceptance. This is not the same as answering "'yes" to a "yes-no" question, which is a more advanced skill.

e.g. When offered a spoonful of food, Michael opens his mouth.

Protest/Rejection/Cessation

- Shows rejection when offered an object/activity ("I don't want that') or shows that he/she wants to stop doing an activity (cessation)

e.g. Justin purses his lips and taps against the caregiver's hand to say that he's had enough when being offered more to eat.

- Not the same as responding "no" to a "yes/no" question - which requires more advanced skill.

Anticipation

- Indicates a desire or dislike for an upcoming object/activity.

e.g. Todd keeps his head up, smiles, and increases physical tone in anticipation of going to the gym with his classmates.

Greetings/Farewells

- Responds in a consistent way to a variety of people when greeted.

e.g. Jan smiles and looks at the school secretary when she says, "Hi" with her BIGmack.

Turn Taking

- Responds when given an opportunity to take a turn

e.g. Todd takes a turn to vocalize when having a 'conversation' with another person.

Two Object Choices

- Signals a choice between two objects/activities

e.g. When shown two activity choices, Jan looks at the one she wants to do.

Multiple Object/Activity Choices

- Signals a choice between several objects/activities

e.g. Joy uses her head switch to give the number of 'beeps' associated with one of three activity choices.

Two Picture Choices

- Uses a signal to choose between two pictures

e.g. Joy looks at photo of side-lyer when asked to choose between it and her wheelchair for where she would like to be positioned.

Multiple Picture Choices

- The student uses a signal to choose between several pictures

e.g., Joy touches a 'shopping' symbol from a choice of 4 leisure activities.

Commenting

- Provides information either spontaneously, or in response to another person's request for information

e.g. Sara picks up a picture of a muffin and shows it to another person.

- Naming, labeling – words that describe physical attributes of objects, events, and people, including size, shape, and location; observable movements and actions of objects and people; and words that refer to attributes which are not immediately observable such as possession and usual location (Roth and Spekman, 1984).

Requesting Information

- Initiates communication in order to get information or to get approval/non approval

e.g., When looking at a book with another student, Sara touches a picture on the page and looks at the student with a puzzled expression that is interpreted as meaning "What's that?"

Yes/No Responses

Have you had your snack? Do you want your milk? Tell me yes or no. These two questions are similar in that they both request information. However, in taking a closer look one question involves acceptance/rejection (Do you want milk?) and the other question is linguistically more complex involving confirmation/denial (Have you had your snack?). These questions are not uncommon or atypical, however for some students the level of comprehension not to mention the method or ability to respond to these questions could be very challenging.

Questions can be used to request information, request for behavior, to display knowledge or to test the knowledge of the hearer, or they may be used rhetorically. For some students the ability to comprehend and respond to simple yes/no questions which have meaning and personal impact for them is certainly possible. The types of questions these students most likely are to respond to consist of questions like: "Do you want ____?" "Are you ____?"

The development of readable, reliable and consistent responses to 'yes/no' type questions varies considerably from individual to individual. Typically, though, a 'yes/n' response is not reliable until a student can consistently communicate acceptance or choice of a single object/activity. Following is a general guideline for developing a 'yes/no' response;

1. The student has a readable and reliable signal to indicate affirmation to simple concrete questions pertaining to the here and now.
e.g. Justin smiles and looks at a book offered to him when asked, "Do you want to hear a story?"
2. The student has a readable and reliable signal to use a negative response ((protest/rejection) to simple concrete questions about the here and now.
e.g. Michael grimaces and looks away when asked if he wants a drink, when he sees the drink.
3. The student responds with either a positive or negative signal to a question involving something that isn't immediately present.
e.g. Joy smiles and looks toward the door when asked, "Are you ready to go home yet?"

This is a Living Document. Use the following area to indicate the communication functions that your student already demonstrates, and a new one that you will be teaching to the student.

_____'S COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOURS (Date_____)

Communication Function	√ - if student demonstrates	√ - if new function to target
1. Awareness		
2. Attention Seeking		
3. Preferences – Likes/Dislikes		
4. Acknowledgment		
5. Requesting continuation – "more"		
6. Requesting/Rejecting Assistance, Object, Act		
7. Acceptance/Single Object/Activity		
8.Protest/Rejection/ Cessation		
9. Anticipation		
10. Greetings/Farewells		
11. Turn Taking		
12. Two Object Choices		
13. Multiple Object/Activity Choices		
14. Two Picture Choices		
15. Multiple Picture Choices		
16. Commenting		
17. Requesting Information		
18. Yes/No Responses		

References

Roth, F.P. and Spekman, N.J. Assessing the pragmatic abilities of children: Part 1. Organizational framework and assessment parameters.
Butterfield, N., Arthur, M., and Sigafoos, J. Partners in Everyday communicative Exchanges. Brookes, 1995.