

Tips for Facilitating Communication

1. Focus on Receptive Language Development.

Focus on knowing what the students understand and using that information to further develop skills

2. Accept brief but effective expressive output from the students rather than insisting on complex or lengthy utterances.

We need to lessen the demand of extensive output for the communication-impaired users or even for those that have high language potential but are physically-impaired. Sometimes less is more. Fewer words can be more precise and efficient.

3. Use Core Language as the primary method for quick language exchanges, supplementing with additional vocabulary that is specific to the activity at hand.

Core Language is the language that can be used in the greatest variety of circumstances. The small words with the greatest play... (see **GiveMe20**). These little words can be used often to keep the conversation moving.

4. DO NOT get lost in labeling or by demanding too much use of activity-based language.

Labeling nouns is not building communication skills, it is just a demonstration of the knowledge of vocabulary. This serves a purpose but is not the heart beat of communication. It should be used as needed and incorporated into specific activities where the words are being tested or used.

5. Focus on the skills of the communication partner. The challenges are not necessarily the problem of the student who can learn to utilize brief languages exchanges. The problem often lies with the partner who needs to be educated to accept brief but fast exchanges.

Be sure to instruct those who will be interacting with an Alternative Communication User on "how they are communicating." In other words a little education can go a long way towards assisting others to interact properly with those using alternate ways to communicate.

6. Sometimes quantity, not quality, is a good thing. SINGLE-WORD RESPONSES quickly get the ball back into the partners court. This will encourage the communication partner to respond again which then sets up another opportunity for the student.

Teacher: Hey man you look good. Did you get a good night sleep?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Wish I did, my dog was sick and I was up all night with him.

Student: Wow.

Teacher: Ok ready for a great day?

Student: No.

Teacher: Why not? You're not in the mood?

Student: No.

Teacher: OK so what do you say we make the best of it?

Student: Good.

The quick excessive practice will enable physical motor memory to develop for the student. This helps a "conversation" to take place and provides the reinforcement for the student's efforts. This will ultimately increase motivation for the student and the partner. This exchange probably took 2 minutes and the student had FIVE hits.

7. Core Language with STATIC LOCATION for words helps muscle memory and establishes a visual appearance that the students will remember. Language hits can become more like touch-typing and further reduce time to get to that desired response. **Keep those symbols in the same spot, eventually the student will not even need to look down!**

8. Pictures and words together serve several purposes. The pictures act as a cue for the student. The words (at first) are there to enable the partner to be aware of the message in association with the symbol. In time, some students will remember the picture of the word and be able to identify the words as well as the symbols. By forcing this recognition or acknowledging this, we are encouraging literacy skills to develop. **Slowly remove or reduce picture size. Start with small words... remembering to maintain location.**

WE SUGGEST:

Words to be placed above the picture symbols so the words take a prominent position. Either way will work. If you are used to words below, that is okay.

The words eventually increase in size while the pictures decrease in size.

Gradually remove the picture symbols from the tags of words very commonly used or those words that have simple visual representation that the students can easily remember (e.g. I, want, me, You, Yes, No, etc.). For students with cognitive delays, the approach to literacy may work best with this representative word-based (sight-based) approach. This can be accompanied by activities to foster phonemic awareness.

*The most important tool we can give a communication-impaired student is **access to reading**. Success depends on the individual student capabilities, but there is a responsibility to provide this opportunity.*

9. Teach the students about their communication limitations. Teach them that they speak using another way, but it is still talking. USE the words "tell me", "I need to hear you", "talk to me" while indicating the use of the device. DO NOT USE "tell me with your Dynavox," or "show me on your iPad." **There is no secret to be kept here. We need to inform the students and everyone else around them on what we can expect and when we need to push for more.**

10. Provide modeling:

Examples:

“If you want to talk to me, you can do this” (then model a sample language exchange).

“If you want me to stop, do this” (then hit the message stop a few times).

“If you are hungry, do this” (press “Eat”).

11. Encourage language exchanges among the students. Use verbal students with non-verbal students. Use also non-verbal to non-verbal so the peer model of a like response can be encouraged.

The motivation for language development and communication is typically socially driven. Engaging with peers is highly motivational. When students have communication impairments, it is sometimes difficult at first to initiate communication with others that also have communication impairments. There are barriers that can be physical, or the barrier of varying devices and ways that each may be communicating. The teachers and staff need to be facilitators for this and actually teach the students how to engage with their peers. Each student’s method of communication should be detailed and presented to the others.

Example:

This is John. He uses this device to speak to you. We can speak with him just the same way we speak to anyone. He uses this to talk since he cannot use his voice. Sometimes it takes him a minute to move his hand, but if you can wait just a minute he will answer you... John, let's show them. Hey John what do you want to drink? (John presses milk on his Dynavox). Great when we go to lunch there will definitely be milk. Can you wait until lunch? (John presses Yes on his Dynavox).

12. Provide access and instruction on the power of expressing emotions. Being able to express how you feel helps to develop one’s individual personality. Feelings about things are very individual and expressed differently by all. It is important to enable those that have difficulty communicating an outlet for these expressions.

Provide practice and support for using symbols to express feelings. Try to show video clips that would initiate a particular response and elicit from the students “how does this make you feel?” Teach the students how they can express themselves. The subtleties of being able to roll your eyes when something is annoying are a viable expression that speaks volumes to all. It is extremely important to enable our students to have some of these in their repertoire.