

Communication

Many of us take for granted how important our communication is when functioning in our homes, schools, and communities. We often don't think about what it would be like if we could not speak. Think about all the people you have spoken to today and all the things you have said. Language allows us to control our environment. It allows us to influence those around us. It gives us a way to ask for needed things, request assistance, socialize with others, and express thoughts and feelings. Many students with significant communication needs display inappropriate behaviors due to the inability to communicate.

Students with significant disabilities often have limited communication and exhibit poor language skills. Many techniques are used to increase their language skills or to teach them an alternate way to communicate. These techniques include using signs or gestures, using pictures or symbols, or a more sophisticated communication device. These techniques are sometimes referred to as augmentative or alternative communication systems.

Read the section “What Is It Like to Have a Severe Communication Disorder?” on the following website. Write a one page reflection about how you would feel if you could not speak.

<http://www.pbrookes.com/aac/excerpt.htm>

Look at the following website and describe what is meant by a communication disorder and give some characteristics of students who have communication disorders.

http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/language_disorders.html

Read the following sections “What is communication” and “The Communication Bill of Rights.”

What items from the Bill of Rights do you think are most important?

<http://www.patts.org/library/osep-tads1-2.htm>

The other topics linked to this unit will let you explore the important topic of communication in greater

depth. **Click on the links to explore:**

[Everyone Communicates](#)

[Behavior as communication](#)

[Augmentative and Alternative Communications](#)

[Supporting communication.](#)

When you have reviewed these links and completed the activities, ask your teacher to take the quiz on this unit. As you are working on this unit, think about how you would let people know what you think or want if speaking was hard or impossible for you. How do you think it feels for the students with disabilities with whom you are working?

Everyone Communicates

We all communicate everyday with those around us. We may use a spoken language to interact with others. We may use other forms to communicate. You might raise your hand in class to communicate to the teacher that you have something to say. We might wave at someone across the road to say hello. We also communicate to others how we are feeling in a variety of ways. We smile when we are happy and may frown when upset. We laugh and cry. We don't even have to say a word and others around us can sometimes guess how we are feeling.

Students with disabilities also communicate in a variety of ways. Their communication can be symbolic or non-symbolic. In symbolic communication, specific forms represent something else. For example, the word "ball" represents something that is round and that children might play with. The word can be spoken, signed or represented by a picture. Some students with disabilities are able to communicate through symbolic communication. They may have a limited vocabulary of spoken words, may use sign language, may use picture communication cards, or a combination of these forms.

Other students with disabilities may use nonsymbolic communication. They do not use or understand symbols. They rely on their bodies or the environment around them to communicate. Some forms of nonsymbolic communication include body movements or changes in muscle tone, vocalizations, facial expressions, orientation (looking toward or away from someone or something), touching, manipulating, or moving another person, manipulating objects or using them to interact with others, and aggressive or self-injurious behavior. Students may exhibit one or more of these types of communication. For students who use nonsymbolic communication, it is important to always be aware of their behavior and what it could possibly mean. A student might take your hand and pull you to the door, possibly indicating that he wants to go out. Another student might turn their head when offered a drink, possibly indicating that they do not want a drink or do not like what is being offered. A student may be crying, possibly indicating that they are in pain, fearful, or disliking what is happening around or to them.

Look at the following website to learn more about language development.

What are the stages of language development?

<http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/b1.html#b1c>

Why should we guarantee the right to communicate for people with disabilities?

<http://www.tash.org/resolutions/res02communicate.htm>

Steven Hawking is a very interesting person. He has accomplished much in his life, and due to a disease, has lost his ability to communicate with others verbally.

Look at the following sites to learn more about his life. Describe how Steven Hawking's life has changed in terms of his ability to communicate.

<http://www.hawking.org.uk/about/aindex.html>

<http://www.hawking.org.uk/disable/dindex.html>

Many people think that Steven Hawking is one of the “smartest” people in the world because he showed everyone what he could do before he lost the ability to speak. He did not stop being “smart” because he had to start using a device to communicate. What about people who never develop the ability to speak, could they be “smart?” Much of what our society defines as being smart really is about the ability to use spoken or written language effectively. Does that mean that the nonverbal communication of babies or people like Steven Hawking who cannot speak is less important? If we know that everyone communicates, what does that mean for you as a peer tutor in your day to day work with students who may not talk clearly or speak at all?

Behavior as Communication

We know babies communicate without speaking. We all communicate many things to people around us without saying a word. People can look at us and see we are happy or sad. How often has someone looked at you and based on your expression or your posture jumped to a conclusion about what you are thinking or feeling? How often have you moved beyond passive forms of non-verbal communication to use an active form of non-verbal communication by making a gesture or an action to express your opinion? I will bet many of your teachers have become expert at interpreting the non-verbal communication of high school students when they give major project or homework assignments!

You can speak and probably are very articulate in standing up for yourself. So when you believe an assignment is unfair, a grade unjust, the milk in the cafeteria has gone sour, your stomach upset, or someone is making fun of you, I bet you do not hesitate to communicate your reaction to the appropriate person. What if you could not speak? How would you learn to say: “Leave me alone, I don’t feel good;” or “Take that away, I hate broccoli;” or “I don’t understand what you want me to do;” or “Go away, I can tell you don’t like me!”

It used to be true that when students with severe disabilities tried to “tell” other people some of these things, the only way they could communicate was interpreted as inappropriate or “challenging” behaviors. What we call “inappropriate behaviors” may be the most efficient or only method for these students to communicate.

Let us think about an event you may actually observe with one of the students with whom you are working. Imagine that you can’t communicate with your voice and someone is trying to get you to do something that you absolutely hate to do. They keep asking you to do it and begin physically prompting you to do it. What do you do? Do you go along with them or do you find a way to communicate that you don’t want to do it? If you said that you would find a way to communicate your dislike of the activity, how would you do it? Would you push them away, try to escape, pinch, scratch, bite?

Teachers and others who have worked with students who could not effectively communicate eventually began to understand that much of the behavior they saw in their students was not “bad” or “acting-out” behavior. It was a legitimate effort by the students to communicate about some very basic things. Gradually a way of thinking about this type of behavior was developed. It took as a basic principle that all behavior is some form of communication. So just like we would try very hard to get an interpreter if a student from a foreign country suddenly arrived at our schools, a way of interpreting the actions of students with communication problems was developed. This strategy is called functional behavior analysis.

The team of teachers, parents and others working with a student may use a functional behavior analysis to determine why the student is displaying certain behaviors. After the reason behind the behavior is determined, the team tries to teach the student a more appropriate way of communicating the same idea. For example, if a student begins to hit after working for more than 10 minutes, the team may teach him or her to request a break. This request might be in the form of giving the team member a card that has a picture signifying the need for a break or the word “break” written on it. The student may touch a switch that says, “I need a break.” The team may teach the student to use a gesture to indicate the need for a break. There are many different ways that the student can be taught to say, “I need a break,”

instead of hitting. The team must look at the abilities of that particular student.

Read the section “Children with severe behavioral issues” to find out more about functional behavior analysis. What are the steps involved in a functional behavior assessment?

<http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/d4.html#d4e>

Why does a child need to have the four communicative functions (i.e making choices, requesting, getting attention and rejecting) in his or her repertoire? <http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/d2a.html#d2a1>

Now that you have learned to understand behavior as a critical part of communication, what does it suggest to you about the best way to deal with troublesome behavior? Why do many authorities say that punishment is the least effective way of managing such behavior? Why do you think some authors call this an educational approach to behavior?

Augmentative & Alternative Communication

Many students with moderate and severe disabilities exhibit communication difficulties. Some may be able to communicate in a very simple way, such as reaching out their hand to request something. Others may use a sophisticated means to communicate, such as a communication device or a picture system. Some students have no means at all to communicate. It is up to the team (parents, special education teacher, regular education teacher, speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist) that works with these students to assess their capabilities and find an alternative communication system that could possibly work for that student. They must receive training in its use and then teach the student and those around the student to use it. If it does not seem to work, then they must keep looking and trying until they find a system that works.

Look at the following sites and answer the following questions:

What is augmentative and alternative communication? What does it include?

<http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/b0.html>

What are four purposes of communication? Describe each one.

<http://www.pbrookes.com/aac/excerpt.htm>

When does a child need AAC? Why should AAC be considered for a child with a communication impairment or delay?

<http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/b1.html>

What is the purpose of a communication program? What is its aim?

<http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/d0.html>

Look at the following website. (Be sure to look at links in the three areas for consideration and the daily routines sections):

Describe the three areas for consideration in the AAC process.

Describe how AAC can be embedded throughout the student's daily routine.

<http://www.circleofinclusion.org/english/augcomm/index.html>

What is the difference between low, medium, and high tech augmentative communication systems?

<http://www.bsc.net/jaynamom/aacintro.html>

Look at the following site to see some examples of communication devices.

<http://www.mayer-johnson.com/hardware/index.html>

Now that you have explored the various ways that people can communicate, look at the people in your school who do not communicate well just by speech or writing. Look at the various things they need to do within the school on a daily basis. How could augmentative or alternative communication assist them to take part in activities or be more independent? One more thing to think about: if you used some sort of augmentative or alternative device, what would need to happen so you would become proficient and independent in using it?

Supporting Communication

Many students with disabilities communicate in various ways. We have discussed those ways of communicating in section Everyone Communicates. How can we support students who are using these different forms of communication? First, we need to be aware of how each student communicates. We need to continuously monitor their behavior, checking to see if they are using nonsymbolic ways to communicate something. We also need to make sure that those around the students know and understand how they communicate so that they can interact with them in a meaningful way. If students do not have a way to communicate that benefits them, we may need to look at their abilities and try to find some ways to teach them to communicate. We might need to teach them to use picture communication cards, sign language, or a communication device.

Even though a student has a way to communicate, that student may not use it when he or she needs to. Communication must also be taught in meaningful way. If you are teaching a student to use picture communication cards and you ask that student what he or she wants, when that student touches or gives you the picture for cookies, you must give the student the cookie. This teaches the student that communicating with the cards does work and the student gets what he or she wants.

Communication also needs to be taught throughout the day. Students must be taught how to use it in a variety of environments and with a variety of people. They might use signs to ask for a spoon at breakfast, for a pencil in math class, or for a drink during physical education class. Students must always have a means to communicate with them at all times and others should know how they use it. If the student has no way to communicate, that student may become frustrated and communicate in an inappropriate way.

There are many strategies that can be used to support the communication of students with disabilities.

Look at the following websites to learn about some of these strategies and answer the questions.

What are the three guidelines used to support communication between students with and without disabilities?

<http://www.circleofinclusion.org/english/guidelines/modulefour/social/d4.html>

How could these language strategies be used with high school students with significant disabilities?

Remember to be age-appropriate! <http://www.circleofinclusion.org/english/pim/five/verbal.html>

What are some of the general recommendations for teaching a child intentional communication?

<http://www.mrtc.org/duffy/yaack/d2a.html>

Now that you have finished this unit on communication, you have just scratched the surface of one of the most important and far-reaching topic in the education of students with moderate and severe disabilities. The importance of this topic cannot be overstated. Many people regard the ability to communicate as the basic function that differentiates human being from the other species on this planet. This is why enhancing communication is usually the first priority in the education of any student who does not use standard forms of communication. Our system of communication is the way we each reach out and connect with the people around us.

As you take the quiz on this unit think about the importance of this topic. Meet with your teacher to consider the design of a communication tool as a final project.