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NEWSLETTER OF COLORADO SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE DEAFBLIND
Serving Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss (Deafblindness),
Their Families, and Service Providers

**Modified Fall 2002 Edition: Focus on Communication and
Tangible Symbol Systems.**

This is an edited version of the original newsletter. Only articles pertinent to communication and tangible symbols have been retained as resource information. If you copy any of the content of this modified newsletter, please credit the original source.



THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE: BELIEVE!





By Tanni Anthony, Project Director
Colorado Services to Children with Deafblindness

The power of communication cannot be overstated. With communication, the world expands to include other people, both familiar and unfamiliar. With communication, there are unlimited opportunities to express emotion, needs, and opinions. With communication, one belongs to a community and has recognized value within the

community.

Without communication, the world shrinks to a solo existence and the luck of the draw as to whether personal needs are understood and will be met. Without communication, how is a child to expect that he or she has value, that personal preferences and choices will be honored, that his or her voice will make a difference in what happens or does not happen? Without communication, what is the hope of a life with meaning?

As teachers, as parents, as everyone people, we must believe:

-  Every person has the right to be heard.
-  Every person has the right to be understood.
-  Every person deserves to communicate his or her needs, thoughts, questions, emotions, and choices.
-  Every person can communicate in his or her own way.

Several years ago, I spoke at a conference in another state on the topic of building communication systems for children with combined vision and hearing loss. The room was

packed with over 200 people in attendance. About a half an hour into the presentation, a woman raised her hand with extreme urgency. She asked a question that I will never forget. She stood and asked with emotion, "Our team members disagree about a particular child. We argue about if he can communicate." (*In my mind I waited for her to say that she believed he could and needed strategies to convince her colleagues*). Instead, she continued, "I say that he **cannot** communicate. How can I prove to them that this child cannot communicate?"

It was a both a sincere and startling question. There was no reason to believe that she was not a dedicated professional – after all, she was at a conference to learn about communication programs for children with deafblindness. But it shook me.

My response was immediate and to this day, it surprises even me. I asked if she would answer a question back for me. She agreed and then I asked, "Is this child dead?" Taken back, she replied, "no." I answered, as calmly as I could, "Then he communicates."

To me it was important to let this simple message be heard without further immediate expansion. The child is alive, the child communicates. If we do not believe that this child or any other child communicates, we are not paying attention, not listening, not expecting, and we certainly will not be teaching.

My intention was not to be glib or overly dramatic. It was more of a reaction than a deliberate moment of teaching. My instinct was to protect this child – to be a voice for him – "I am here. I need you to believe in me. I have things to tell you."

We then spent the rest of the morning talking about how to capture the communication abilities of this child and perhaps other children like him. How to identify the ways the child was truly communicating, what he liked and disliked, how he let people know these preferences however simple, and how to chronicle voice and movement behaviors that could be shaped into intentional communication. In the end, we all seemed to agree that this child was indeed communicating and how to proceed with the next steps of his communication program.

Many of us have learned over the years how to work together to build a communication systems. Each year, there seems to be something else to consider – a new piece of technology, a better understanding of how to observe the most minute signals of a child, an increased awareness of the personal responsibility that a communication system truly relies upon the consistency of the people who surround the child, and so on. But it all begins with a simple belief in the child's ability to communicate. All children.

At our 2002 Summer Institute on Deafblindness, Phil Schweigert gave us two and a half days of rich content about the early communication development of children. He offered tools for both parents and professionals to create a communication environment for children with combined vision and hearing loss.

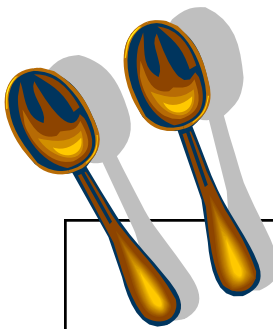
Information will be shared in this newsletter about some of the important things that Phil shared with during the summer institute. Gina and I hope to share some of Phil's key points with you in this newsletter. We also have items in our lending library that can assist with building a communication program for the children in your lives. If you would like a technical assistance visit, give us a call at 303 866-6681 or 303 866-6605.

Communication Bill of Rights

All persons, regardless of the extent or severity of their disabilities, have a basic right to affect, through communication, the conditions of their own existence. Beyond this general right, a number of specific communication rights should be ensured in all daily interactions and interventions involving persons who have severe disabilities. These basic communication rights are as follow:

1. **The right** to request desired objects, actions, events, and person, and to express personal preferences or feelings.
2. **The right** to be offered choices and alternatives.
3. **The right** to reject or refuse undesired objects, events, or actions, including the right to decline or reject all preferred choices.
4. **The right** to request and be given, attention from and interaction with another person.
5. **The right** to request feedback or information about a state, an object, a person, or an event of interest.
6. **The right** to active treatment and intervention efforts to enable people with severe disabilities to communicate messages in whatever modes, and as effectively and efficiently as their specific abilities will allow.
7. **The right** to have communicative acts acknowledged and responded to, even when the intent of these acts cannot be fulfilled by the responder.
8. **The right** to have access at all times to any needed augmentative and alternative communication devices and other devices, to have those devices in good working order.
9. **The right** to environmental contexts, interactions, and opportunities that expect and encourage persons with disabilities to participate as full communicative partners with other people including peers.
10. **The right** to be informed about the people, things, and events in one's immediate environment.
11. **The right** to be communicated with in a manner that recognizes and acknowledges the inherent dignity of the person being addressed, including the right to be a part of communication exchanges about individuals that are conducted in his or her presence.
12. **The right** to be communicated with in ways that are meaningful, understandable, and culturally and linguistically appropriate.

*National Joint Committee for the Communicative
Needs of persons with Severe Disabilities (1992)*



Constantly Consistent?

By Gina Quintana, Project Coordinator

I recently attended a very interesting team meeting. Those in attendance were some of the 'key players' in the life and education of 'Sam.' The players included his mother, his teachers, one from each of the two schools he attends, his intervenor, as well as myself. The group came together at the request of his mother, to examine the communication system that was being used for Sam.

Sam's mother, attended the Summer Institute on Deafblindness in June, 2002. She was able to hear Phil Schweigert's inservice on Tactile Communications Systems. She pondered the new information that she received, and decided to call this group together.

What was discovered was a situation that I find is very common. All of those involved with Sam understand his need for an object communication system; he has a very competent team working with him. They all understand how to use the system for Sam's benefit, to give him the information he needs. The missing, but important factor was the consistency in the communication system. Sam had one system at home, one at School A and one at School B. For example, at School A, he had a spoon on a card to symbolize that it was time to eat. At School B, he had a

smaller, plastic spoon, and at home, he had a small yellow plastic fork. While all of the systems were good, it is probably difficult for Sam to learn his communication system, because of absence of consistency.

In order for a communication system of any type, whether it's objects or picture symbols, to be successful, for any student with dual sensory impairment, the student must be given the information in a way that he understands, consistently. Not only should the objects / picture symbols be consistent, but also, the manner in which it is presented to him needs the same consistency. The student will learn what each symbol represents, without having to ascertain, or figure out the information.

The team developed a system for Sam, using pieces of each of the current systems. Each person volunteered to gather objects (3 of each) to be used in the three different settings. The objects will be housed in the settings in a shoe bag that hangs on the wall, labeled with the activity it represents. This way, they stay somewhat orderly, and *anyone* that comes into the classroom(s) or the home, to work with Sam, can look at the wall hanging and utilize the appropriate object.

Questions and Answers about Tangible Communication Systems?

This information is taken from the notes taken by Tanni Anthony from the 2002 Summer Institute on Deafblindness. The presenter was by Philip Schweigert and the topic was *Tangible Communication Systems for Learners with Significant Disabilities, Including Deafblindness.*



What are the social foundations of communication?

It is important for the child to learn to:

- ☆ Differentiate from self others
- ☆ Differentiate other people from objects
- ☆ Attachment to other persons (motivation - to have needs / wants met)
- ☆ Comprehends role of other people as social agents

What are the elements of communication?

Three things must be in place in order for communication to occur:

- ☆ A Sender and Receiver
- ☆ A Means of Expression (body movement, sound/voice, words, signs, etc.)
- ☆ Topic (something that the child cares about as a topic to communicate about)

The sender must have the means of expression. All children have a means - we need to recognize the child's means of expression. The child must have a topic of which to communicate about - basic likes and dislikes are often a starting point. The receiver must be able to be receptive to the message and the means of communication. We need to look at the child's intent to communicate.

How do I know when to introduce a symbolic communication system to a child?

It is important not to introduce a symbolic level of communication with a child who is functioning at level one or two (see communication chart of page 13). The child, at this level, is not ready to communicate with symbols. The child first must have intentional communication with another person. When the child arrives at the "intent to communicate" stage - that he or she is showing that he or she has the

groundwork for introducing symbols. The child now has the elements of communicate - but the symbols become the means of communication.

A child with vision loss may not use conventional communication behaviors such as eye referencing, pointing, and/or gesturing. Both sensory and physical capabilities will influence certain types of conventional communication.

How can we work to establish intentional communication?



Parents and professionals must ensure that the child is given opportunities to communicate by being consistently responsive to potential communication behaviors (e.g. fussing when hungry, vocalizing pleasure of an activity). The child needs repetitive reinforcement opportunities to advance from a level one to a level two.

At Level Three, the child now has the intent to affect behavior. The intent of the behavior at this level is to communicate something specific to a person. For example, rather than just banging on a table for something to do- the banging is now directed to someone. "Hey, you, I am trying to tell you something! Please come over here and pay attention to me."

How can I motivate a child to communicate?

It is so important to find out what is motivating to the child. Conduct a preference probe - find a topic that is interesting to the child. What does the child like - a person, an object, a color, a movement, a song, a touch, etc.

What is a Tangible Symbol System?

The premise of a tangible symbol system is to use concrete symbols as a system of communication. May be whole objects, parts of objects, associated objects, textures, shapes, photographs, or line drawings. There is a progression of abstract representation. A tangible communication system may serve as a bridge to other communication systems such as a voice output device. It may be one of many avenues to promote receptive and expressive communication with a child.



How do I know if a child is ready for a Tangible Symbol System?

The child who has some intentional communication, has intentional behavior for indicating/selecting response, and is able to use abstract symbol system may be a good candidate for a tangible symbol system. If the child is not ready to use the

symbols expressively, he or she may be ready to use them receptively. Also the child can be reinforced to use pre-symbolic levels of communication. Look to see if the child can make choices between objects. Does the child indicate that he or she wants more of an activity? Does the child use another person to get what he or she wants (attention, an object)? If a child is ready, it is time to conduct a probe. Readiness comes down to the intent to communicate - directing behavior to other people. If not, the symbolic training may be necessary. If yes, determine appropriate level of representation.

It may be very appropriate to expose the child to an object system - even if the child is not showing intentional communication. Children typically function at different levels receptively and expressively - symbols may fuel receptive abilities before they fuel expressive abilities.

When it is time to use tangible systems, how do I pick these items?

The item must be physically tangible, as well as conceptually tangible to the INDIVIDUAL USER (eye of the beholder) - this means that objects should be based on the child's sensory capabilities, conceptual understanding of the experience associated with the object. We need to understand the child's perspective of the selected object and not base it on an adult's perspective.

How does the child indicate a response to the tangible system?

Determine what behavior the learner will use to select a symbol based on motor and sensory responses. Will the child point to, look at, hands over the object, etc. The indicating response should be driven by the user - what is the child most capable of doing and what is the most readable to others. At all times, there must be means to gain attention in conjunction with using the symbols!



How can I best reinforce communication with any symbol system?

The system is based on the premise that the child knows what the symbol stands for - and so do other people. You may need to untrain an expectation that it is always a win: win situation on getting something he or she wants. You may need to decipher when a student does not know what a symbol means or does not understand what comes next once the symbol is selected. Start by offering a choice of objects - once a choice has been made, then offer the two symbols. Look to see if the same symbol is selected as the initial object choice. This will indicate if the choice is understood. At times the child may appear to be making an informed choice, but is rather

selecting objects held in a certain location. Want to eliminate the chance that position of the objects is the grounds for a symbol choice. This is a "position bias".

You may also want to use distracter symbols for something other than a preferred item. Use one preferred item and one non-preferred item to see if the child makes a true choice. Or use a "nothing" symbol - where nothing happens if this symbol is selected. With time, one can eliminate the comprehension check process because it is known that the child understands the symbol. When the child is at a three symbol array - the child probably has comprehension. Of course, physical disability may influence whether or not a child can handle a three symbol array. It may be necessary re-insert a comprehension check when more symbols are added to an array.

How do I promote student progress with a symbol system?

Collect objective data and adjust variables accordingly to ensure continuing progress. Possible changes include: expand vocabulary, increase size of array, target generalization, target new communicative functions, target multi-symbol utterances, increase portability of symbols, and change to more conventional /abstract type of symbol (higher level of representation). Be careful not to move too quickly.



Building vocabulary may be a slow process for some children - that is okay - it may just take time to integrate this process. Many children will be motivated by the sheer opportunity of interacting with another person. It is key to go back to what is motivating to a child in order to discern all of the symbols (representing different objects) that a child might be interested in. The more a child has to talk about, the less frustration the child may experience, which can decrease aberrant behaviors such as self-injurious.

The increase of the array size must be based on some criterion so that good decisions can be made about when to increase the array- involve your teacher of students who are visually impaired to look at visual acuity, field size, visual spacing, etc.

Try to make the system as portable as possible. This may be a challenge for a student who has significantly low vision and who does not have good hand skills to use a tactual system - so needs a very large symbol from a visual standpoint. Accessibility is vital to the use of a system across environments and portability helps with this process.

More ?s - give us a call and we can share more information and materials. Tanni - (303) 866-6681 and Gina - (303) 866-6605.



Seven Levels of Communicative Competence



This wonderful chart gives key information about whether a child is ready for a symbolic communication system. The foundation of intentional behavior must first be in place. This chart should be a cornerstone to every child's communication program.

<u>Level</u>	<u>Salient Behavior</u>
1. Pre-intentional (reactive behavior) (0-3 months)	Pre-intentional or reflexive behavior that expresses <u>state</u> of subject. State (e.g. hungry, wet) is interpreted by observer.
2. Intentional (proactive) Behavior (not intentionally communicative)	Behavior is intentional, but is not intentionally communicative. Behavior <u>functions</u> to affect observer's Behavior, since observer infers intent.
3. Nonconventional Presymbolic Communication	Nonconventional gestures are used with intent of affecting observer's behavior
4. Conventional Presymbolic Communication	Conventional gestures are used with intent of affecting observer's Behavior (role of the sight)
5. Concrete Symbol Communication	Limited use of concrete (iconic) symbols to represent environmental entities. 1 to 1 correspondence between symbol and referent.
6. Abstract Symbolic Communication	Limited use of abstract (arbitrary) symbols to represent environmental Entities. Symbols are used singly.
7. Formal Symbolic Communication	Rule-bound use or arbitrary symbol system. Ordered combinations of two or more symbols according to syntactic rules.

Communication Development and Teaching Strategies for Children with Sever and Multiple Disabilities: *Pre-Symbolic Communication and Tangible Symbol Systems* (Charity Rowland and Philip Schweigert, p. 1) Oregon Health Sciences University.

