



# Tips for Home or School

## Using Cues to Enhance Expressive Communication

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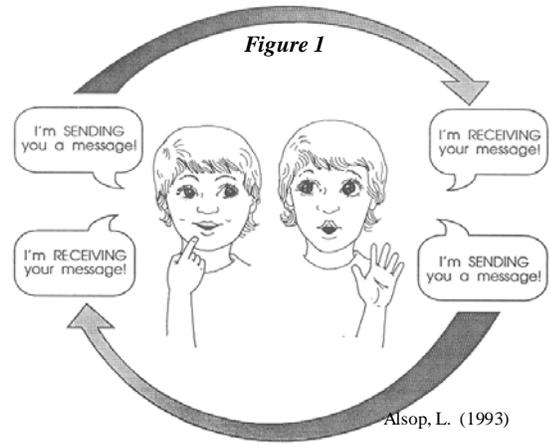
### Purpose of this fact sheet

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide you information on:

- Different functions, or purposes, of expressive communication
- Different forms, or ways, of expressing messages
- Strategies to enhance expressive communication of children with severe, multiple disabilities

### What is Communication?

Communication is made up of two parts: receptive and expressive communication (Figure 1). Receptive communication refers to the way a listener receives & understands a message from a communication partner\*. Expressive communication refers to how one conveys a message to a communication partner by gesturing, speaking, writing, or signing. Meaning can be added to expressive communication by using specific body language or vocal inflection. \*See the project fact sheet *Providing Cues to Enhance Receptive Communication for more information on this topic.*



### Expressive Communication & Individuals with Disabilities

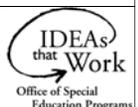
Individuals who have disabilities might have difficulty expressing themselves by using the above methods. Individuals who are deaf might also use sign language as a key method of expressive communication, while an individual with more significant disabilities might use pictures (e.g., photos, line drawings) and/or objects as methods of expressing themselves. At times, an individual might use methods of communicating that are not typically viewed as communication (e.g., aggressive or disruptive behaviors). In such a situation it is essential to conduct a functional behavioral assessment to identify the communicative purposes of the problem behavior and to target an appropriate replacement behavior (order project fact sheets on positive behavioral support and functional behavioral assessment). Many times, a person with disabilities will use a variety of ways to express themselves to communicative partners. Regardless of ability, expressive communication evolves from basic expressions to more complex social expressions as individuals develop.

#### Early Functions of Expressive Communication

- To protest or to reject
  - "I don't like that!"
  - "Stop!"
- To request continuation
  - "I want more to eat."
  - "More bouncing!"
- To make a choice
  - "I want a drink." (not more to eat)
  - "I want that toy." (not the other one)

#### Later Functions of Expressive Communication

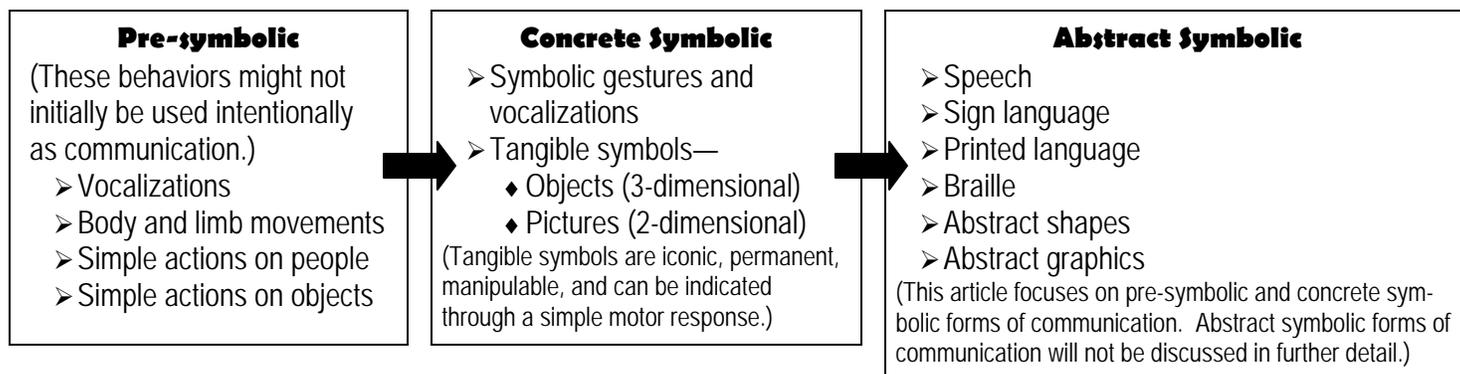
- To greet others or to make social comments
  - "Hi!" "Bye!" "Thank you."
- To make offers
  - "Would you like some?"
- To provide comments
  - "The table is dirty."
- To reply to another's comment
  - "Okay."
- To get more information
  - "What's next?"
  - "Where are we going?"



## Communicative Behaviors

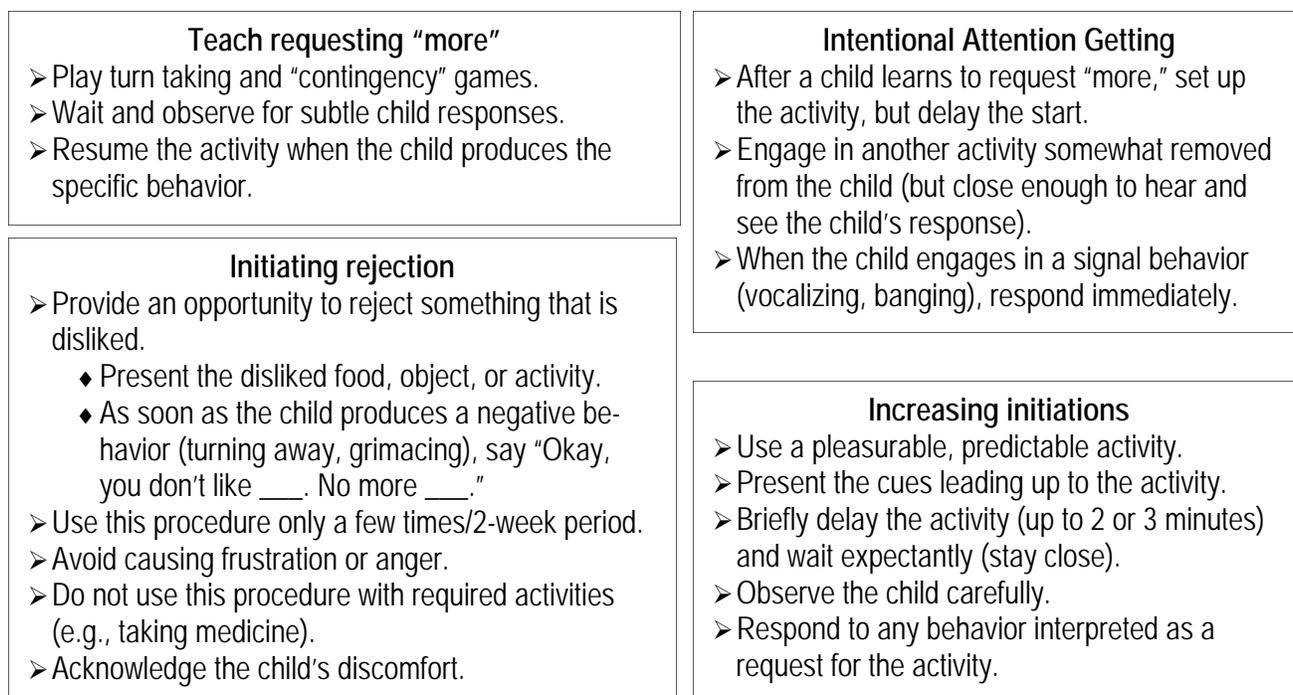
It is very important to remember that a positive, nurturing relationship with the communication partner is essential to encourage communication. Negative relationships can be barriers to meaningful interactions and the development of both receptive and expressive communication.

It is also important to remember that children with multiple disabilities communicate in ways that can be hard to recognize and understand. A child communicates in many ways prior to using formal communication, including behaviors often times referred to as challenging or unwanted. We must first recognize these early (pre-symbolic) forms in order to build up to concrete symbolic and ultimately abstract symbolic forms of communication.



## Enhancing Pre-symbolic Communication

In order to enhance pre-symbolic communication it is essential to use activities that are preferred by & motivating to the child.



## Enhancing Pre-symbolic Communication

When addressing problem behaviors remember that ALL behavior can be communicative. Behavior does not have to be intentional to be communicative and understanding communicative messages can be complex.

<b>Four Primary Communicative Messages</b>			
1. Tangibles <i>"I want ____." (thing/event)</i>	2. Attention <i>"I want ____." (attention)</i>	3. Escape/Avoidance <i>"I don't want ____." "I want to take a break"</i>	4. Sensory Motivated <i>"I'm bored." "I'm stressed/anxious."</i>

### Viewing Problem Behaviors as Communication

- Look for hidden communication messages in problem behaviors.
- Teach alternative communication responses.
- Teach a better way to communicate the same message.
- The alternative way should be as easy and as effective as the problem behavior.

## Enhancing Concrete Symbolic Communication

When is a child ready for object symbols? If the child does not use pre-symbolic behaviors **intentionally** and **reliably**, continue to teach those behaviors. The child must understand that he/she can control another's behavior through pre-symbolic means.

When the child has **intentional** fine or gross motor behavior that can be used to indicate a symbol (e.g., pointing, picking up, eye pointing, touching), he/she is ready to build upon pre-symbolic communication to a more concrete level. Do not expect the child to immediately use all concrete forms of communication for all behaviors. Many behaviors may remain at the pre-symbolic level, while others are at the concrete level. If the child can already use a more abstract symbol reliably, do not ask him/her to use a lower level of communication.

### Points to keep in mind when enhancing concrete symbolic communication

- Identify highly motivating activities that occur frequently and regularly.
- Be prepared to identify new motivating activities/materials.
- Ensure that you are perceived as a valuable communication partner.
- Select an "indicating" response that the child can make easily and that is clear to communication partners.
  - ◆ *Pointing, touching, picking up and giving, eye pointing*
- Be sure the child's communication partners know the child's indicating response.

### Teaching Choice Making

1. Select choice options based on the child's likes.
2. Identify and define a choice response.
3. Choose routine activities in which to present choice pairs.
4. Provide an opportunity for the child to experience each option.
5. Offer the choice options & direct scanning or looking.
6. Ask "Do you want \_ or \_?" or "Which one do you want?"
7. Wait 5 to 10 seconds for a response.
8. Respond immediately if an independent choice response occurs.
9. Prompt the choice response if an independent response does NOT occur.
10. If the child refuses an option, take the choices away. Do not force a choice.
11. Repeat the steps for another choice opportunity.
12. Continue as long as child is receptive.
13. Vary the positions on each trial.

### Strategies to encourage expressive communication

- Make desired items inaccessible (have items in view but out of reach).
- Use materials that the child will need help to use.
- Provide only a small amount of the desired item.
- Provide a short turn at an activity.
- Use interesting, motivating materials and activities.
- Ensure that the object symbols are continuously available to the child.
- Provide choices whenever possible.

### Checking the Understanding of Object Symbols

When a child is using concrete object symbols for communication, it is important to ensure that the symbol is comprehended and not just viewed as something that you give that results in something positive happening. For example, we want the child to understand that when she hands a communication partner a card with a pretzel glued to it that she will receive the bag of pretzels. We want to teach the 1:1 correspondence between the symbol (i.e., the card with the pretzel on it) and its referent (i.e., the bag of pretzels). That is, we want the child to understand that the object symbol of the pretzel on the card represents only pretzels and not just any snack. There are two basic ways that you can check for comprehension or understanding of object symbols:



1. Objects first, then symbols
  - Offer a choice of objects.
  - After the learner indicates the object he wants, offer a choice of symbols for the same objects.
  - If the learner chooses the symbol that corresponds to the chosen object, this shows comprehension and not random choice.
  - If the learner chooses wrong symbol, do not give chosen object.
  - Show the correct symbol and set up new choice.

2. Symbols first, then objects
  - Offer a choice of symbols.
  - After the learner indicates the symbol he wants, offer a choice of objects for the same symbols.
  - If the learner chooses the object that corresponds to the chosen symbol, this shows comprehension and not random choice.
  - If the learner chooses wrong object, do not give it to him.
  - Show the correct object and set up a new choice.

- Continue comprehension checks until it is clear the child understands the meaning of the symbol
- Eliminate comprehension checks when understanding is clear
- Comprehension checks can continue for new symbols

Regardless of whether the child is at the pre-symbolic or concrete symbolic level of communication, it is always important to think about “what’s next?” There can be an emphasis on both expanding at the current level (e.g., incorporating new functions or new vocabulary) as well as moving to the next level (e.g., moving from pre-symbolic to concrete symbolic communication).

### **Where do we go from here?**

- Expand the child’s vocabulary
- If the child uses a display, increase size of display
- Target generalization of the child’s communication behaviors to new communication partners or new settings
- Target new communicative functions
  - ◆ Encourage social responses (greetings, please, thank you)
  - ◆ Encourage comments
- Encourage the child to use multi-symbol utterances
- Change the type of symbol the child is using (e.g., move to a more abstract symbol)

### **Encouraging Consistency**

As the child’s expressive communication system is being developed, it is important to document how the child communicates (e.g., using pre-symbolic behaviors, object symbols) as well as what the child’s communicative behaviors mean. For example, when the child turns his head away, that means “no more” or vocalizing “mmmm” means “I want more.” Similarly, the object symbols used by the child should be listed and their corresponding meaning specified.

It is important that everyone who interacts with the child understands the child’s expressive communication system. Documenting the child’s communication in this manner is sometimes referred to as a “communication dictionary.” As the child’s system is expanded using the strategies discussed above, it is important to modify the child’s communication dictionary by adding new information to it and deleting any information no longer relevant.

The educational team invests much time and effort into developing and expanding the child’s communication system. Too often, this information is not documented in any way and is then lost when the child moves on to a new teacher or educational setting, thus creating confusing and frustrating interactions for both the child and the new team members. Creating a communication dictionary is a simple way of documenting a child’s pre-symbolic and concrete symbolic expressive communication to make the child’s transition to a new teacher more successful.

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