

PARTNER STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATION

Partner strategies refer to ways in which family and other team members can learn to modify their own communication to best suit the student's needs and goals. The idea is to provide the student with ways for him to control the environment so that he can experience the power and control that communication can give her. To help him learn these communication ideas more quickly, whoever plays or spends time with the student, should try to use the following ideas as much as possible:

1. Structure the environment.

Arrange the environment to encourage more and more successful communication. Ensure that it is easy for partners to locate needed objects, props, boxes etc. Put all objects you need for an activity in one location or in several containers. If it's not there, you won't use it. Plan the environment so that it will encourage the most functional communication. For example, if you want the student to ask for more, make sure that you stop a favorite activity (dancing), so he can look at you and ask for more. As another example, ensure you will run out of something by using small or inadequate amounts of food so he needs to ask for more.

The student has shown that he is able to anticipate routines. Partners need to set up and use lots of routines, allowing the student to anticipate. Sometimes these routines are too fast for him to be able to participate actively. Try to rehearse, practice these routines before and after so you can slow the pace and give more opportunities to "make him work" – help him to be more than a passive observer of the action.

2. Observe, wait and listen so you can follow the student's lead.

Respond to all communication attempts immediately and dramatically. This will teach him that communication can effect immediate changes in the student's environment. If he requests something, respond immediately – consistently and clearly. When he opens his mouth for food, you immediately verbalize and give more food. "You opened your mouth. You want more food." When you leave him alone and he vocalizes, you can say: "I hear you. I'm coming." – then go immediately!

3. Encourage a shared focus.

It is important to encourage the student to share activities since communication demands that both people attend to one shared topic. The idea of having fun by sharing in an activity often begins with the student and communication partner simply attending to an object or an activity. Shared activities might involve combing a doll's hair, washing dishes in a container full of water, or looking at a book.

4. Increase opportunities for the student to become a more active communicator.

Ensure that all communication partners keep the student's communication goals in mind and then plan creative ways of offering as many opportunities for the student to experience success in communication as possible. Ensure that partners share the same expectations of the student. As much as possible, try to find some way for the student to request, respond, initiate something e.g., by looking at locations, people, objects or vocalizing.

It's important to prepare for activities such as circle or story time. Before circle, you can rehearse activities he enjoys and is able to participate in. This will prepare the student, provide extra opportunities for him to practice, and give him added time (as on an individual basis you can slow the activity down).

Adapted from Light, J., McNaughton, D., & Parnes, P. (1987). *A Protocol for the Assessment of the Communicative Interaction Skills of Non-speaking Severely Handicapped Adults and their Facilitators*. Don Mills: Easter Seals Communication Institute. By Nora Rothschild - Bloorview MacMillan Childrens' Centre, Communication & Writing Aids Service Revised September 2002

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5. Provide clear expectations.

If you are expecting the student to do something, make your expectations very clear. e.g., "Do you want to do more? You need to look (at me)." Partners should be expecting him to be a more active participant in communication interactions. In "making him work" more, it's also important to prepare him for what's coming so she's ready to take his turn.

It is easier to state your expectations clearly if you understand the communication goal you are working on. Practice, rehearsal and working with a partner initially makes this (and other strategies) easier to learn and incorporate into everyday interactions.

6. Attend to student and encourage a shared focus

If the student does not focus on the shared task, or if he does not "wait" for his partner to take his turn, you may try to explore with tactful, prompting, non-intrusive phrases such as "**quiet hands**" to remind her.

7. Pace the interaction

You need to watch the student carefully for clues. He may need many shorter activities – each activity may last only 30 to 90 seconds before he loses interest. You may also need to give him time to process instructions, so remember to give more (visual) clues and wait for him to respond – this may take awhile so you may need to slow down.

8. Talk using simple, repetitive language.

Using simple language input will help to make it easier for the student to understand language. Try to use 1 to 3 words at a time. All peers and adults should make an effort to do this when interacting with the student. Often if the familiar communication partner uses this type of input, it is sufficient as a role model for others (such as children, volunteers) to try to copy.

Be as specific as possible to give him more concrete feedback and language input. Rather than say "good girl", try "You looked at me. I like that." In addition to using simple language, try to pair it with meaningful tactile and visual input for added clues to help his understanding.

9. Provide lots of modeling

Whenever peers or adults communicate with the student, they should think of ways of showing him how he could communicate a similar message, (along with using simple spoken language). Post a list of signs and gestures in conspicuous places so that everyone talking with the student can constantly refer to them. This will help you all use the same gestures consistently. Think about pointing to pictures on the wall, bringing objects, etc. Model communication in a way that the student could use. Try to keep it simple and repetitive. In this way, the student will see many ways for him to communicate. This should help him comprehend the message more easily. It will give him ideas of what and how to communicate. It will show him that communicating in alternate ways is acceptable and fun.

10. Use prompts consciously and remove ASAP

Prompts are used in a hierarchical fashion according to the degree of intrusiveness of the prompts. "Least-to-most" starts with a pause and may finally, after many other prompt levels, end with a full hand-over-hand prompt. **Use of pauses between each prompt level is essential.** See also separate handout for more specifics on prompt use.

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11. Provide consistent partner feedback to confirm messages.

Whenever the student communicates anything (intentionally or unintentionally), you should say aloud, using simple language what you think he is doing and meaning - and how you came to this conclusion. As an example: "I see you're smiling. You like this!" This verbal input acknowledges his communication attempts. It lets him know that you're listening and understanding – if you're wrong in your interpretation, this gives him a chance to protest and "correct" your misunderstanding. Remember to respond to all of the student's attempts to communicate - immediately and dramatically. This will help to teach the student that communication can effect immediate changes in his environment. If he vocalizes or looks at you, respond immediately – consistently and clearly. Try to make communication functional and motivating with immediate natural consequences.

12. Have fun with the things the student requests.

This is a way of communicating and teaching, not testing. He needs to see and feel immediately the power, control and fun of all of his communication attempts. The student should feel rewarded for his communication efforts. If possible, use motivational activities for communication goals.