



Techniques and Devices Can Help a Child Learn to Communicate

Most people use speech and language to indicate their needs and choices or to socialize. Some children, however, have difficulty learning to talk, and others cannot use their voices at all. Fortunately, augmentative communication methods, technology, and therapy can help them communicate.

Communication skills generally develop in predictable stages early in a child's life. If parents detect that their child has difficulty speaking, they should seek advice from a physician, early childhood specialist, or speech therapist as soon as possible. Professionals can test for hearing loss as well as other reasons for speech impairment. They can also suggest ways to help that may range from simple activities parents can do with the child at home to lifetime use of sign language or a communication device.

Parents are sometimes concerned that using sign language or a device will deter their child from trying to speak. The opposite may be true. Experiencing the power of communication often encourages a child to expand efforts—and skills.

A child who needs speech aids may begin with a strategy such as using basic signs or pointing to groups of pictures. Later, as skills develop, more sophisticated tools may be appropriate. Using any equipment or method to its full potential requires training, time, patience, and consistency from the child and people in their lives, such as family members and preschool or day care staff. A child can sense, and is encouraged, when his or her efforts to communicate are acknowledged and appreciated.

For a child to use augmentative communication most effectively, people in the child's environment must also learn and use the method, whether it be sign language, pointing to symbols in a display, or creating speech from a Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA).

The child's peers can also help. Children in one preschool, for example, insisted their teacher program a classmate's VOCA with the phrase "No way!" so that he could use their language.

Some daycare providers or preschool staff may resist using augmentative communication, because they believe it takes too much time or is too difficult to learn. When they understand and see the benefits of the technique or technology, however, they often are enthusiastic about using it. Therefore, it is usually helpful for parents and communication specialists to include daycare providers and preschool teachers in deciding on a communication system and activities for using it.

School district technology centers or other organizations, such as PACER's Computer Resource Center, may loan communication devices for families to try as they investigate the one most appropriate for their child. If the child's communication improves with the borrowed equipment, parents can document it. The information may help the child's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP) team provide a device or acquire funding for a long-term communication solution.

Once a communication strategy or device is selected, the IFSP or IEP team should identify the member who can expand the system to meet the child's changing needs. For example, a technology specialist may use computer software to create a group of communication symbols or an occupational therapist may develop a book of symbols and adapt it so the child can turn the pages. A speech-language therapist may provide copies of signs

used in sign language and distribute them for others to teach the child. If an augmentative device is used, someone should be assigned to care for it, as well as to program it for the child to use (such assistance is mentioned in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

Forming a Communication Plan

The following steps may help to formulate a communication plan for a child who is having difficulty speaking:

1. Recognize that the child is communicating in some way and will communicate. Value all appropriate attempts the child uses to express him- or herself. Be patient!
2. Arrange a meeting with professionals to assess the child's strengths and needs.
3. Make a plan to help the child communicate. Consider how the child communicates now, how he or she could communicate more effectively, and what strategies or devices could be of help.
4. Prepare the child's environment to help him or her communicate. Inform and involve family members, school personnel and classmates, and people in the community, such as those at the library, favorite restaurant, or doctor's office.
5. Implement communication strategies at home and in other environments. Experiment with simple devices and methods and move to more complex ones as needed.
6. Evaluate and document what works or doesn't work. Be open to what might work better. Celebrate small victories!