Alternative Communication Strategies

Module III
International Partners
Empowering People on the Front Lines of Poverty

“Comunidades inclusivas” Module Series
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Module III
ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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# MODULE III: ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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TRAINING MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Pictures or drawings of activities, objects, emotions, etc.
- Laminating materials
- Poster paper
- Scissors (several pairs)
- Velcro
ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

COMMUNICATION

Communication is the process of sharing information between and among people. It can happen in many different ways; it can be done through oral language as well as through expressions (like smiling or frowning) and gestures (like pointing or shaking one’s head).

Communication can be receptive (understanding communication from someone else) or expressive (producing communication for someone else).

DISABILITIES AND COMMUNICATION

Some disabilities can make it more difficult for a person to communicate. For example, when a person cannot hear, he/she might not know what others are saying or how to use oral language to communicate. For that person, learning a system of gestures or a formal sign language system may be useful. Other disabilities may affect movement of the arms and/or hands and, therefore, make it difficult for the individual to use sign language effectively. As a result, we need to establish a system of communication that is effective for the individual based on a combination of the person’s capacities/needs and the resources and support available in the environment.

When we understand how the disability affects a person’s ability to communicate, we are better able to find different ways to communicate and/or to adapt the way we work with that person so that he/she can both understand others and be understood.
FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

People communicate for many different reasons, which are called the functions of communication. To facilitate communication for individuals with disabilities, it is important to be aware of these functions.

❖ To make requests (for information, objects, actions) and express wants and needs

  o “I want to play.”
  o “I need to use the restroom.”
  o “I want a drink of water.”
  o “Please help me…”
  o “Pay attention to me.”
  o “Please do the dishes.”

❖ To acknowledge or respond to questions

❖ To protest

  o “No!”
  o “I don’t want it.”
  o “I won’t do it.”
  o “I don’t like it.”

❖ To communicate emotions

  o “I’m happy.”
  o “I’m sad.”
  o “I’m excited.”
  o “I’m mad.”
  o “I’m scared.”

❖ To inform

  o “I will be back later.”
  o “I am supposed to bring a notebook to school.”
  o “There is a mouse in the house.”

❖ To persuade

  o “I need a cell phone, so I can text my friends.”
  o “You should go to bed earlier, so you won’t be tired.”
  o “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”
To socialize
- “Hi!”
- “How was your day today?”
- “I had a really bad day at school.”
- “I want to be your friend.”
- “Goodbye.”
METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

- **Speech** – most common form – used to express thoughts and feelings through spoken language

- **Facial expressions** (e.g., smile, frown)

- **Gestures** (e.g., pointing, shaking one’s head)
  People need motor skills required by the particular gesture.

- **Sign Language**
  For many people, sign language is an effective way to communicate. Sometimes, it consists of a formal system that is recognized and taught. In other cases, when individuals and families have not learned formal sign language, a system may evolve that is unique to a family.

  Sign language can be a very practical and rapid way of communicating – when all participants recognize and use the signs. Its use may be limited, however, if others in the environment do not know the signs or if the individual cannot move his or her arms/hands to form the signs.

  Click here for a video example on YouTube about learning sign language!
  The same video can be found at this link:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KZbdamwZ4&t=17s
Communication Boards

A communication board is a surface with photos, drawings, or symbols that a person can use to communicate preferences, responses, and feelings. Communication boards are created for the individual based on his or her specific abilities. (See next section for more information about creating and using communication boards.)

Not all of these methods are appropriate for all people. For example, people who cannot hear might have difficulty understanding spoken words. That does not mean that they are incapable of understanding ideas and concepts; they just might have to use other methods to communicate with others. Gestures, signs, and communication boards may all be effective means of communication, depending on their other skills, needs, and the environment (for example, whether others in the environment know how to sign). Individuals with motor disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, may find it challenging to form signs, so in that case, other methods of communication would need to be considered.
COMMUNICATION BOARDS

What Are They?
Communication boards consist of photographs, drawings, and/or symbols that a person points to, touches, or looks at to communicate. Communication boards should be individualized and specific to the person who will be using them. They can have as few as two choices or many choices depending on the age and abilities of the person. They can consist of simple drawings/photos or more complex and abstract symbols.

How Are They Made?
Each board should be adapted to meet the needs of specific individuals, so you must understand the abilities and needs of the individual as well as what he/she needs to do to function in his or her environment effectively.

Think about which functions of communication would best serve the person who will be using it. For example, you may want the person to be able to communicate basic needs (like hunger or thirst), answer questions, or express emotions (such as anger or happiness).

Discuss the communication needs with his/her family and teachers. Work with the student as well as any caregivers to identify the most important ideas to communicate.

Evaluate the abilities of the individual. For example, does he/she have the ability to touch a picture or symbol? The ability to point? The ability to shift his/her gaze to focus on a particular picture or symbol?

Make sure the individual knows how to use these response strategies to make choices.

Choose appropriate symbols and/or pictures to include on the board (e.g., wants, needs, favorite toys).

Make sure he/she recognizes and understands the photo, drawing, or symbol you are using. This process is often easier when you are using photos of familiar objects (like a picture of the individual’s bed, pictures of favorite objects, or pictures of preferred foods). You may have to teach the relationship between a more abstract concept (such as a feeling) and the corresponding photo or drawing.

Decide how many symbols to include. This decision will depend on how many choices the person can handle at one time.

Make the communication board with the use of photos, computer graphics, or clear hand-drawn graphics. Then, you can use a laminator to make it durable.

Make the system as portable as possible so that the person can take it into different environments (home, school, and community).
How Are They Used?

The person for whom the communication board was made should have access to the board at all times. It is not helpful if he/she can communicate at school, but not at home, for example.

Make sure the person knows the pictures or symbols that you want him/her to use.

When the person wants to communicate, he/she can point to, touch, or look at the symbol/picture that symbolizes what he/she wants to say. For example, if the person needs to use the restroom, he/she will point to, touch, or look at the picture of the toilet. If the person wants to play with his/her favorite toy, then he/she will point to, touch, or look at the picture of the toy. When the person selects a symbol, whomever the person is communicating with should respond appropriately.
Click here to see a video example on YouTube about teaching someone to use a two-option photo communication system. The same video can be found at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwc8AHt91hE

**How Are They Taught?**

Start simply and, gradually, make the communication board more complex as the person feels comfortable using more symbols.

Like anything new, you must first introduce the communication board to the person as well as to his/her family, teachers, and friends.

Give the person an orientation of where different symbols/pictures are and show him/her the patterns you used in developing the board. For example, show the person that “eat” is next to “drink,” and “bathroom” is next to “bath.”

Model how to use it. Demonstrate that when you point to, touch, or look at “drink,” you get a drink of water, for example.

Create multiple opportunities to use the board. Even if you think, or know, that the person is hungry, require him/her to point to, touch, or look at the “eat” symbol in order to understand the cause and effect relationship of using the board with someone else.

Reward the person for using it by giving him/her what is being requested in the communication. For example, if the person points to the picture of water, give him/her a drink of water.

The most important part to remember is that you need to teach the person to use the board and not just “offer access” and hope that the person uses it. Teaching the person will be a process that requires time, but it will be worth it.
Communication Board Exemplar

I want to...

- play
- go to the library
- listen to music
- use the computer
- go for a walk
- eat
- sleep
- use the bathroom
- take a shower
Additional Exemplars

TWO-OPTION PHOTO COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

COMMUNICATION BOARD MADE ON A PAN
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: ACTIVITIES

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION 1

How Do Different Disabilities Affect Someone’s Ability to Communicate?

Divide into four small groups.

Each group should focus on one type of disability:

- Sensory impairments (hearing, vision)
- Autism
- Intellectual disability
- Cerebral palsy (CP)

List: What are the characteristics of the disability? (For example, cerebral palsy affects muscle tone, so individuals with CP may have difficulty using their arms/hands. Individuals with autism often need to be explicitly taught social skills.)

Discuss: How could the disability affect a person’s ability to communicate?

Large group discussion: Share ideas to identify the various ways that communication may be impacted by a disability.
Back-to-Back/Front-to-Front

Find a partner whom you don’t know well (or is from a different class, program, school, or community) and stand back-to-back.

• Back-to-Back
  Think about the following question: If you couldn’t speak, how could you communicate that you needed to use the bathroom? Try to think of three different ways to communicate it.

• Front-to-Front
  Turn around and share your ideas with your partner.

Look for someone different and stand back-to-back.

• Back-to-Back
  Think about the following question: If you couldn’t speak, how could you communicate that you wanted to eat or drink? Try to think of three different ways to communicate it.

• Front-to-Front
  Turn around and share your ideas with your partner.
SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION 2

Which function of communication is the most important?

- Write each function of communication on a separate sheet of paper and hang the sheets in different places around the room.
- Ask each member of the group to stand by the function he/she believes to be the most important.
- Have the new groups discuss their reasoning and then have an open dialogue with all the groups.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION: All functions of communication are important. They are all connected and play a role in sharing information, expressing ideas, communicating emotions, and understanding those around us.
Alternative Communication Strategies

Module III provides alternative ways to communicate to individuals who do not use spoken language. The toolkit includes a training manual activities that can be used during trainings, a PowerPoint presentation that can be adapted to various settings, and video examples.

DIFFERENT CAPABILITIES
SAME HEARTS