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***„Creating communication rich environments:  
Practices and structures to build  
communication skills“***

## CREATING A COMMUNICATION RICH ENVIRONMENT: PRACTICES & STRUCTURES THAT HELP TO BUILD COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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"All humans crave connection.  
Communication--the exchange of  
ideas and feelings and thoughts is a  
way creating connections."

~Lauri Trulzi, teacher of the deafblind



### Searching for connection



- In fact, neurodevelopmental research has found humans are born with an innate need to build attachments as we seek the emotional safety needed to construct meaning in our world.
- To form connections with others we use the behaviors available to us to communicate with others.

### Building connection through communication

In typical development of communication skills:

- Child uses facial gestures, vocalizations, gestures, movement, and speech or sign language to initiate or respond to others.
- From birth a child learns these behaviors incidentally by watching and listening to others.
- Babies and young children communicate with a small circle of trusted adults — parents and other trusted care providers — who can interpret and quickly respond to their attempts to communicate through behaviors.

### Communication & Concept Development

- Communication is central to learning about the world and developing relationships with others.
- Children with combined vision and hearing loss miss the visual and auditory cues other children rely on, so respectful touch and use of multiple modes of communication, including touch, are very helpful.
- Communication skills are learned through practice and use in every activity and setting across the day.

### Connection barriers for an individual with CHARGE syndrome

- **Vision loss**- miss facial expressions, non-verbal gestures, opportunities to learn social skills incidentally.
- **Deaf or hard of hearing**- cannot hear or understand spoken language. Need for a visual language which is a different language than other family members.
- **Other sensory issues and needs**- balance, standing, walking, movement may be difficult and unusual posture and positions may be used out of necessity.
- **Medical issues and hospitalizations**- limits opportunities for building early connections, especially positive ones.

## Range of abilities in students with CHARGE

- Expressive communication in all children is delayed.
- Cannot generalize skill levels to all individuals with CHARGE due to range of their anomalies and abilities.
- All children start with pre-intentional behavior.
- Approximately 60% will acquire language, either spoken or visual. (Theilin, Steele, & King, 2008).
- Others will advance along the continuum but not reach symbolic language.
- For some individuals intentional behaviors and unconventional communication might remain most effective way to communicate.

## Communication development: Three important areas

- **Form** - mode used to communicate
- **Function** - reasons to communicate
- **Rates** - how often an individual communicates, including rates of initiation

## Forms of communication

- Behaviors
  - Vocalizations
  - Gestures
  - Speech
  - Sign language
  - Touch/Tactile sign language
  - Objects
  - Photos, picture symbols
- Many children will use more than one mode and the modes may change as they grow and develop.
  - Communicating with the student in their "language" is key to development of communication and interaction skills.

## Supporting communication skills

Identify student's **current** communicative behaviors

- **Pre-intentional-behaviors:** A response that demonstrate pleasure or displeasure. Crying or laughing and not directed to another person. Focus on applying meaning to actions.
- **Pre-symbolic:** gestures, pictures, touch cues, object cues, body movements, eye gaze shift, maladaptive behaviors.
- **Symbolic:** spoken or signed language to convey information to another person and receive information back.

**Meet the student at their current level & support next level of skills.**

## Behavior = Communication

Often unusual and unexpected behaviors are misunderstood labeled "attention-seeking" and perhaps a better description is "**connection-seeking**".

### ◦ **External communication intent-**

- Connecting and responding to others

### ◦ **Internal communication intent-**

- Connecting and responding with your body or senses

Important to recognize the difference and respond accordingly.



## Communication Foundations

- Touch cues: Something is about to happen to my body.
- Tactile name cues: Who are you?
- Object cues: Where are we going? What will I do when I get there.

## Providing information

- A TOUCH CUE consists of **tactile contact, made in a consistent manner** directly on a person's body, to communicate with the learner.
- A TACTILE NAME CUE is a **distinctive personal object** unique to that person.
- An OBJECT CUE is an **object or part of an object that refers** to a person, place, object, or activity.



## Object Cues in a Calendar

- A calendar system is timepiece for a deafblind learner.
- The objects used let the student know the next activity, plans for the day, week or month.
- The objects selected to represent the activity must be familiar and meaningful to the student.



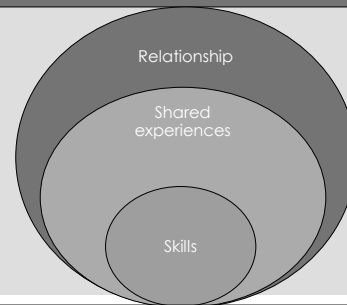
## Dr. Susan Bruce, Boston College

"Learning the meaning of symbols is not enough to ensure quality interactions. A rich history of early communication opportunities prepares children to successfully use symbols to communicate, express thoughts, and gain access to the thoughts of others."



Source: Malloy, P. & Bruce, S. (2008) *NCDB Practice Perspectives*, 3

## Communication Context



## Influences on the development of symbolic communication

- Highly responsive adults.
- Experiences involving action and movement.
- Emotional impact of activities and materials.
- Activities and objects are interesting and meaningful to the student.
- Interactions that occur with objects during play.
- Regular routines.
- Exploration using all the senses, including touch.
- Maximize use of hearing and vision.

Source: Malloy, P. & Bruce, S. (2008) *NCDB Practice Perspectives*, 3

## Communication through connection

- Trusting relationships
- Importance of routines
- Physical spaces that encourage communication
- Sensory considerations
- Using child's interests to plan activities
- Don't forget about social interactions and play
- Time and patience

## BUILDING TRUST: Communication partners

- Communication partners must be familiar, respectful, and patient.
- Hold expectations that the student can and wants to communicate.
- Notice behaviors AND respond to the student's messages to you or others and apply meaning to the behavior.
  - Example: Reaching for an item means "I want that." or "What is that? I'm curious".
- Respond to ALL initiations by the student.
- Follow the child's lead and pace for interactions.

## Importance of routines

- Routines provide a student chance to learn concepts and skills not learned incidentally.
- Routines provide structure and predictability.
- Predictability allows the student to anticipate and initiate.
- Promotes active participation and a means for student to contribute to the class community.
- Use of routines leads to increased confidence and independence.



## Elements of routines

- Predictable routines need a clear beginning, middle, and end.
  - Examples: School arrival and departure, playing a game with a peer, preparing a daily snack, partner reading time.
- Allows student to anticipate the activity or next step and initiate action or a message.
- Slight changes in steps in a routine provide another opportunity for student to initiate and express a message about the change.

## School Routines

- Identify the daily routines in the class and school.
- Initially, routines occur in **same** space at the **same** time.
- Identify the parts of the routine the student can to complete independently. Join them in completing other parts.
- As the student engages in routine with you or other partner, apply meaning to all attempts to communicate through vocalizations, gestures, and behavior.
  - (Giggling="That's fun."; Jumping="I'm excited"; Reaching="I want that!!").

## Routines: Opportunities for communication

Within routines create opportunities when the student **needs** to comment, request, or ask a question.

- Change or delay the routine and see if the student notices and lets you know or corrects you.
- Forget some material needed in the routine. Does student ask for it or comment about?
- Pretend to forget a step or skip the student's turn. What do they do?
- Keep it fun, use humor. Do NOT cause the student distress.

## Spaces that encourage communication are...

- Organized.
- Inviting and interesting.
- Include the visual, auditory, tactile, physical enhancements and supports the student needs.
- Limit distractions.
- Allow the student to easily navigate and locate or look for favorite items in environment.
- Include preferred learning materials AND add new and unexpected items for novelty and generalizing skills.



### Imagine the space for a student with CHARGE syndrome

- The environment has a strong influence on interactions:
  - The space
  - Activities
  - People
- Imagine the recess yard, the cafeteria, a crowded high school hallway or stairwell, a busy classroom.
- When identifying opportunities look for spaces and activities that support joint attention and encourage positive interactions.

### Connecting through available senses

- Use and model the communication form the student uses to communicate.
- Watch for signals from the student that they're ready to communicate, or need more time, or want a break or to end interaction.
- Enhance visual and auditory cues when selecting materials or planning activities.
- Use touch cues, object cues, and hand-under hand support to provide additional information.
- Consider other senses to provide information.

### Notice and use the student's interests

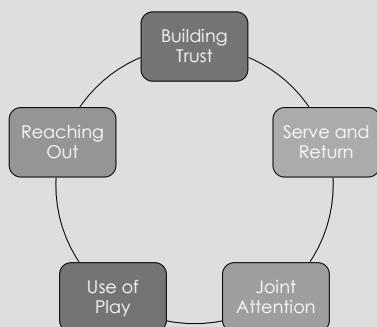
It's easier to engage someone in activities and conversations they enjoy or find interesting, and this will lead to more positive interactions.

- What interests and motivates the student?
- What types of activities, materials, and toys do they prefer?
- Which senses do you think they use best?
- What sensory experiences do they seek?
- What topics, people, and places are preferred?

### Focus on social interactions

- We all communicate for a variety of purposes. An important purpose is to connect and form relationships with others.
- Don't limit the skills you teach a student to responding to a request or making a choice.
- Social interactions and conversational acts must be a focus. Many of these skills are learned incidentally by typically developing children. Model and explain these skills.

### Quality Reciprocal Interactions



### Promoting harmonious interactions

Communication partner must...

- **Recognize** the learner's signals and initiations
- **Affirm and respond** to the learner in appropriate ways
- And make changes to the environment to **encourage** increased interactions.

It is the adult's responsibility to create and maintain harmonious interactions.

Malloy, P., Janssen, M., Riksen-Walveren, van Dijk, J., van den Tillaart, B. (2007).

## Joint Attention

- This occurs when two people are paying attention to each other the same thing at the same time and both partners know they are both paying attention to the same thing at the same time.
- Joint attention typically develops in children around 9 months of age through play and book reading with care providers.



## Encouraging communication

- Actively join the child in a shared activity.
- It is important to be actively involved with a student from the student's point of view.
- When you join the student in an active way, you "step into their shoes" and it is easier to interpret what they can see and hear, what they want or like or don't want or like, and their physical and emotional state.



## Play promotes communication

- Opportunities for commenting, asking questions, making choices and to share information about new concepts.
- Demonstrate that you share the student's interest as you join them in play.
- Perfect way to teach and practice turn-taking.
- Provide opportunities for choices and for leading the play.
- **Remember play is fun** and this can be a good avenue for including peers in interactions.



## Peers as models and support

- Maximize opportunities to interact, play, complete activities with peers.
- Be a BRIDGE, not a BARRIER.
- Provide peers with information and support that helps them understand how the student with CHARGE syndrome communicates and participates.
- Be creative and modify the activity so all children can participate.



## Preparing the environment for social interactions

- Provide ability awareness information that helps peers better understand their peer and supports they use.
- Teach peers about how student communicates.
- Model through your interactions with the student.
- Identify shared activities that are interesting and can be easily modified.
- Encourage open communication. All questions are welcomed.
- Check in often with student and peers.

## Information to share with peers

- The student's interests, strengths, and abilities of the student
- Similarities between the student and peers
- Impact of sensory losses
- Differences in communication
- Accommodations, equipment and other supports
- Ways to initiate interactions, play, and support

## Sharing information with others

- When interacting and joining activities with others, many students with CHARGE benefit from support and facilitation from a trusted communication partner.
- As a teacher or support provider your roles will also include:
  - coach or mentor for the student and their peers,
  - interpreter of how the student communicates,
  - and supportive advocate
- Using a "Personal Passport" or "All About Me" book and communication dictionary can be very helpful for others.

## A Communication Dictionary includes:

- A written introduction on how to use the dictionary.
- A list of tangible symbols (e.g., photos/line drawings, object cues, etc.) and their meanings.
- A list of touch cues used and their meanings.
- A list of the individual's various communicative behaviors, their meanings, and the appropriate responses by communication partners.
- A list of all signs used. Include a description line drawing of each sign or a description of how the sign is made should be provided. In addition, it should be stated if tactile signing should be used. Finally, describe how the student forms the sign.

## Object Communication Dictionary using Total Communication

Activity	Object	Sign	Spoken Word	Picture/Photo
Story Time	Book	Sign for "read"	"It's story time."	Photo of book
Snack/Lunch	Syringe	Sign for "eat"	"Time for lunch"	Photo of syringe and tubing
iPad	iPad	Sign for iPad	"Let's use iPad."	Photo of iPad
Recess	Piece of foam mat	Sign for "recess" and "play"	"Let's go to recess"	Photo of play structure
Art Class	Paintbrush	Sign for "Art class"	"Time for art class."	Photo of paint brush and paper.
Home	Backpack	Sign for "home"	"It's time to go home."	Photo of child's home or family



**BEN**  
AGE: 14  
9TH GRADE

**PARENT'S YES/NO PER MATH**  
Yes/No for communication and all other needs of that person's life. It is up to you and your son.

**MY STRENGTHS**

- I can write clearly
- I can read
- I can understand the meaning of the text
- I can understand the meaning of the text and understand the meaning of the text
- I can understand the meaning of the text
- I can understand the meaning of the text
- I can understand the meaning of the text

**WHAT I WANT FOR ME**

- I want to be able to read
- I want to be able to understand the meaning of the text
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## Communication takes TIME

- It requires time to learn and develop the skills need for fluent communication.
- Your student needs time to receive and respond to messages.
- Build time into routines which follow the student's pace and rhythm.
- Communicating can be tiring and frustrating for the student, and for you at times. Take breaks.
- The effort and energy required can result in communication breakdowns.



## Reaching out

- By providing a student with positive experiences through joint attention and responsive affirmations and initiatives toward the student, they feel safe and secure.
- This security gives them confidence to reach out to explore new materials, new activities and new people.
- This expands their learning experiences and opportunities.





“Every act of communication is a  
miracle of translation.”  
– Ken Liu

## Questions? Comments?

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