Patterns for Creating a Communication Rich Environment

“Focusing our communication teaching exclusively on “functional skills,” such as requesting, choice-making and social rituals do not necessarily lead the child to engage in longer interactions or improve the quality of relationships with peers or adults. Children need to learn that sometimes we interact for the purpose of having fun together which is the “reward” for communicative behavior. These conversation interactions may naturally lead the child to more “functional” communication such as requesting, choosing, or commenting.” (Linda Hagood)

As Dr. van Dijk notes, conversation “can occur at all levels” even with children who have little or no formal signed or spoken language. Conversational interactions with students who have limited language skills should include the following:

- A short turn-taking format in which the adult and student alternately engage in actions with or without objects
- The student’s lead in terms of interest or joint attention to an object
- Make it fun and playful for both you and the student
- Focus on modeling communication for the student, with communicating, requesting, or describing as integral parts.

Conversations which occur during an ongoing activity frequently involve shared a focus or playful interaction. Often these familiar activities help a child learn the art of conversation better than situations which we have set up to elicit requesting or choice-making. It can be a difficult process for a student with sensory impairments to receive visual or spoken cues that typically occur in conversations. Learning to take turns, initiating, maintaining, and stopping interactions, or changing topics of conversation, are skills that need to be taught. Children may need explicit instruction and concrete cues to learn the behaviors expected of them in both nonverbal and verbal conversations. Using social games to teach a child how to sustain an interaction may help in the process. Playing ritualized social games such as “Peek-a-Boo,” “This little Piggy,” and “Pat-a-Cake” are important in teaching any child, even one without disabilities, how to sustain interaction for multiple turns. These games have features which make them ideal for teaching individuals to take turns in conversations:

- Playful interactivity
- Multiple opportunities for student response
- Clearly marked cues for student response
- Simple repetitive structure
- Reversible roles

When adapting these games for your student, think about how their deafness or blindness might impact these features. For instance, the child without vision will need tactile and auditory “surprises,” rather than visual ones to understand “Peek-a-Boo.” Hiding your face for this game does not serve as a cue.

You can also make up your own game using the same features that promote interactivity. Dr. van Dijk suggests movement activities with predictable, consistent patterns. Songs which involve body contact with an adult provide a good structure for learning to maintain an interaction. Such an activity will encourage the child to signal that they want to continue when a pause is introduced, maintain joint attention, laugh, or show other affective responses.

When a child moves to an area and begins to search for a familiar object or toy, the adult can respond as if this is an attempt to interact and converse. For example, if a child likes to sit in his favorite rocking chair when he gets home from school and the adult puts the student in the chair and then helps to remove his shoes and socks, and then rocks him gently. Periodically the adult will pause to allow him opportunities to continue the “conversation” by signaling for continuations. The child learns that his actions can impact other people, and that people in his environment respond to his intentional behavior. Always be sensitive to the level of intrusiveness which is acceptable to the child during this type of interaction.
Developing patterns of expectancy and anticipation through the use of routines or familiar repeated activities is also important. When an activity is announced or begun, it is important to watch for signs of anticipation and recognition. The moment in which a student anticipates or expects something to happen is often the time they will attempt to communicate and our conversations will be most effective and meaningful. At the point of anticipation, pause for a brief conversation before continuing with the routine.

For example, a child may initially anticipate a trip to the grocery store when her hands are placed on the grocery cart outside the door to the store. For this girl, the “conversation” could involve exploring the cart together, choosing whether to sit in the front or the back, buckling the belt and unbuckling it, and showing a wrapper for her favorite candy which will be purchased later in the store. Another individual may anticipate this trip to the store earlier in the routine. When his mother makes a list in the kitchen, looks through the ads for coupons, he may anticipate where they are going. For this boy, the “conversation” about going to the store could involve helping to make a shopping list by drawing or placing pictures or labels on a list. He might be given money for the merry-go-round or gum machine outside the store that he loves.

It is always important to let the student know that you understood his attempts to communicate. You may say, “Oh, you need your blanket!” or “You want your socks on?” etc. Your movements as you speak can be an imitation of his movements. Your statements should tell him that you “heard” what he was saying and that you respect his wishes. Be sure that your facial expression, body language, vocalizations, and speech all give a message of positive feelings about his communication.

Suggestions for enhancing communication with beginning communicators:

- Set aside special times for having conversations. Just as we set time aside to call a friend to family member.
- Do movements that the child finds enjoyable together. This movement may be a way of stimulating like rocking or playing with something.
- Be consistent when playing social games such as “Pat-a-Cake” with the student. Make up a song about some activity or object the student likes.
- Interpret non-communicative behaviors as “conversation starters.”
- Use consistent daily routines in which your child is fully involved.

Suggestions for enhancing communication with more advanced communicators:

- Use routines or familiar repetitive activities to develop patterns of expectancy and anticipation that can be built upon. This will provide the child with a way to talk about the present, past, and future.
- Make slight changes in familiar routines. When a student shows anticipation for what comes next in a routine you may want to change something. You may be able to stimulate him to initiate a “conversation” with this change. You can play this as though you “forgot” to do something or put an object out.
- Help the individual locate a partner for conversation.

Additional Resources


“Conversations without Language: Building Quality Interactions with Children Who are Deaf-Blind,” Linda Hagood, Kate Moss (7/7/2010) Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired http://www.tsbvi.edu/Outreach/seehear/archive/conversation.html