

Communicating with Symbols Promotes Skill Development in Children with CdLS

article from Reaching Out (March/April 1996- reviewed 8-10)

Speech, gestures, written symbols, signing and objects -- they are all ways to communicate a message. For some people with multiple disabilities, however, words may be the least effective method. Other symbols may do the job better. The critical component in using symbolic communication is an inner understanding by the child that a particular symbol truly represents a particular activity, object, action or feeling.

The principles for developing this inner understanding are based on what we naturally do with people who have no disabilities. But these principles must be carried out more intentionally, more systematically, and more slowly.

Object Communication for Persons with Limited Understanding of Words

Using objects is a communication form easily understood by most listeners in both new and familiar situations. This system may be used along with sign language and/or speech to make sure the listener clearly understands.

1. Why Use Objects?

The purpose is to provide an alternate form of communication for persons with a limited understanding of words or pictures. Objects, called objects of reference, can represent activities, places or people. The child uses these objects to get information, make choices, or give his message to others.

2. What Objects should be used?

An object of reference is something routinely used by the child. Using it systematically is a way of giving the child a cue that a familiar event is going to occur. It is also a tangible way (eventually) for the child to request a particular event. Object communication is particularly useful in a school setting.

3. How should Objects be referenced?

A. Make a list of the child's daily routines such as eating, tooth brushing, going to school or going to bed. The classroom staff may make a list of major classroom activities.



B. Select an object that can be routinely and naturally used by the child as part of that specific activity. For example:

ACTIVITY	OBJECT
eating	spoon
tooth brushing	toothbrush
going to school	fanny-pack
going to bed	special blanket or toy

C. Highlight each object of reference so the child will associate the object with the activity not only when the activity is occurring, but also whenever he sees the object. Highlighting means making a big deal about it and including the child in conversationally using the object in the activity.

For example, if a brightly colored fanny-pack is an object of reference for school, use it only when the child is going to school. After all the child's outside clothing is on, have the child reach for the fanny-pack, place it around the child's waist, place the child's hands on the fanny-pack and with your hand over the child's, say-"go to school ... go to school ... go to school." Each time you say "school," gently but firmly, place pressure on the child's hand (which is on the fanny-pack). When the child reaches the school, the teacher places the child's hand on the fanny-pack and with her hand gently placing pressure over the child's says "school ...school ... school," unbuckles the fanny-pack and together they place it in a consistent but accessible location. At the end of the day, they reach for it, place it around the child's waist, place the child's hands on the fanny-pack and in the same manner say "school done ... school done ... school done." When the child reaches home, place her hands on the pack and in the same manner, say "school done ... school done ... school done." Unbuckle it and finally, the two of you place it in a consistent but accessible place.

Even though this scenario needs to be adapted for individual children, the rules remain the same: (a) use the object to tell the child an activity is going to occur; (b) allow the child to actively participate; (c) use consistent but simple vocal language; (d) keep the object in an accessible location. This method allows the child to know what is going to happen. It also allows the child to ask to go to school by reaching for the pack or, by showing some other response, to say he does not want to go to school.

For a more complete description of Object Communication, call the CdLS Foundation. The information in this article is adapted, in part, from New England center for Deaf-Blind Services and from California Deaf-Blind Services.

