

Alternative Communication in the Education System

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From the time I first became a teacher of children with combined deafness and visual impairment, there has been a focus on educators and family members working together, not in isolation of each other or, worse yet, in opposition to each other. But what does parent/professional collaboration look like at the classroom level, and how can everyone work together to support a child's communication and language development? There is probably no other educational domain in which a strong partnership is more important than it is with communication.

I often tell families that one of the greatest gifts a school program can give a student is an effective, formal communication system that meets the child's receptive and expressive needs. What I mean by the word "formal" is not that the communication system necessarily includes symbolic modes such as speech or American Sign Language, but that the system is documented in writing and/or video. This documentation can be in the form of a personal communication dictionary, a personal passport, or as simple as a written list or a few short video clips.

The communication systems for students I serve typically include multiple modes (e.g., photos, line drawings, tactile name cues, objects, signs, spoken words, etc.). This may seem unusual because most other students are often characterized by one mode, such as saying a child is a "signer" or a "talker." In addition, for many children I serve, expressive and receptive communication modes might not be the same. For example, a child might respond to signed communication receptively but use pictures and a voice output device to communicate expressively. This is actually much closer to the way we all communicate. I may use speech as my primary mode but will revert to gestures, facial expressions, behaviors, etc. when I am fatigued, stressed, or feel like I am not being understood.

What can families expect from educational programs? First, they should expect a home visit by their child's teacher if the family is agreeable to this. Seeing a child's home environment will help the teacher to better understand the whole child and will help the teacher understand the context of much of the child's communication. Second, a family should expect that members of their child's educational team will contact them to learn how the child communicates. This will be the time to find out if the child uses "home signs" or has other idiosyncratic ways of communicating. (Family members tell stories of making up a sign on the spot because they didn't have access to a sign language dictionary or app at the moment they needed to know a particular sign, thinking that the child wouldn't remember

the sign. And then, much to their dismay, this is a sign the child never forgets and they have to spend years explaining this made up sign!) Families should expect that the child's communication system will be used consistently throughout the child's school program.

Families should also expect that the communication system will meet everyone's needs, so that words and phrases are included that the family, the child and the child's peers all want to communicate about. And lastly, families should expect that program staff will strive to expand the child's communication system and not be limited only to the words and signs the child knows and regularly uses.

For more information, check out the communication page from the National Center on Deaf-Blindness website: <https://nationaldb.org/library/list/14/> or contact me for ideas and strategies that have worked for others. I can be reached at mbelote@sfsu.edu.

