

Teaching Communication as a Behavior

Communication is a behavior, and like any other behavior, it can be taught. Effective teaching techniques include repetition, prompting, and shaping to achieve the desired responses. For example, if the goal is to teach a child to request a ball, the initial attempt of saying "buh" might be acceptable. Over time, with careful data analysis, the criteria can become more demanding until the child can clearly say "BALL."

Examples of Communication Systems:

1. Sign Language

When teaching sign language, it's essential to pair signs with verbal labels so the child hears the correct word while learning the sign. Consider the child's age, imitation skills, and fine motor abilities when introducing sign language. This method can support communication for children who may have difficulty with verbal speech but can use gestures effectively.

2. Picture Communication Systems

Picture communication includes methods like picture exchange, touching or pointing to photos, or using electronic systems such as iPads with picture apps. The child learns to communicate by exchanging, touching, or pointing to pictures of items, activities, or people. When using these systems, consider the child's cognitive and motor abilities:

- Can the child match pictures to objects?
- Do they understand that a 2D photo represents a 3D object or activity?
- Do they have the motor skills to push or swipe on a device?

3. Advantages:

- Simple to use and easy for others to understand.
- Can be transported across different environments.

4. Disadvantages:

- It can be difficult to manage all the pictures or keep track of the materials.

Consistency Across Settings and People

Regardless of which communication system you choose, consistency is key for the child to understand and effectively use it. The child must learn that alternative methods of communication are the only acceptable ways to express needs or wants. For example, if a child is learning to request a cookie using a picture or sign, climbing onto the counter to get the cookies on their own should no longer be an option. Instead, you should prompt them to use the communication system—whether it's pointing, signing, or using an AAC device—and reinforce that behavior.

Reinforcement of Communication

Children need to understand that communication leads to positive outcomes. For example, if a child is learning to request "juice," they should receive juice each time they ask appropriately using the communication methods being taught, especially in the early stages. This natural consequence—receiving juice when requested—provides immediate reinforcement and helps the child understand that communicating with others is an effective way to get their needs met.

Example Natural Language Activity Lesson Plan: Making Playdough

Activity: Uncooked Playdough Recipe

Items Available: Bowl, measuring cup, spoon, water, salt, oil, food colors/flavorings, flour, cornstarch; once finished, cookie cutter shapes, rolling pin

Actions Available: Stir, pour, drop; once finished, roll, cut, pinch

Promoting Communication:

- **Narrate Actions:** Verbalize the actions as they happen: "I'm pouring the water," or "We're stirring in the food coloring."
 - **Encourage Participation:** Prompt the child to take turns: "Your turn! Can you stir?"
 - **Request for Items:** Guide the child to identify objects: "Let's find a spoon. Where's the bowl?"
 - **Encourage Giving Items:** Ask the child to hand over objects: "Can you give me the spoon? It's time to stir."
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Language Activities

Increasing Vocabulary:

- Use real objects, toys, and pictures to teach new words.
- Talk about the objects your child sees: "Look, an apple. You eat an apple."
- **Example Prompt:** "Where's the apple? You eat an apple."

Sorting/Categorizing:

- Have the child sort items into categories: "Find all the red foods," or "Find all the animals."

Adjectives:

- Describe the attributes of objects or ask the child to identify items based on descriptions:
 - "Show me something red."
 - "Point to the blue flower."
 - "Give me the white spoon."

*If the child doesn't know how to answer, give them the answer to repeat.

Following Directions:

- Practice giving the child one-step or multi-step directions, increasing the complexity as they progress:
 - Basic: "Point to the hat."
 - More advanced: "Find the hat, then touch the ball."

