

NEWSLETTER

Featuring Functional Communication



The Absolute Necessity of Functional Communication

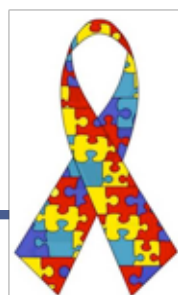
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KISN - Regional Systems Coordinator

Absolutes in life are rare. They are especially rare when working with persons on the autism spectrum. There is, however, one I have found. That absolute is the necessity that every student be taught a functional communication system.

Consider how your own life would change if you were unable to communicate independently. No more ordering food through a drive through. No way to ask for clarification if you were confused or needed direction. No longer would you have the ability to make a choice, express an opinion or indicate distress. Without functional communication we have very little control over any aspect of our environment.

Strong communication systems are made up of a variety of strategies in addition to the spoken word (i.e. gestures, facial expressions, writing). An entire thought process can be communicated through a roll of the eyes or turn of a shoulder. When one strategy doesn't work or suit the situation we switch to another.

Many of our students lack even one reliable strategy. Communication in students with autism is perplexing. Some are non-verbal, others highly verbal. The ability to say words is not a reliable measure of comprehension. A child that may be able to recite entire scenes from their favorite movie may not be able to use those same words to indicate the most basic need. On the other hand, stereotypical phrases and movements may become the child's unique way of communicating. So unique, that those who don't know them well are unable to understand the meaning. This absence of functional communication often results in frustration and use of inappropriate behaviors.



Calendar

Jan. 11, 2011

Webinar Series: Developing 5-Point Scales, presented by Katie Thomas - Online, across Kansas

Jan. 14, 2011

Webinar Guest: Eclipse Model Overview, presented by Sherry Moyer - Online, across Kansas

Jan. 25, 2011

Webinar Series: An Introduction to Social Stories presented by Katie Thomas - Online, across Kansas

For more information and registration information on Trainings, please visit:

www.KansasASD.com

& check out the Training Calendar

Functional communication skills are forms of behavior that express needs, wants, feelings, and preferences that others can understand. When individuals learn functional communication skills, they are able to express themselves without resorting to problem behavior or experiencing communication breakdown. (National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities, asha.org)



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For communication to really be functional, it needs to be:

- **understood by potential communication partners**
- **directed toward a person**
- **appropriate**

Understood

Communication supports typically have a visual component. This increases the student’s comprehension. It also increases the chance that they will be understood by potential communication partners. PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), Voice output communication devices with pictures, words or objects, picture choice boards and keyboarding are examples. Formal sign language is a visual communication strategy that is not usually recommended for children who are on the autism spectrum. It is not understood by most peers and requires fine motor dexterity.

Directed

Communication without direction is as effective as lighting a candle with fireworks. Some students communicate as if they are tossing sounds in the air in hopes that something will happen. If their communication attempt lands on someone who understands them then there is success. If not then their attempt is not reinforced and chances are not great that they will keep trying. It is when students are taught to direct communication toward a person that it becomes functional. Eye contact is difficult for some and is not the only way to direct. Students can turn toward the person. They can hand them a picture or object. PECS is a good resource for teaching directed communication. If the firework lands on the candle, it just might get lit but I would put my money on the match.

Appropriate

Behavior is a form of communication. Talking, smiling, hitting, and pushing are all communicative behaviors. Hitting is an effective way to tell someone to “go away”,

but definitely not appropriate. When faced with a challenging behavior, ask yourself, “What is that behavior trying to communicate?” Running out of a room may indicate a desire to escape demands or noise. Grabbing food off of others plates may be used when no other way is available to ask for “more”. Shutting down may indicate a need to ask for a break or ask for help on difficult work. If the answer is not readily apparent, take data on the environment, frequency and demands being made when the behavior occurs. Functional behavior assessments are helpful in getting to the root of the problem. A student will continue to use inappropriate behaviors to communicate until they are taught functional communication skills in their place. Teaching functional communication will not decrease every difficult behavior; however it often is an integral part of the solution.

Your school speech pathologist can help you develop individual communication systems for students in need. Here are some tips to build communication into your daily classroom routine:

- Communicate with students face to face at their physical level.
- Respond immediately to communication attempts.
- Teach communication during meaningful activities rather than in isolation.
- Consider the students interests- *Interests motivate us to communicate!*
- Expect communication- increase opportunities by providing pictures for choice making, requesting and commenting at classroom centers.
- Last but not least, supports for functional communication should be available all day- every day. (bus, bathroom, recess, classroom)

Please welcome our new Admin Assistant:
Jennifer Houser
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Reminder:
SPED Directors Receive Summer Institute Applications Jan. 5th, 2011!!!!