

Creating A Need to Communicate

Individuals with dual sensory impairments may show beginning communication skills in many ways. This communication may take the form of body movement, gestures, facial expressions, vocalizing, use of objects or people, pointing to pictures, or more formal systems. As these skills begin to develop, it may be helpful to create a need for increasing the use of these new communication forms.

1. You may do movements together with the individual which the person really enjoys (e.g., rocking, dancing or stirring batter). You can stop your movement, pause for a few seconds, and see if the individual indicates he wants to continue. He may indicate he wants to continue by his body movement, facial expression, gestures, vocalizing, etc. This is the beginning of communicating needs and wants.
2. As the individual becomes familiar with various routines, you can watch to see if he anticipates each step of the routine. As you do the familiar routine, pause before moving on to the next step of the activity. During the waiting period of a few seconds, watch for movement, body posture, facial expression, gestures, vocalizing, etc., which indicates that the individual wants to complete the activity. (For example, you may assist the individual with dressing and may pause after the socks are placed on his toes. The individual may wiggle his toes to indicate he wants to finish dressing.)
3. Many times a person with dual sensory impairments learns a variety of tasks well which do not require the need to communicate. You can create a need to communicate within the routine/task by “forgetting” to put out all materials he will need for finishing the task (e.g., putting out a can of soup without the pan, putting out the toothpaste without the toothbrush, or placing a desired object just out of reach). The individual will then need to ask for the missing item in whatever way he can. You should not, however, interrupt his independence by removing materials he is currently using. It is also not recommended to insist he describe what he is doing in order to continue his task (e.g., the teacher removes the child’s cookie for each bite until the child says/signs/gestures, “I want the cookie”). If you interrupt by removing materials he already has, the individual may feel punished and may not wish to communicate. If you block his independence by requesting a description of what he is doing, he may stop functioning independently and may always wait to be prompted to continue actions.
4. After the individual expresses his desire to continue these activities, it is very important to let him know that you understood his attempts to communicate. You may say “Oh, you need the toothbrush!” or “You want your socks on?”, etc. Your movements as you speak can be an imitation of his movement. 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.