Tangible Symbol Systems ™

Making the right to communicate a reality for individuals with severe disabilities

Denver CO
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Assessing Communication Skills

A useful instrument for assessing the current communication skills of potential tangible symbols users is the **Communication Matrix** (Rowland, 1990, 1996). This instrument is structured around seven levels of communicative competence covering pre-intentional behavior through the development of language. It accommodates all forms of communication including gestures, augmentative and alternative communication systems and speech.

Not a Pretty Picture

At a recent conference we were approached by a child psychiatrist who wanted to vent his frustration with the picture communication systems that he had seen imposed upon some of his clients recently. Why, he asked, is the assumption made that any child can understand what pictures mean, regardless of his cognitive or sensory abilities? Pretesting for the ability to understand various levels of representation is a good way to avoid the indiscriminate use of any particular type of symbol.

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The Medium of Enjoyment
During a parent workshop we showed many videotaped scenes of children using tangible symbols in the midst of various highly engaging activities. One parent used the phrase "the medium of enjoy-ment" to describe the use of intrinsically motivating contexts for teaching commu-nication skills.

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"No Thanks, Try Again"
Sometimes individuals who have previously demonstrated their abili-ty to make choices will not choose any of the symbols or objects that you present to them. You may won-der whether the learner has sud-denly forgotten what to do. At this point, consider the possibility that the learner is trying to communi-cate that he would like to make a different choice, one that has more appeal to him. In other words, this lack of a response may be his way of communicating "No thanks, try again". When you think this may be the case, offer other choices if they are available.

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The Story's in the Data
George couldn't seem to break out of the 60-70% range of performance day after day. Looking at the data, it was clear that his mistakes were occurring near the end of each instructional ses-sion. The mistakes were not specific to certain items. Perhaps George was get-ting bored and this was his way of demonstrating that. We introduced a way for George to indicate "finished" so that he could tell his teacher when he was tired of the activity. Another pref-erence probe was also conducted.

pp35-36

This is Not a Cook Book

Tangible Symbol Systems™ is not a cook book approach to instruction. A cook book approach does not allow individualization, which is key to our instructional process. However, our approach is systematic and logical and its success is based upon a clear rationale and decision making that is based upon objective data.

pp 41-42

Tangible Symbols and Speech

For individuals who have a few speech approximations, the introduction of tangible symbols does not cause them to abandon the little speech they are using, nor does it prevent them from acquiring new spoken vocabulary. It does, however, provide a means of communicating symbolically that is immediately meaningful to the user, allowing access to more interaction and greater participation than would be the case if we responded only to the limited speech. (Remember Kenyari and Catherine from the videotape? See also Alberto's and Damien's case studies)

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