

Communicating

1. What is Communication?

Communication is an exchange of information, ideas and feelings between two or more people.

Communication thus requires:

- Someone to say / share information - e.g. "I want a pen".
- Someone to say it to / listen to what is said - "Ramesh, I want a pen".
- A way to say things so that both people understand. "Ramesh, I want a pen". Ramesh gives the pen to the boy.
- Reason / need to communicate - I need a pen to write in my book.

In the absence of any one of the above mentioned four factors, the process of communication will not happen. All the four are equally important.

2. With whom do we communicate?

There are many people with whom we communicate on a day-to-day basis for different reasons. Think about the number of people with whom the Deafblind child communicates everyday. Think about how many people you can add to this list and increase the number of people with whom he can have a communication/interaction. They could be:

- Family members
- Friends and neighbours
- People around us at school and at work
- In the community
- Unfamiliar people and strangers

3. Why do we communicate?

- To express a need - "I am hungry. Give me food"
- To express an experience - "I fell down today"
- To express an opinion - "I don't like to eat vegetables"
- To express a feeling - "I am happy"
- To ask a question - "What is this?"
- To make a choice - "I want music, not ball"
- To make a suggestion - "Blue paper will look better for wrapping the gift"
- To make friends - Hi, I am Rita. What's your name?
- To make conversation - Yesterday we went to the beach near my house. It was so cool and pleasant. Is there a beach near your house?

All these reasons help us to initiate communication. In the absence of these reasons it would not be necessary to communicate with anyone. It is important for us to give children with Deafblindness as many reasons as possible to communicate.

During an activity, a child will have many reasons to communicate. It is necessary to observe him during this time and recognize his attempts at communication. He may be communicating to indicate that he does not like the activity, or that he wants something else.

Make a list of the different reasons for which your child communicates and think about how you can increase the number of reasons he has to communicate with others. The more the number of reasons he has the better will be his level of communication.

4. How do people usually communicate?

By using Speech:

This is the most common form of communication we all use. It means using the local language, which everybody understands and talking to them using that language. This can mean using **Words** - Hi, **Phrases** - Good morning and **Sentences** - Children are playing in the garden.

By using non-verbal means:

- Eye gaze - by looking at an object when you want it
- Facial expressions - by smiling when you are happy
- Body language - by turning away from things you do not like
- Pointing - using the hand or finger to point towards the object / person you want
- Gestures - waving hand to say bye- bye
- Touching - touching another person hand to get his attention to ask for something

Most of our communication with people is non-verbal. Even when we talk, it is always accompanied by non-verbal forms of communication.

Most of the children with Deafblindness never learn to talk like we do because of cognitive impairments that may sometimes be present along with Deafblindness and the existing dual sensory impairments. Depending upon the extent of damage, the age at which the child became deafblind and other physical problems, that may be present along with Deafblindness, these children will have different levels of understanding and different types of speech problems.

Irrespective of the extent of their problems, all children with Deafblindness can learn to communicate even if they are unable to **"talk"**.

Therefore it is very important for us to remember to communicate with each child at his own level of understanding and to make use of all his abilities.

5. How do we communicate with a child with deafblindness?

A Deafblind child relies heavily on his sense of touch to receive and to exchange information. It thus becomes important to use touch cues when communicating with the child. **Touch cues** are given on the child's body and may be the way you touch, hold and move him. E.g. when you are asking Ram to sit you could press on his shoulders gently with your hands so that he understands that you want him to sit. That is a touch cue that gives him this information even though he may not understand the meaning of the word "sit down".

At times we also use **objects** as cues. E.g. Ram needs to know that it is time to go for a bath. You might show him the towel, which he uses to wipe himself after the bath. Once he touches the towel before going for a bath, it gives him an indication that it is time for a bath.

A **movement cue** could also be used. E.g. you could also do the action/movement of rubbing the soap on the body before the bathing activity, so that the child understands it is time for a bath.

You could also combine a touch cue with an object cue. E.g. for the activity of wearing pants, you could show the pants to the child which he will be wearing, that is an object cue. At the same time you could tap his waist, which is a touch cue.

There are many **environmental cues**, which could be used as well, such as smell of the food when the child comes near the kitchen.

However it is important to remember that even though the child is receiving information through these cues it is equally important to talk to him simultaneously. Even though the child may not understand the spoken language, he will definitely get some message from your tone and intonation. A raised voice may communicate anger or disapproval while a calm and soothing voice may communicate care and affection. At the same time, the child may understand some of the words, which are routinely used during the activity.

As you consistently combine verbal communication with cues the child gradually learns to anticipate the activity or action that will follow the cue. Slowly the child will start showing behaviours that will indicate that he anticipates the activity after getting the cue. E.g. before the activity of combing hair, you show him a comb, and he takes the comb and places it on his head. This action indicates that the child knows that the comb is used for combing his hair.

Sign language can also be used to communicate with children with Deafblindness. However not all children can learn to use sign language fluently. But most of them can understand the routine basic signs that are used everyday related to the routine activities. You could decide on a number of signs, which you can use many times during the day while interacting with the child. Signs such as those for eat, water, drink, etc are bound to be used everyday. Similarly if there are things the child likes, you could introduce signs for those objects as well as the child would be interested in them.

For a child to initiate and understand communication it is important that the people who communicate frequently with the child such as his parents or teachers, use communication forms, such as cues, speech, etc which he is capable of understanding, responding and later on using.

As mentioned earlier, it is also important that the child has things, experiences and needs or wants to communicate about. This comes through giving the child opportunities for communication in his day-to-day life. Thus the key is in finding out opportunities for communication in different activities which are done on a daily basis, such as bathing, eating food, dressing, etc.

6. How do we teach alternate ways of Communication to children with Deafblindness ?

- **Observe** what the child is already communicating or trying to say through his gestures or body language.

e.g. A student is doing the work of packing chalks. Halfway through the work, her facial expressions change. Since you work with her, you understand that this is an indication that she is fed up with the work and that she needs a break. However we need to create a way, so that other people can also understand this.
- You can teach her an **alternate way** to communicate to others that she needs a break, by pushing away the materials. Every time you teach her to push away the materials, ask her, do you want to stop work for some time? This can be repeated everyday so that the child understands the meaning of pushing away the materials. Also it is easier for other people to understand that she is fed up when she pushes the material away, rather than by looking at her facial expressions.
- Encourage your child to use signals and gestures.

If your child uses signals and gestures to express a like or dislike, respond appropriately. E.g. if he pushes a certain toy away, to indicate that he does not like it, you could respect his choice and change the toy. Soon the child learns that when he uses a signal/gesture he gets a certain result. He will try the same signal / gesture again to see if he gets the same result. That is communication!

It is important to remember that every behaviour whether appropriate or inappropriate communicates something. What we need to do is think about what alternate ways can be taught to the child to communicate the same thing in a different way, which is more acceptable.

7. What is the child's receptive communication?

Receptive communication means what the child understands.

You can know what is the child's level of receptive communication by observing the child in different situations and answering certain questions:

- What does the child seem to understand? E.g. routine questions, simple commands, etc
- What does he respond to?
- Does he seem to understand what will happen next?
- Does he seem to understand where he is going?
- Are there any particular objects, which he recognises?
- Does he anticipate routine events?

By observing the child in different situations and with different people you will be able to get a good idea about the level of his receptive communication.

8. What is the child's Expressive Communication?

Expressive communication means something that the child does in order to make something happen or stop something from happening.

You can know what is the child's expressive communication by asking the following questions.

- What does the child communicate?
- How does the child communicate?
- When does he communicate?
- With whom does he communicate?
- How often does he communicate?
- What are the different reasons for which he communicates?

Make a note of all this as it will help you to plan and develop child's communication and take him to the next level.

9. What are the steps for a communication interaction with a student with Deafblindness?

1) Let the child know who you are.

Don't startle the child with a sudden touch. Slowly approach the child and gently touch him on the shoulder or on the hand.

2) Use an object of reference by which the child can identify you.

An object of reference can be anything that you wear everyday, such as a ring, watch, bracelet, etc. When the child touches this object it helps him to identify you and he feels secure as you are someone he knows. All people in the child's immediate environment could have an object of reference. This is very helpful especially when the child is totally blind, as he is not getting any visual information.

It is important however to keep this object constant and not change it every now and then as the child would associate you with that object.

3) Let your child know what you are going to do

Use a cue (touch, object or movement cue) to let the child know what is going to happen. E.g. if you are going to lift him up, pull his hands gently in an upward direction before you pick him up so he can anticipate it.

4) Choose key phrases to pair with the cues.

Use these phrases along with the cues, e.g. when giving him a touch cue for picking him up also say "I am going to pick you up". The child will gradually become familiar with the sound and rhythm of the phrases, even if he does not recognise the meaning.

5) Let your child be as independent as possible

During the activity give him proper information and let him be as independent as possible. If possible give him an opportunity to make a choice during the activity. E.g. asking him whether he wants to play with the ball or with the drum. This would help the child become more involved in the activity as he himself has chosen it.

6) Indicate when activity is finished

Inform the child that the activity is finished. E.g. help him keep away the materials used in the activity. This will help him know that the current activity is now over.

7) Let him know when you leave

The way you introduced yourself before the interaction, in a similar manner you must inform the child when you are leaving. You could use a simple gesture for bye, which he could feel with his hands to let him know that you are going away.

10. What are the things to keep in mind during a communication interaction with the child?

1) Follow the child's interest

Observe what is interesting for the child and use that. E.g. during an activity if the child suddenly notices something that attracts his attention, play with it along with him for some time, instead of putting it away.

2) Turn-taking

Both of you have to take an active part in the activity you are doing. Both you as well as your child have to take turns, so that his interest is maintained in the activity.

3) Every activity should have a beginning, middle and an end.

Before the activity gather all material related to the activity. During the activity give him appropriate information and feedback. After the activity inform him that the activity is over.

4) Consider the child's special needs

Depending upon the individual child, his needs may include:

- Spectacles or other visual aids (magnifying lens, bright colours, contrast, lighting, pictures, etc)
- Hearing Aids or other modifications such as being closer while speaking.
- Tactile or touch adaptations in terms of use of tactile sign language, use of tactile material or objects for communication.

5) During communication it is important to make best use of the child's available sensory system.

E.g. if the child's vision is better than his hearing, a communication system should be used that depends on his vision – signing, gestures or possibly pictures.

Things to remember

- 1) All children can communicate.
- 2) It is important to give the child a reason to communicate and also to think about increasing the reasons for his communication.
- 3) Most of our communication is non-verbal.
- 4) The sense of touch is the most important means through which we can communicate with a child who has Deafblindness.
- 5) We can make use of different cues to communicate with the child who has Deafblindness.
- 6) We can use a combination of cues at any time to communicate.
- 7) Remember to speak along while using the cues.
- 8) The cues should be used consistently with the child so that he gradually learns to anticipate.
- 9) You can teach a child alternate ways of communication.
- 10) Consider the child's individual special needs for communication.

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