

Functional Use of Symbols

Symbols can be used to support or enhance an individual's other modes of communication. It takes planning, teaching and time to ensure that symbols are a useful communication tool. The following are some considerations for implementing and supporting the functional use of symbols for communication.

Communication Goals

Along with other goals, it is important to establish goals for communication development. A plan to work on identified goals may include symbols and/or other forms of augmentative communication.

Opportunities for Communication

It is useful to take an inventory of daily activities, and identify vocabulary needed to communicate within these activities. When doing this, it is important to consider the various functions of communication – greeting, commenting, asking and answering questions, protesting, making choices, etc.

Vocabulary Selection

There are a number of factors to consider when selecting vocabulary, including:

- Individual's characteristics
- Individual's interests
- Opportunities for communication
- Vocabulary communicated effectively in other ways
- Type of layout(s)
- Consistent symbols
- Word vs. whole messages
- Intended communication partner(s)

Organization

Vocabulary can be laid out in various organizations including:

- On a wheelchair tray
- In a book / folder / board
- On a wrist band
- On a placemat
- On object in the room

Physical Characteristic that need to be considered include:

- Size of Display
- Size of Symbols
- Number of Symbols
- Spacing of items
- Arrangement of vocabulary
- Colour coding of symbols

Considerations When Implementing Symbols

The functional use of symbols will not happen quickly or automatically - time and context-based teaching are needed.

The more opportunities and expectations there are for an individual to communicate, the more likely they are to develop communication skills.

If the use of symbols is not progressing, consider the barriers that may be effecting success:

- Lack of motivation to communicate
- Few opportunities / expectations for communication
- Too few or too many symbols
- Vocabulary that is not meaningful to the individual
- The individual does not know what the symbols represent
- Organization of symbols that does not make sense to the person using the set up
- Set-up that does not fit with the abilities and needs of the individual

Areas to Consider When Teaching the Use of symbols:

- What the symbols represent
- Where the various symbols are located on a display
- When to use them (i.e., whenever other modes are not meeting needs)
- Strategies that may be useful for teaching
- How the use of symbols fits into language development (i.e. using symbols to initiate interactions, to take turns)

Engineering the Environment to Provide Communication Opportunities

There are so many opportunities to use symbols throughout the day including:

- Morning Circle (e.g., symbols to represent weather, calendar, news)
- Activity Based Unit (e.g., symbols of animals, food groups)
- Monthly Themes
- Job Charts (e.g., attendance)
- Cooking Activities
- Drama
- Music
- Community Experiences

Functional Use of Picture Communication Symbols | 2021-11-22

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