

Functional communication - getting our priorities right and assessing what to look at first

When we are looking at a communication program we often have to think carefully about a number of factors. Although our end goal is to try and create a system of communication that is functional, effective and easy to understand for everyone, we often need to put a lot of building blocks in place before this will work. Initially, we need to look at a couple of questions.

1. What are the **current priorities** issues around communication and behaviour?
2. What are our long term goals, and what short and medium term objectives do we need to accomplish to achieve these goals.

This may seem very obvious, but often the goals we set are too big in the short term and/or, are not functional. To explain what I mean here are some examples:

Example 1.

The father of 4 year old John, who has Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and no speech or functional system of communication, states: *"I want John to learn to speak"*.

John needs a system of communication to express his basic needs prior to teaching him to speak (and it is conceivable that speech may not be his long term system of communication). Even if John learns some new words, will he be able to tell you he is hungry, sick or needs the toilet, these are functional every day requests that John needs to have some way of communicating. Using some kind of picture exchange system might be a good start.

So while I am not criticizing John's father's wish that he should be able to talk, my feeling would be, lets look at the first step which is teaching John how to communicate and how to initiate. We then want John to have a system to express his basic needs and make choices, and then, maybe, we can focus more on whether John will learn to speak, but only if it is practical and functional i.e. if John has the capabilities for speech and we have a good rationale for working on this goal.





Example 2.

The teacher of 6 year old Julie with ASD, says: *“She keeps wondering from her chair, doesn't sit down, doesn't listen and throws a tantrum if we try and get her back to her desk. I want her at her desk for every lesson, all of the time”*.

For Julie, there are lots of small steps to take before we can expect her to be sitting at her desk all day. We need to get her to understand routine and structure (probably by using some visual schedules - see www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more information on visual schedules). We need to teach her about looking, listening and attending. We need to get her to be at her desk for short periods and build on this. We need to give her timeouts so she can re-charge her batteries. We need find ways of dealing with her inappropriate or challenging behaviour when it occurs. There are many smaller goals to accomplish before we can expect Julie to be sitting at her desk for longer periods and attending.

Example 3.

The key-worker for 52 year old Kenneth who has ASD, is non-verbal and has been in institutionalized care for most of his life states: *“I want him to request and make choices”*.

Kenneth has been in institutionalized care for most of his life, he has probably had everything done for him, now we want him to request and make choices. This is a good goal, but before we can get John to do this we have to teach him about communication. We have to teach him that communication is a tool and he can use it to get what he wants. We have to teach him to approach someone and initiate communication when he wants something, and we have to give him the tools to communicate. These things can take a long time to teach, and staff have to be prepared, when they set these goals, to be consistent and persevere with the teaching. After 50 years of not having to request or communicate it may take a long time for him to learn these skills.

These examples highlight that there are often many steps to take before we can reach our longer term goals. Often individuals with ASD do not have many basic skills such as listening and attention or initiating communication to request. These skills all have to be taught before we can achieve our bigger goals.

See www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more ideas, activities and programmes to facilitate the communication of individuals with ASD.



To learn more about Autism, language and communication click this link to see our [Book Shop](#) to look at, and purchase books.

Suggested Reading:

1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders by Veronica Zysk and Ellen Notbohm

Playing, Laughing and Learning With Children on the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Resource of Play Ideas for Parents and Carers by Julia Moor

Overcoming Autism: Finding the Answers, Strategies, and Hope That Can Transform a Child's life by Lynn Kern Koegel and Claire LaZebnik

Self-Help Skills for People With Autism: A Systematic Teaching Approach by Stephen R. Anderson, Amy L. Jablonski, Vicki Madaus Knapp, and Marcus L. Thomeer

Activity Schedules for Children With Autism: Teaching Independent Behavior by Lynn E., Ph.D. McClannahan and Patricia J., Ph.D. Krantz

Visual Supports for People With Autism: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Marlene J. Cohen and Donna L. Sloan

Making Visual Supports Work in the Home and Community: Strategies for Individuals with Autism and Asperger Syndrome by Jennifer L. Savner, Brenda Smith Hyles, and Brenda Smith Myles

A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism (Topics in Autism) by Andy, Ph.D. Bondy and Lori Frost

Solving Behavior Problems in Autism (Visual Strategies Series) by Linda A. Hodgdon

Visual Language in Autism by Howard C. Shane and Sharon Weiss-Kapp

The New Social Story Book : Illustrated Edition by Carol Gray

My Social Stories Book by Abbie Leigh White, Carol Gray, and Sean McAndrew

The Social Skills Picture Book Teaching play, emotion, and communication to children with autism by Dr. Jed Baker

Comic Strip Conversations by Carol Gray