

## **Augmentative Communication: What and Why?**

Children learn language partly by interacting with their environment. They need opportunities for interesting interactions with their environment in order to develop early communication skills. Some children, however, such as those with physical or cognitive difficulties do not always have the opportunity or the interest to explore their environment. For these children language development may be delayed (Williamson, 1987). It is therefore, important to give these children some way to communicate their wants, feelings, and needs. One such way is with augmentative or alternative communication. This can give your child a "voice" or a more efficient way of communicating, therefore increasing the quality of life for both the child and family (Browder, Anderson, & Meek, 1986).

Communication whether it be with speech or some other alternative method, helps children learn, form social relationships, express feelings, and participate in daily **living activities (Baby Power, 1993), all of which are important** to every child and every family. To use an alternative method of communication is not to say that speech will never develop and in fact it is best to work on speech at the same time you are introducing and developing an alternative method of communication for your child. If speech develops that is all the better, but in the mean time, giving your child some way to tell you he is happy or she wants juice will help decrease both your and your child's frustration during all aspects of the day.

### **What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication?**

**Means to transmit an idea** - In other words, how can children express their thoughts?

There are many ways children can express their thoughts. One way, the way we usually think about, is by using speech, but there are other ways to express thoughts, as well. For instance, writing, sign language, gestures, body movements, and facial expressions are all ways to express thoughts. These ways of expressing thoughts are called unaided because they do not require an external device for production. That is children can use some part of their own body to express the thought (i.e., voice, hands, and face). Other ways of expressing thoughts can be called aided, meaning that there is a need for some type of external device for production. That is children use more than their own body to express their thoughts (Lloyd and Fuller, 1986). Examples of aided ways to express thoughts are with communication boards, communication books, communication cards, and electronic communication devices.

**Means to represent an idea** - In other words, how can children represent to us what they want?

Children can represent their thoughts using symbols. A symbol is "something that stands for or represents something else" (Vanderheiden and Yoder, 1986, p. 15). One symbol that children can use is the spoken word produced by their own speech. Words can represent the child's thoughts. Another symbol that can be used is a gesture. For example, a child may point to a toy to represent the thought "I would like to play with that toy." Sign language is another symbol system that can be used to represent thoughts. For instance, a child may use the sign for "I more" to represent the thought "I would like more juice." Another set of symbols that can represent thoughts are pictures, photographs, or line drawings. A child may point to a picture of a cookie to represent the thought "I would like a cookie for snack." Any of these symbols can be used to help a child more effectively and efficiently let you know what she is thinking.

**Selection techniques** - In other words, how can children select the symbol they want to use to tell us something?

Selection techniques include the many ways children can choose the symbol they want to represent their thoughts. Some of these ways are pointing to the symbol, eye-gazing to the symbol, and using switches to access a computer or communication device in order to choose a symbol. Which selection technique to use is determined by each child's individual skills, abilities, and needs. Choosing the selection technique best suited for your child will help make communication more effective and more efficient.

### **Summary**

Considering how children can express their thoughts, and how they can actually choose the symbol with which they want to represent their thoughts is important when developing an augmentative or alternative way for your child to communicate. It is important to think about all three parts of a communication system in order to make communication effective and efficient for your child.