NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: CUES, SIGNALS AND SYMBOLS

Cues

A cue is a type of communication used by an adult to let a child know what is expected of him/her in a given situation. Cues are a type of receptive communication.

Designing and using a consistent routine is the beginning of teaching cues. Given time in this type of the routine, the child will first begin to anticipate his/her part in the routine. Given more experience with the routine, the child may begin to anticipate the routine from some part of the routine.

Touch cues are ways an adult can touch a child to communicate a desired action. For example, an adult may gently pull a child's arm upward with a grasp at the wrist to cue the child to lift arm during a dressing routine.

A sensory cues is some sensory input used to help a child anticipate an event: For example, a smell of lotion before it is applied to the child's arm or the sound of water splashing before placing the child in the bathtub.

Object cues are some concrete piece of a routine that is used to represent that routine. For example, a diaper may be an object cue for diaper changing.

When deciding what cues to use with a child, it is important to remember to select cues that the child can easily discriminate one from the other. Otherwise the cues may be confusing to the child.

Signals

Signals are movements the child uses to communicate needs, desires and feelings to adults. Signals are a form of expressive communication.

Signals may start as a behavior that the child is not intentionally using to communicate. But because an adult consistently responds to this behavior, the child begins to understand that producing this behavior causes a particular event to occur. For example, a child may inadvertently clap hands with an adult. If hand clapping is enjoyable for the child and the adult consistently responds by hand clapping with the child, the child may signal for more hand clapping by clapping the adults hand again. Signals are usually first seen within an already occurring activity. As the child becomes more sophisticated, he or she may produce the signal to initiate the activity.

Symbols

Symbols are representations of an event, action, object, person, or place that can be used to communicate about the event, action, object, person, or place. Symbols can be used for both receptive and expressive communication. Objects, parts of objects, pictures, print, actions, gestures, signs, and speech can all be symbols. Symbols may start as cues and signals. If a
child recognizes a cue out of context, that cue may be acting as a symbol. If a child uses a signal or an object cue to communicate about an event, action, object, person or place out of context, the child may be using that signal or cue as a symbol.

The more a symbol resembles what it represents, the more concrete that symbol is. The less a symbol resembles what it represents, the more abstract that symbol is. An example of a concrete symbol would be a spoon, used during mealtimes, to represent mealtime. A less concrete (or more abstract) symbol would be a small line drawing of a person eating. The spoken phrase "time to eat" would be the most abstract because those sounds don't look, smell, or feel like food or the action of eating. Concrete symbols are more easily associated with what they represent than are abstract symbols. When determining how closely a symbol resembles an event, action, object, person, or place it is important to consider how the child perceives that event, action, object, person, or place. For example, a symbol based on visual similarities may not be as concrete for a person with a visual impairment as it would be for an individual who is fully sighted. A symbol based on an action may be abstract for an individual with physical impairment such that he/she had never performed that action.

A hierarchy of visual symbols from concrete to abstract may be the following:

- an object used as part of the activity it represents,
- an object identical to the one used as part of an activity,
- an object similar but not identical to the object used as part of an activity,
- a part of an object,
- a full-sized colored drawing of the object,
- a full-sized black and white drawing of the object or a reduced-size colored drawing of an object,
- a reduced-size black and white drawing of an object,
- a printed word.

There is a similar hierarchy for movement with an object to sign:

- movement with an object used as part of the activity it represents,
- movement with an object identical to one used as part of an activity,
- movement with an object similar to but not identical to the one used as part of an activity it represents,
- movement without an object,
- a sign that resembles the movement without the object,
- a sign that does not resemble the movement without the object

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