

Communicative Functions

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Everyone engages in communicative acts every day. Some acts are more easily noticed or understood than others. This handout provides examples of several classes of communication messages, shows a variety of ways or means of communicating a message, and supplies examples of messages that are not always consciously signaled by the child/adult with disabilities. These ideas are usually identified by specific terms which are defined below.

Means of Communication:

Regular speech, echolalia, vocalizations, gestures, signs from manual sign language, communication boards, electronic communication devices, handwriting, typing, or pulling someone to a location are some of the different means by which messages are conveyed.

Communicative Function:

All messages have a basic underlying purpose such as the seeking of an object for information, refusal, provision of information, indications of agreement, or social engagement.

Communicative Intent:

Not all messages are deliberately signaled to a communication partner. Sometimes the partner has to notice the behavior of the other person and then assign meaning or intent to it. For Example, a person could intentionally tell someone, "No, I don't want to fold the towels." The same message might be surmised from a behavior such as someone tipping the basket contents onto the floor and then defiantly walking away.

Recognizing the diversity of communicative functions that might be expressed (whether intentional or not) and having an awareness of the multiple means by which messages can be expressed are central to understanding the communication of individuals with expressive communication disabilities and to building a positive communication program for them.

Function	Example of Situation And Communication Means Used
I. Requests	
A. Wants tangible object.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Says "drink" to teacher. 2. Takes person to refrigerator. 3. Points to picture of popcorn on communication board. 4. ** Says "trick or treat" anytime candy is wanted. 5. Gives picture as part of Picture Exchange System.
B. Wants an action, event, or activity to occur.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Says "go Target." 2. Points to phrase "scratch my back, please" on communication board. 3. Spells "watch basketball" on a spelling board. 4. * Rubs eyes and looks tired. (Parent directs child to get ready for bed.)
C. Wants attention.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Signs "help." 2. Says "Mom" repeatedly until she comes. 3. * Goes to block area, picks up some blocks, and randomly begins to throw them. (<i>Adult will automatically come over and show child how to constructively play with blocks.</i>)
D. Seeks permission or direction.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Turns and looks to see if adult indicates that it's okay to open the cabinet to get a cracker for snack. 2. Holds crotch and says "teacher" until told that it is okay to proceed to the bathroom.
E. Wants or needs information.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looks at adult with puzzled expression when told to go to the office. 2. * Begins to throw things and screams when told that Mom will be late for pick up today. (<i>"Lateness" is abstract concept. Child does not know when Mom is coming to get him.</i>) 3. Asks "home?" (<i>Rising inflection indicates that the child wants to</i>

	<i>know whether it is time to go home.)</i>
II. Negative assertion or disagreement	
A. Refuse, reject, or protest a directive, action, activity, or object.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Says "no." 2. Pushes work materials away. 3. * Hits self in face after being told to go to X. 4. * Screams when favorite toy is not in its usual place on the shelf.
B. Denial.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shakes head when told it is his turn to water the plants. (<i>Indicates that it is actually someone else's turn.</i>) 2. Says "No John" when someone mistakenly calls him "John."
III. Comments	
A. Names or comments on objects, people, or activities.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Says "Mickey Mouse" as he sees the words in advertising for Disneyland. 2. Says "charge" as he hears the charge sound on TV during a ball game. 3. Signs "dirty" with regard to Kool Aid on peer's shirt. 4. Points to "home" on communication board as he recognizes a toy on shelf. Does not try to take toy. (<i>Message indicates he has same toy at home.</i>)
B. Comments on self or expresses feelings.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Points to ear and "hurt" on communication board. 2. Signs "sleep" and puts head down. 3. Spells "I'm frustrated" on computer with an assistant providing light support at the wrist. 4. * Jumps up and down with excitement.
C. Agreement or affirmation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nods head "yes". 2. * When asked if he wants a cookie, he reaches out and takes it. 3. ** Mother asks, "Do you want some juice?" as she pours juice

<div><div><div>A</div><div>A</div><div>RETURN TO TOPIC MENU</div><div>A</div><div>A</div></div><div>repeats her question and grabs the juice.</div></div>	
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IV. Social Routines	
A. Initiates interaction.	<div><div>1. Says "what's your name?" and may continue with a routine of other questions.</div><div>2. Walks up and touches the hair of a familiar adult.</div></div>
B. Selected examples of social functions.	<div><div>1. Says "thank you" with communication device.</div><div>2. Signs "sorry" when he steps on someone else's foot.</div><div>3. Waves "bye" with assistant providing support at the elbow.</div></div>
<div><div>* Represents non-intentional communicative behavior.</div><div>** Represents purposeful or functional echolalia.</div><div>Vicker, B. (2004). Communicative functions. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Resource Center for Autism.</div></div>	