Communicate with Students and Expect Them to Communicate with You

When teachers are working with students who do not have a reliable communication system, they sometimes ask me, “How can you tell how much she understands?” The truth is, teachers may not know how much a learner understands if he or she does not have a way to communicate. The rule should always be, when in doubt, assume that students can learn and do want to communicate.

Historically, “experts” have been tragically wrong about the learning potential and intellectual abilities of many different groups of people, including women, poor people, those from different racial and ethnic groups, people with physical disabilities, those with mental illness, those who are deaf and hard of hearing, and many others (Gould, 1981; Sacks, 1973; Selden, 1999). This history is important, as we will undoubtedly repeat our mistakes if we do not assume our students are capable, can communicate, and want to connect with us.

Some teachers may feel uncomfortable or unsure of how to interact with a student who does not speak or one who communicates in a way that is unfamiliar to him or her. This is understandable, but feeling uncomfortable is not an excuse for not learning new ways of inter-

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Table 7.5. Guidelines for including a student who does not talk

Guidelines
Never talk about someone in front of them. Always acknowledge the person's presence. Some people may not be able to communicate through spoken words or body language that they understand what you are saying or that they are listening. Assume they are listening and interested in what you are talking about.
Talk in an *age-appropriate* manner, using age-appropriate content. Using a sing-song voice or a tone similar to that used with a young child should be reserved for babies and toddlers. Be sure to check your tone of voice and the content you are talking about.
While teaching, be sure to acknowledge the nonverbal student's presence often. You should not go an entire lesson without saying, "Sean I bet you'll like this part. I know you like to swim," or "Megan I see you smiling. I am sure you will like learning about volcanoes."
If students use a yes / no communication strategy, be sure to use this during a lesson. You can do this during a whole group lesson by saying, "Do you all think that 5 + 5 = 10?" If they answer incorrectly, then you can say, "Oh, I don't think that is quite right. Does anyone have other ideas?"
If the student uses an augmentative communication system, you need to be sure to have them utilize it across lessons.
Use partners during lesson activities. Model and encourage peers to talk about topics with each other.
Take every opportunity to talk with the student. Talk about current events, age-appropriate interests, things you like to do, places to go, and events around school. Also, let them use their communication strategy to make LOTS of choices throughout the day.
Be sure to include them in the academic curriculum in the classroom. Assume learning is possible.

From Kasa-Hendrickson (personal communication, 2008).

acting. A few simple guidelines for communicating with a student who does not talk are offered in Table 7.5. As Gillingham suggested, however, one of the most important ways to make a student feel included in the classroom is simply to communicate with him or her and expect the student to communicate with you:

> When I go into a home and say "hello" to an autistic person, they do not have to reply "hello" for me to feel that they are responding. Whether they approach me or withdraw to another room tells me something. I read an increase in repetitive behavior as an indication that they are excited to see me, and I verbally tell them that it feels good to see their excitement. I follow their lead if they take my hand to show me something. If they speak with garbled sounds, I acknowledge their efforts and openly admit that I don't quite understand what they are trying to say. As I spend time with them, I am continuously aware of what they are doing and how they are responding to me. (2000, pp. 111–112)

This way of interacting undoubtedly inspires trust in relationships and allows teachers and students to build communication opportunities and skills. As Gillingham goes on to share, "Concentration on acceptance of what is, instead of trying to fix what appears wrong, leads to improved communication" (2000, p. 112).

In communicating with students and expecting communication, it can also be helpful to reflect on one's assumptions. Shevin (1999) noted that in his role as a communication ally, he always begins with "default values" on which he acts until receiving specific information to the contrary. His own assumptions about individuals with communication differences are that they

- Are highly intelligent
- Have a deep interest in fostering relations with others
- Have stories they would like to tell, if the circumstances are right

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- Have positive images of themselves that they wish to present as part of their communication
- Are paying attention to when others interact with them

Although every teacher will want to establish his or her own values and assumptions, those offered by Shevin (1999) should be carefully considered, as this particular way of thinking about people can inspire positive actions. For instance, a teacher who believes his or her student is intelligent will creatively include that student in lessons and respond to him when he seems particularly interested in an idea.

Pay Attention to the Communication Skills Students Do Have

Too often, professionals focus on what students cannot do instead of what they can do. All students with autism have some ways of communicating even if they do not use spoken words. Does the student point to objects she wants? Does she use facial expressions to indicate distress, pain, or happiness? Can she use an object or a picture to make a request (e.g., grab her lunchbox when she is ready to eat)? Can she accurately use a gesture to communicate a need, a want, or a feeling (e.g., clapping when she wants to hear music)?

Although teachers, therapists, and others who work with a student will certainly want to help him or her build on and enhance his or her communication strategies, support should begin by exploring and honoring the skills and abilities the student already has. Teachers may not be able to accurately identify ways in which learners are communicating after knowing them only a few days or weeks; therefore, families must be interviewed and consulted about their child's communication strategies. If the teachers and other team members are unable to generate a lot of useful information by simply meeting with the family, the group might sit together and view a few video clips of the student (at home and at school).

The purpose of such a viewing is to allow various members of the group to ask questions and share answers about how the student communicates across various activities. For instance, as the team watches a tape of the student getting ready for school, the student's mother might point out how he taps his head to ask for his hat or how he vocalizes "buh" to ask for his favorite book.

Teach All Students to Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Before any of us learned to speak, we had the advantage of observing and listening to thousands of people speaking, but before students are introduced to augmentative and alternative communication, they have likely not seen anyone else use it fluently, if at all. For this reason, researchers have become increasingly interested in promoting models of communication wherein students get to regularly observe others using their communication system (Cafiero, 2001; Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2009; Mirenda, 2008). For example, Cafiero (2001) described the use of what she termed a natural aided language intervention (NAL) with Timothy, an adolescent on the spectrum. Timothy was placed in a special education classroom that focused primarily on life skills instruction. Prior to the intervention, Timothy was provided with a 16-symbol display of Picture Communication Symbols (PCS); this was used primarily to make food choices. Timothy used 6 of the 16 symbols functionally.

During the intervention, Timothy was provided with context-specific PCS displays depicting relevant nouns, action words, descriptors, and yes/no symbols. His communication partners (staff members) pointed to symbols on these displays as they asked questions, re-

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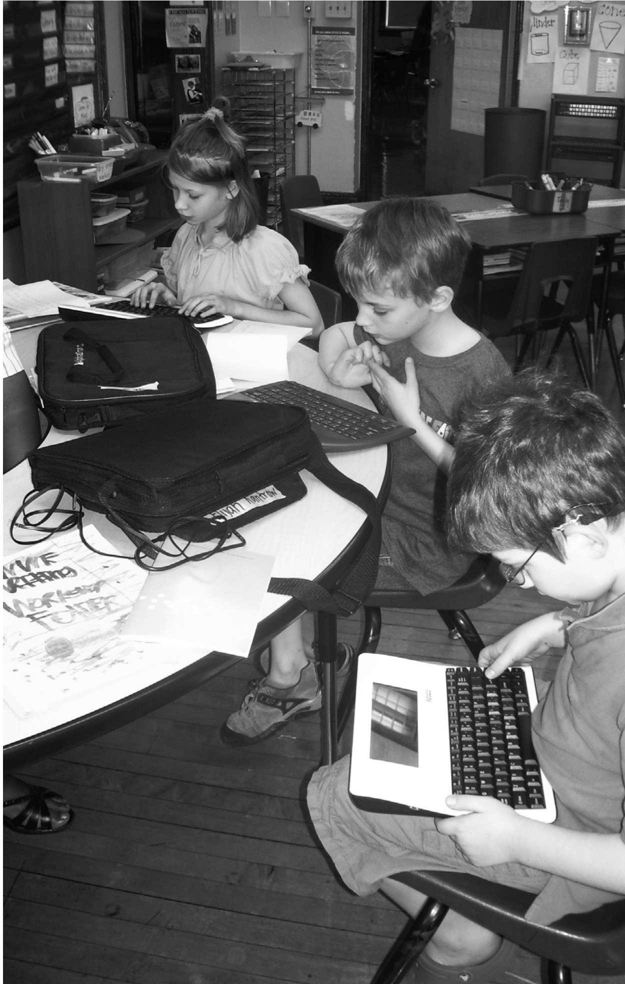

Figure 7.2. Three students typing on AlphaSmarts in an inclusive classroom.

sponded to his initiations, made comments, and expanded on his communicative attempts. Despite receiving no formal instruction on communicating with these materials, Timothy's functional lexicon increased from 6 to 29 words over a 3-month period. Over the next 19 months, his lexicon increased to 67 words, his challenging behaviors decreased significantly, and he began receiving a more academic education as his team's understanding of his ability began to change.

Cafiero illustrates the great benefit of giving students with autism opportunities to see their system in use. Any teacher can engineer opportunities to integrate AAC into classroom life. If a learner with autism uses a picture board to indicate choices, the teacher might ask all students to use pictures for choices at some point in the day. If one student uses a switch to "read" a repetitive line in a story, all students should get opportunities to do the same. And students in the inclusive classroom might learn to use some sign language if this is a communication system used by the student with autism. A teacher in this situation might even consider giving all students a spelling test using the sign language alphabet.

In teaching all students to use alternative modes of communication, teachers encourage expression and introduce learners to a wide range of choices they can make when communicating, creating, composing, and expressing. I worked with one young man without a disability who came alive as a poet when he started using another student's voice output augmentative communication device. And in a third-grade classroom, all students have started using AlphaSmart keyboarding devices because teachers found they helped everyone—those with and without autism—write more fluently (see Figure 7.2).

Create Communication Opportunities

Students with and without disabilities should have time to interact, share, and communicate with the teacher and peers throughout the day. In some classrooms, a handful of students dominate small-group conversations and whole-class discussions. Although it is important for these verbal and outgoing students to have a voice in the classroom, it is equally important for other students—including shy and quiet students, students using English as a second language, and students with disabilities—to have opportunities to share and challenge ideas, ask and answer questions, and exchange thoughts. To ensure that all students have oppor-

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tunities to communicate, teachers need to put structures and activities in place that allow for interaction.

In one classroom, the teacher started every morning with a “whip” (Harmon, 1994). She pointed to each student in the class and asked him or her to give a three- to five-word phrase related to her prompt of the day. One morning, for instance, she asked students to report on something they learned on the previous day’s fieldtrip to an art museum. Responses ranged from “Picasso was a sculptor” to “Dancing is art.”

Another way to inspire communication is to ask students to “turn and talk” to each other at various points in the day. A high school history teacher used this strategy throughout the year to break up lectures and to give students time to teach the material to each other. After talking for about 15 minutes, he asked students to turn to a partner and answer a specific question or explain a concept he had taught. For instance, after giving a short lecture on the presidency, he asked students to discuss, “What qualities do Americans seem to want in a president?”

Teachers also can provide opportunities for communication by asking questions that require a physical response. For example, instead of asking, “Who can tell me what H2O is?” the teacher might say, “Stand up if you think you know the common name for H2O.” This strategy not only gives all learners a chance to give an answer but also allows for some teacher-sanctioned movement, something often welcomed by students with autism and by any active learner in the inclusive classroom.

Another way to encourage communication is to prepare the student with autism for his or her participation. The teacher might give the student a question or prompt before the class starts so that he or she can formulate a cogent response and respond with confidence. Although preparing the student in this way is often helpful for any student with autism, it can be especially useful for individuals who use AAC and who will need to write or type it out or get it programmed by a teacher or therapist. See Figure 7.3 for a checklist that provides even more ideas for providing communication opportunities into the school day.

On Being a Supportive Communication Partner

Open any textbook on autism or disability and you will find several pages and perhaps several chapters dedicated to improving the communication skills or capacities of students with autism. Less common, however, are pages and chapters dedicated to the necessary skills, attitudes, beliefs, and abilities of the communication partner. This paradigm or view of seeing “communication improvement” as a task for only one person in the communicative act is puzzling because communicating is social. Therefore, both partners may need to make accommodations, at times. For instance, any teacher can become a better partner by respecting gaze avoidance, considering voice volume and tone, listening to AAC users, experimenting with indirect communication, and helping students understand language.

Respect Gaze Avoidance

When teachers want a learner’s attention, many expect eye contact. Those who have taught students with autism, however, understand that eye contact can be irritating or even painful for these individuals. Wendy Lawson, who has Asperger syndrome, has claimed that for her, making eye contact with a speaker can result in a breakdown in communication:

> How much easier it is to hear someone if you can’t see his or her face. Then words are pure and not distorted by grimaces and gestures. I can listen better to the tone of someone’s voice when I am not confused by the unwritten words of their facial expressions. (1998, p. 97)

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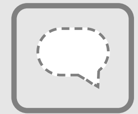
Communication Opportunities Across the School Day



In order for a student's individual communication goals to be adequately addressed, teachers may need to increase the communication opportunities given in the inclusive classroom.

Instructions: Review the options in the left-hand column and decide which ones will work in your classroom. Then decide how often you can commit to using each technique and provide any notes regarding adaptations you may need to make, how specifically you will use it, or into which lessons or units you might integrate it.

Subject area: ______________________________

Techniques:	How often?	Notes:
News and Goods: Every student shares one new or good thing that has happened recently.	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
Highs and Lows: Every student shares a high and a low of their day/summer/vacation break.	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
______________ (e.g., vocabulary word, fun fact, joke) of the day: A different student each day shares one.	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
Turn & Talk: Students turn to one another and share a comment or question.	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
15+2: Teacher lectures or holds a discussion for 15 minutes, then lets all students talk with a partner for 2 minutes. This repeats a second or third time until the lesson is completed.	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
Notes Share and Compare (Udvari-Solner & Kluth, 2007): Students take notes for a certain amount of time before turning to a partner or partners to compare and explain them.	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
Whip (Harmin, 1994): Ask each student in the class, one by one, to answer a question or offer a comment (using no more than 5–7 words each).	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	
Physical whole-class responses: Have all students answer a prompt at once by responding physically in some way (e.g., stand if you agree, sit if you disagree; hold up one finger if you know one way to solve the problem, two fingers if you know two ways . . .)	Daily ___ Weekly ___ Biweekly ___ Monthly ___ Occasionally ___ n/a ___	

Figure 7.3. Checklist of Communication Opportunities Across the School Day.

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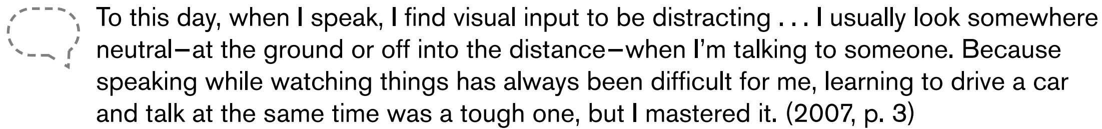
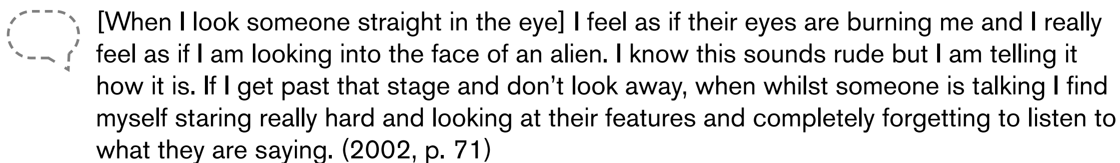
Similarly, John Elder Robison claims that if he makes eye contact with a communication partner, he risks losing focus on the conversation:



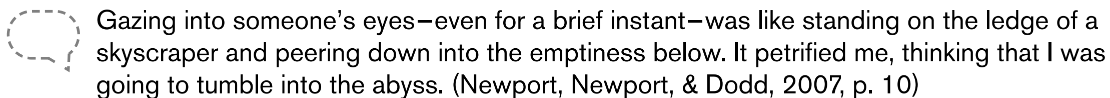
> To this day, when I speak, I find visual input to be distracting . . . I usually look somewhere neutral—at the ground or off into the distance—when I'm talking to someone. Because speaking while watching things has always been difficult for me, learning to drive a car and talk at the same time was a tough one, but I mastered it. (2007, p. 3)

Luke Jackson claims eye contact is more than ineffective. For him, it is physically uncomfortable:



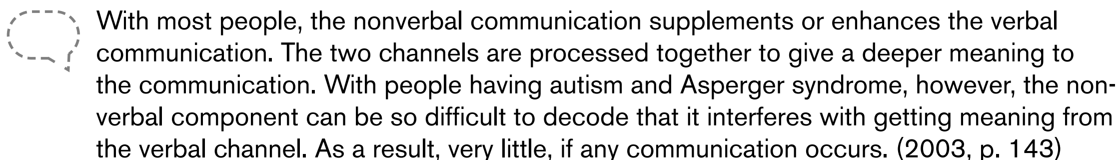
> [When I look someone straight in the eye] I feel as if their eyes are burning me and I really feel as if I am looking into the face of an alien. I know this sounds rude but I am telling it how it is. If I get past that stage and don't look away, when whilst someone is talking I find myself staring really hard and looking at their features and completely forgetting to listen to what they are saying. (2002, p. 71)

And Jerry Newport explains that, for him, it is downright scary:



> Gazing into someone's eyes—even for a brief instant—was like standing on the ledge of a skyscraper and peering down into the emptiness below. It petrified me, thinking that I was going to tumble into the abyss. (Newport, Newport, & Dodd, 2007, p. 10)

From these accounts, it is clear that individuals on the spectrum are not just seeking their own comfort when they engage in gaze avoidance, they are likely doing their best to communicate efficiently and effectively. Stephen Shore, a university professor and individual on the spectrum, explains that eye contact, for many on the spectrum, disrupts quality communication:



> With most people, the nonverbal communication supplements or enhances the verbal communication. The two channels are processed together to give a deeper meaning to the communication. With people having autism and Asperger syndrome, however, the nonverbal component can be so difficult to decode that it interferes with getting meaning from the verbal channel. As a result, very little, if any communication occurs. (2003, p. 143)

Building on the words of these individuals, teachers would do well to proceed with caution in the area of eye contact. One way to learn what your student can tolerate is to ask him or her. If that isn't possible, you may need to gently assess how a student communicates best. This doesn't mean that eye contact cannot be addressed. Some students may not be bothered by making eye contact and may profit from learning how and when to use it. Others may appreciate learning tricks that will help them connect with people without feeling uneasy (e.g., making "forehead contact" or "nose bridge contact"). Few, if any, will likely respond well to commands (e.g., "look at me") that ignore inherent needs and fail to take individual differences into account.

Consider Voice Volume and Tone

Any teacher can attest to the powers of the voice. When I taught high school students, I often found that the best way to get the attention of a noisy room of teenagers was to whisper. Using this tone of voice seemed to unarm them in a way. When I taught kindergarten, I often gave directions in a sing-song voice. This, too, caught students off guard and appeared to capture their interest.

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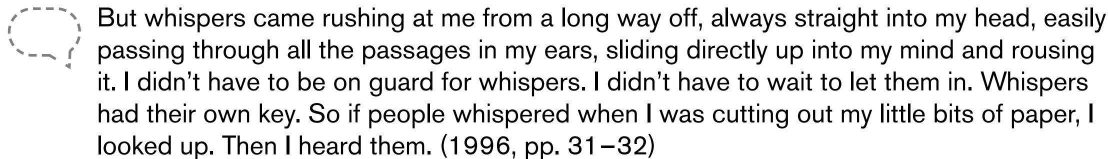
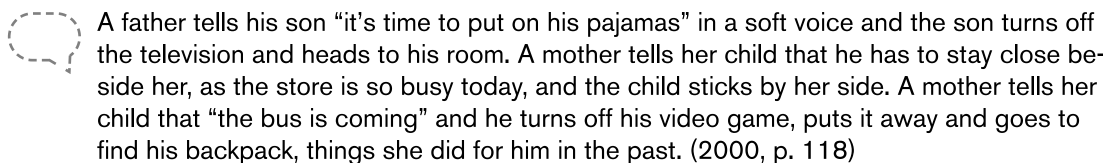
Playing with voice volume, quality, and tone can be a tool in connecting with any student, including those with autism. Gunilla Gerland, a woman with autism, indicates that whispers are extremely helpful as a communication tool:



> But whispers came rushing at me from a long way off, always straight into my head, easily passing through all the passages in my ears, sliding directly up into my mind and rousing it. I didn't have to be on guard for whispers. I didn't have to wait to let them in. Whispers had their own key. So if people whispered when I was cutting out my little bits of paper, I looked up. Then I heard them. (1996, pp. 31–32)

Gail Gillingham, who shares the "whispering strategy" with people in her workshops on autism, has received reports of success from attendees:



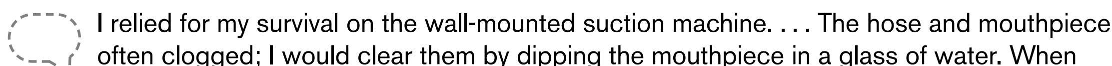
> A father tells his son "it's time to put on his pajamas" in a soft voice and the son turns off the television and heads to his room. A mother tells her child that he has to stay close beside her, as the store is so busy today, and the child sticks by her side. A mother tells her child that "the bus is coming" and he turns off his video game, puts it away and goes to find his backpack, things she did for him in the past. (2000, p. 118)

"Listen" to Augmentative and Alternative Communication System Users

The communication act requires visual and auditory attention when an AAC system is being used; therefore, the AAC user may have a difficult time interrupting, interjecting, or even initiating a conversation if the communication partner is not aware of this demand. For example, an AAC user may begin a conversation by pointing to a picture. Such an initiation will be missed if the communication partner does not attend visually to the AAC user and look for signs that he or she wants to join the conversation.

Jorgensen, McSheehan, and Sonnenmeier (2009) illustrated this need in a vignette about Jay, a fifth grader with autism. As the researchers reported, Jay's teacher led a discussion in which students shared events that happened in the book, *Maniac Magee* (e.g., "Maniac ran away"). After the students had offered several answers the teacher asked them to find just two more to finish the activity. As Jay's paraprofessional tried in vain to direct him to the events other students were sharing, Jay kept turning his adapted book back to a previous page of the story; once on the page he would tap on a particular passage. The paraprofessional, recognizing this as communication, raised her hand, and shared that Jay was pointing to a passage about Maniac living in a zoo. The teacher replied, "Good one, Jay," causing Jay to clap his hands and grin.

In addition to being open to the initiation of communication, partners should also be aware of and open to changes in the pace of conversation. Communication partners may cut AAC users off mid-sentence assuming they know what will be typed, pointed to, signed, or indicated next or they may grow impatient with the AAC users' attempts to communicate and prematurely end a conversation. These and other types of communication clashes are often reported by people using AAC (Bauby, 1997; Crossley, 1997; Robillard, 1997; Tavalaro & Tayson, 1997). Mayer Shevin, a disability activist and advocate, encountered such a challenge firsthand when he was hospitalized for a surgery related to his oral cancer. Shevin had to breathe through a tracheostomy and deal with a "seeming ocean of mucus in his mouth." The situation was made more challenging by the fact that he had to communicate by writing notes.



> I relied for my survival on the wall-mounted suction machine. . . . The hose and mouthpiece often clogged; I would clear them by dipping the mouthpiece in a glass of water. When

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> that didn't work, and the hose or mouthpiece needed to be replaced, I had only a few minutes "breathing space" before I would begin choking.
>
> One afternoon, the hose and mouthpiece both clogged, and I waited an endless-seeming 15 minutes until the nurse responded to my buzzer. When she asked me why I had buzzed, I started to write, "My suction is clogged–the tube and mouthpiece need to be replaced." I wrote MY SUCTION IS . . . and the nurse started out the door, saying, "Oh, I see–you need a new mouthpiece–I'll get it for you." I knew that merely replacing the mouthpiece wouldn't work, and I was already gasping for air. I flung my notebook at her, and hit her in the back of the head. Startled and angry, she came back to yell at me; I kept pounding my pencil on the tabletop and gestured, until grudgingly she returned my notebook to me. I scrawled my panic-stricken message in its entirety, making sure she did not leave until I was done. "Oh," she snorted, and with ill-grace returned a few minutes later with my precious suction hose. I'm sure she went home that night to tell someone about the rude patient who had attacked her. (1999, p. 1)

Although Shevin's story holds lessons about the need to humanize the medical profession, it is also a powerful story about communication. When Shevin's nurse turned away from him, she did more than engage in poor nursing practices; she took his voice.

As this story illustrates, people using augmentative communication often have to struggle to be understood. Consider some of the problems of typed communication, for instance. Typed words do not always reflect tone, inflection, and emotion. It can be difficult to detect sarcasm, anger, joy, or surprise in the written word. Furthermore, body language may be of little help in interpreting messages when the physical movements of the participants are unpredictable or unintentional—as they often are in the case of individuals with autism. A careful communication partner is observant—allowing for the full and undisturbed expression of the AAC user. Attempts should always be made to minimize the dominance of the communication partner and maximize the involvement of the AAC user. Whereas some AAC users have equipment with voice output, an ability to store messages, and a digital screen, others work from simpler systems like paper communication boards. For this reason, some AAC users—especially those with simple systems—will need some feedback from their communication partner. For instance, a student using typed communication may need a communication partner to ask clarifying questions if he or she has a lot of misspellings or types only in sentence fragments.

Jean-Dominique Bauby (1997), in his book *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, shared just how challenging it can be to maintain the integrity of one's messages when augmentative and alternative methods are used to communicate. Bauby experienced a massive stroke and had to invent an AAC system. He shared a comical side of communicating in this unique way and explained how very dynamic the process is:

> You read off the alphabet . . . until, with a blink of my eye, I stop you at the letter to be noted. The maneuver is repeated for the letters that follow, so that fairly soon you have a whole word, and then fragments of more or less intelligible sentences. That, at least, is the theory. In all reality, all does not go well for some visitors. Because of nervousness, impatience, or obtuseness, performances vary in the handling of the code (which is what we call this method of transcribing my thoughts). Crossword fans and Scrabble players have a head start. Girls manage better than boys. By dint of practice, some of them know the code by heart and no longer even turn to our special notebook–the one containing the order of the letters and which all my words are set down like the Delphic oracle's.
>
> Indeed, I wonder what conclusions anthropologists of the year 3000 will reach if they ever chance to leaf through these notebooks, where haphazardly scribbled remarks such as "The physical therapist is pregnant," "Mainly on the legs," "Arthur Rimbaud," and "The French team played like pigs" are interspersed with unintelligible gibberish, misspelled words, lost letters, omitted syllables. (p. 21)

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To minimize "gibberish, misspelled words, lost letters, omitted syllables" and the potential for miscommunication, the teacher should always work closely with the AAC user to decipher and confirm their communication when any augmentative and alternative methods are used.

Experiment with Indirect Communication

One night, as Echo Fling was tucking her son, Jimmy, in bed, she picked up a puppet and used it to ask him a question. Jimmy, who was not typically talkative, proceeded to participate in a long conversation with his mother. Fling described the experience as "shocking":

> What's your name?' I asked in a squeaky cartoon-type voice, and got the expected response. Jimmy had just recently requested that everyone call him 'Jim,' instead of Jimmy and began to lecture the puppet on his newfound preference. I asked the usual static questions about his family, and what he liked to do. Jimmy and I had a nice back-and-forth discussion about all the characters in the Ghostbusters movie. I was pleased with how well he was maintaining the conversation. I decided to push further to see what more I could learn.
>
> "Who are some of the kids in your class?" To my amazement, Jimmy began to rattle off some of the boys' names. Why would he be able to talk to the puppet and not me? (2000, p. 89)

Fling went on to share that the talks continued for weeks. The two conversed about everything from Jimmy's fears to school issues; eventually, Jimmy was able to have these conversations without the aid of the puppet.

Many individuals with autism feel uncomfortable engaging in direct conversations or direct interactions. Donna Williams, a woman with autism, shared that she prefers to interact and socialize in ways that are more indirect or detached:

> The best way I could have been given things would have been for them to be placed near me with no expectation of thanks and no waiting for a response. To expect a thank-you or a response was to alienate me from the item that prompted the response.
>
> The best way for me to have been able to listen to someone was for them to speak to themselves about me out loud or about someone like me, which would have inspired me to show I could relate to what was being said. In doing so, indirect contact, such as looking out of a window while talking, would have been best. (1992, p. 216)

In her compelling narrative, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, Vivian Paley (1990) shared how she witnessed the power of using indirect communication with one of her students. Jason, a child enamored with helicopters, seldom talked to peers, and appeared to ignore typical types of play.

At one point in Paley's account, Jason was disrupting other children and the classroom community by running on to the stage that students used to perform plays. At first, Paley sat back, interested in why Jason seemed to need to "crash" the stage so often. After he repeated this behavior several times, Paley decided to problem-solve the situation with a few students:

> "Jason, sometimes you still run into the stage even if it's not your turn."
> "My blades are spinning."
> "But it seems as if your blades spin more in the story room than in the blocks."
> "Because he makes a airport there to land," Samantha [another student] points out.
> "Could that be the reason?" I wonder.
> "Yeah, it really is the reason," Joseph states with assurance.

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> "Aren't you sad because you don't have a airport in here to land? To stay landed?"
> Jason is surprised by the question, but Joseph interprets his silence as agreement. "See, I told you. He's sad because there's no airport. His helicopter needs one." (1990, pp. 57–58)

The students went on to decide that Jason should build a small heliport near the stage so he could have a place to park that was not in the middle of the stage. The whole group managed to find a solution to a tricky problem without blaming or isolating anyone and, as important, they were able to communicate about something serious without involving Jason in a direct (and potentially stressful) interaction. The entire conversation that takes place is about finding a space for a helicopter, not about the behavior of a little boy.

Teachers can learn a lot from Paley and her students. Donna Williams (1998) suggested that teachers use costumes, foreign accents, rhymes, and puppets to cultivate interactions that "encourage expression in a way that allows some degree of personal distance." Williams suggested that these props and activities help students "develop self-awareness in a self-controlled and self-regulated way" (p. 306). Indeed, Junee Waites, a mother of a man with autism, shared in her book, *Smiling at Shadows*, that she couldn't get her son to engage in household routines until she sang to him:

> I sang "We're sweeping the floor, sweeping the floor! We're making the bed, making the bed! Would you like . . . dah de dah . . . a drink of milk . . . la la la . . . ?"
> [The] scheme worked. I sang merrily and Dane began to point to what he wanted—and he would look to me. (Waites & Swinbourne, 2002, p. 41)

If a student seems unable to answer direct questions, the teacher might take a cue from Waites and sing the question. Stephen Shore, a man on the spectrum and a music teacher, often uses singing to connect with his students: "All of my communications with one particular child with Asperger's are sung. If I mistakenly lapse into a typical conversational tone, he loses focus, engages in self-stimulatory activities, and drifts away" (2003, p. 69).

All of these ideas for making communication less direct can be used in K–12 classrooms. See Table 7.6 for even more ideas.

Help Students Understand and Decipher Language

Some people have trouble understanding certain aspects of speech. A student may not respond to his own name or may produce a fork when asked to get a spoon. In most cases, students who behave in these ways are not demonstrating hearing problems, they are experiencing processing difficulties. That is, they are having a hard time making sense of certain sounds, words, or sentences they hear. Because of these problems, the learner may seem inattentive, stubborn, or "noncompliant" at times.

Students with autism also have difficulty understanding some types of language. For instance, some students interpret language quite literally. I learned just how literal some students are when I took one of my students swimming. As Tom entered the pool area, he began walking straight for the deep end. I shouted at him to turn around, thinking that he would know to turn his back to the water in order to climb down the small hook ladder attached to the pool wall. I was puzzled at first but quickly understood my error when Tom began twirling in circles. He was "turning around" just as I had asked. Gunilla Gerland seems to be able to relate to Tom. She claims that she often gives literal answers to questions:

> My attitude to questions was quite concrete. "Can you . . . ?" I answered with a "Yes" which meant, "Yes, I can . . . " But that it should also mean "I will" or "I shall . . . " was a totally alien concept to me. If I said "I can," then I meant just that and nothing else. So the

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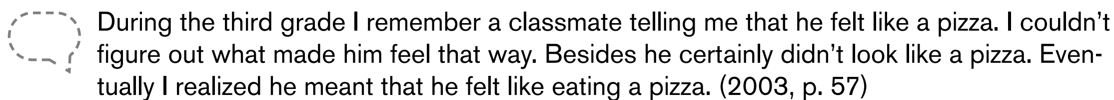
Table 7.6. Ideas for making communication less direct

Ideas for making communication less direct
Use props related to conversation such as toy microphones or megaphones.
Use costumes or pieces of costumes (e.g., storytelling cape).
Have the student "be" their favorite character or person and answer as him or her.
Incorporate gestures and signs (e.g., bump fists instead of saying, "What's up?").
Speak in/teach another language (e.g., allow student to apologize in Spanish or in sign language).
Bring in toys or puppets and have the toy give the information or ask the questions.
Have an exchange on paper, use text messaging, or email back and forth (even if you are in the same room as the student).
Speak on the phone (even if you are in the same room as the student).
Speak to the student while they are doing something else such as bouncing a ball or organizing materials.

effect of my "Yes" to the question "Can you tidy your room?" was not the required one. I didn't at all understand why they were so cross at me. (1996, p. 85)

Stephen Shore reported that slang can also be confusing:



During the third grade I remember a classmate telling me that he felt like a pizza. I couldn't figure out what made him feel that way. Besides he certainly didn't look like a pizza. Eventually I realized he meant that he felt like eating a pizza. (2003, p. 57)

Students with autism may need help interpreting figurative language such as idioms (e.g., "sitting on the fence," "hold your horses"), jokes or riddles, metaphors (e.g., "he was on fire"), phrases or slang expressions with double meaning, and sarcasm (e.g., saying "good work" to someone who has just spilled a glass of milk). Teachers might offer support in the following ways:

- Double-check with all students to make sure directions or questions are understood.
- Provide opportunities for students to learn about language (e.g., present a "metaphor of the week").
- Use visuals to help students remember the meanings of figurative language (e.g., draw a picture of an angry person literally "flying off" of a handle).
- Teach the student the origins of certain metaphors so he or she will be more likely to remember them (e.g., "the ball is in your court" refers to a tennis game; when the ball is in one's court, it is that person's turn to take action).
- Create a memory or Go Fish game featuring idioms (Notbohm & Zysk, 2004). Create two sets of cards with one set featuring idioms (e.g., "on cloud nine") and one set featuring the meanings of idioms (e.g., extremely happy). Many students—not just those on the spectrum—will profit from and enjoy these games.
- Encourage the student to keep a personal dictionary or encyclopedia of puzzling language. Every time the individual is confused by a word or the use of a phrase, explain it and have him add it to his dictionary.

Summary

Communication affects everything else. Therefore, helping a student with communication can also serve to make other aspects of schooling easier. For instance, the more complex a student's communication becomes, the more meaningful the curricular adaptations will be and

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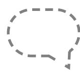
the less likely the student will be to share needs and wants through challenging behavior. Perhaps the most important reason for supporting a student's communication, however, is to help him or her direct his or her own schooling and life. I close by sharing the words of Richard Attfield, a man with autism and an AAC user, who stressed in this letter to a colleague just how important this kind of liberation is:



> I am now finally able to communicate and express my opinion. Recognize for myself communication with other people will also allow me to control my life. Decide for myself what the future will be. Give me a right to be heard. (1993, p. 11)

FOR MORE ANSWERS AND INFORMATION

Books

Downing, J. (2005). *Teaching communication skills to students with severe disabilities* (2nd ed.). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Flodin, M. (2004). *Signing illustrated: The complete learning guide* (Rev. ed.). New York: Perigee Trade.

Gray, C. (1994). *Comic strip conversations.* Arlington, TX: Future Horizons Inc.

Hundal, P., & Lukey, P. (2003). *"Now you know me think more": A journey with autism using facilitated communication techniques*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.

Mirenda, P., & Iacono, T. (2009). *Autism spectrum disorders and AAC*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Mukhopadhyay, T. (2008). *How can I talk if my lips don't move: Inside my autistic mind*. New York: Arcade Publishing.

Welton, J. (2004). *What did you say? What do you mean?: An illustrated guide to understanding metaphors.* Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.

Web Sites

ASLPro.com
http://www.aslpro.com
ASLPro.com is a free resource for teachers. Four video dictionaries allow users to see and practice using thousands of words.

Closing the Gap: Changing Lives with Assistive Technology
http://www.closingthegap.com
Closing the Gap strives to provide parents and educators with the information and training necessary to locate, compare, and implement assistive technology. Through their annual conference, magazine, and web site, they provide some of the best information and training available on AAC.

Core Communication Partners
http://www.darlenehanson.com
This is a good web site with a great newsletter. Topics range from respecting your communication partner to learning about new technology.

(continued)

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(continued)

The Facilitated Communication Institute
http://soeweb.syr.edu/thefci

This group conducts research, public education, training and scholarly seminars. The site contains dozens of short articles written by people with autism.

Simplified Technology
http://www.lburkhart.com

There are so many great make-it-yourself ideas on this web site. The site's creator provides clear directions on how to make your own talking switch, for instance.

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