Understanding the Importance of the Partner in Communication Development for Individuals With Sensory and Multiple Disabilities

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Abstract

Consider this: Communication is not just about the means of expression! Too often we see the focus of intervention placed on some symbolic form without consideration for the child’s understanding of the purpose of communication. This may be particularly true for children with sensory and multiple impairments. Sensory impairments limit many of these learners’ access to partners and topics for communication. Additional disabilities may further restrict their means of communication due to cognitive, motor, and or sensory challenges that could hinder our ability to detect and respond to their attempts to engage their world. In this paper, I will focus on such learners and propose a broadened perspective of communication intervention especially as it relates to the development of a pre-symbolic foundation.

The literature readily highlights how our view of communication has changed over the years. Rowland and Stremel-Campbell (1987) stated that before the 1970s, communication was really only recognized at the level of formal language. The work of researchers such as Bretherton and Bates (1979) encouraged the field to consider the pragmatic functions of children’s behavior in relating to other people and to the objects in their environment as foundational to the development of symbolic communication. Chen (1999) points out that the passage of federal laws, such as the Education for all Handicapped Act in 1986, expanded services to infants and toddlers. Kaiser and Roberts (2011) suggest that this expansion caused interventionists to broaden their emphasis to include prelinguistic communication.

It is evident that such a reinterpretation of communication, with added emphasis on the importance of communicative intent, has proven beneficial and indeed important to the development of later symbolic forms in the child with severe disabilities (Bruce & Vargas, 2007; Candrelia & Wilcox, 2000; Rowland & Schweigert, 2000; Stephenson & Linfoot, 1996). Despite the mounting evidence, it often appears that we as communication practitioners want to race through or even skip over the prelinguistic stage of communication development for our children with sensory and multiple needs. It used to be that if such a child was not able to communicate verbally, we would then attempt to teach him or her sign language. With the further development of augmentative forms of communication and the communication devices
that followed, we then could consider pictures or other representations to use as symbols for a variety of referents in the child’s environment. Unfortunately, these all address only the form of communication and none confront the fundamental underpinnings of communication such as the learner’s understanding of what communication is all about. Intentional behavior like grasping or forming a sign is not a sufficient basis on which to build symbolic communication. Intentional communicative behavior, that is, behavior done with the intent of communicating something to another person (Rowland & Schweigert 2004), must exist. Kaiser and Roberts (2011) remind us that “social attention and prelinguistic communicative behaviors are fundamental to language learning and use” (p. 299).

Rowland and Schweigert (2002) presented a vignette describing a young child with deaf-blindness. It is paraphrased below.

Before the age of one, this youngster was immersed in sign language hoping that she would begin to express herself in the same way. Attentions were so riveted on her production of sign language that people failed to recognize and respond to the pre-symbolic attempts she was making to engage her world. These behaviors were not those of a typical sighted and hearing toddler whose use of those senses allowed for rich interactions with others. Instead, her efforts involved much more proximal tactile strategies. These purposeful behaviors were often met with a barrage of physical manipulations to shape her hands into signs. She became quite resistant to this and frustrated by her failed attempts to gain some control over her world.

Communication is more than just form, and it is helpful to remind ourselves of its basic components. In their often referenced work on symbol formation, Werner and Kaplan (1963) describe four “principle components comprising symbol-situations” (p. 40). They refer to them as the addressor, addressee, object, and symbol. Rowland and Schweigert (2004) have used the terms sender, receiver, topic, and means of expression in their discussion of the elements of communication and the act of “progressive distancing” (Werner & Kaplan, 1963). Bruce (2005) has described this act of distancing as one in which the child gradually begins to separate self from others and from objects. Eventually, the distancing of means of representation from the referent itself occurs as well. In this paper, I will describe those elements as they relate to the role of the communication partner and the implications to intervention, especially at the presymbolic level, for children with multiple and sensory disabilities. Central to this is understanding the role of the partner in developing the child’s desire and intent to communicate.

The Sender

It is critical that the sender, our learners with sensory and multiple disabilities, understand their ability to control events in their world. Without such awareness they, much the same as the newborn, can only react to their world and have no sense that their behavior will cause another to respond. We know that detecting this relationship between one’s behavior and the impact it has on the environment is imperative to further learning (Watson, 1966).

Unlike the typically developing infant, many children with such significant disabilities struggle to perceive the responses of others or engage in the early reciprocal interactions, “the dance” with their caregivers. Think about the signals that babies use and respond to in the earliest exchanges: eye contact, gaze, facial expressions. According to Siegel-Causey, Ernst, and Guess (1987), these are key components of that early social connection that many of the children we are talking about here may not be able to respond to or use. The development of social contingency awareness engendered in these early interactions is critical to the development of communicative intent and it may be further threatened by the presence of motor and cognitive limitations. All of this can potentially impair the child’s awareness and
understanding of how he relates to his environment. Moreover, the caregivers’ sense of effectiveness is also at risk. If they are confronted with signals from the child that they cannot readily interpret or even detect consistently, then they too may begin to feel an inability to connect with their child (Schweigert, 1989).

**The Receiver**

The receiver is the communication partner. Communication is a social function and it is vital for our learners to understand the necessity of having someone to communicate with. Is it really communication if it doesn’t engage another person? The child’s earliest interactions, although not yet intentionally communicative, happen in the arms of the caregiver and it is there that the initial link with a receiver is made. Even as he or she begins to venture out, it is done in the presence and safety of the caregiver.

For the child with multiple disabilities, the role of a receiver may be less than apparent. As already described, reciprocal interactions with another are more difficult to achieve. This makes establishing a rapport with that child more challenging. Without that sense of connectedness and reciprocity, there is little motivation to want to communicate. In addition, children with impaired vision and/or hearing may be unaware when someone is approaching or offering them another bite of food or drink from the cup. Instead, things and people suddenly appear. The spoon is suddenly touching their lips, or the nose gets wiped or the child is lifted up from out of nowhere. The role of another person in gaining access to the things they need or want is not evident to the child.

Finally, knowing that someone is physically available for interaction is important (Bruce & Vargas, 2007; Rowland & Schweigert, 1993). Children with impaired senses and multiple disabilities may lack such awareness because they cannot see or hear that someone is around. They cannot physically access the partner or explore until they find you. Although none of this may preclude the child from developing some purposeful behavior, it may certainly impact a child’s awareness of the need to engage another person. An unfortunate example is when children with severe disabilities are taught a form of communication such as the sign for “more” without understanding the role of another person in the communication interaction. The motor behavior occurs and then suddenly, if someone is around, and if a topic is evident, it is responded to. The child may sit in front of a cupboard that holds his favorite toy signing “more.” Magically the toy appears!

**The Topic**

The topic is something to communicate about. It is readily apparent to the typically developing child. They can see, hear, feel, explore, and soon access it independently. Such experiences are necessary if the child is to learn about the world, how one relates to it, and how one is different from other people, as well as things. Experiences help the child formulate interests. They provide motivation and topics for interaction. It is important to remember that the experiences we are describing here do not initially develop in social isolation. Werner and Kaplan (1963) point out that in what they refer to as the “primordial sharing situation” (p. 42), a child’s initial experiences with objects are sharing that object with another person. This, in turn, contributes to the development of joint attention. This is vital to the development of communicative intent.

For learners with sensory and multiple disabilities, access to the world and to topics is extremely limited. They may lack the sensory abilities to locate or observe other people engaged with different topics. They may also lack the physical ability to access these things or explore them in a variety of ways to gain a fuller sense of what it is or does. Bruce (2005) reminds us that children who are visually impaired learn about their world and specific topics, in a part-to-
whole direction, rather than whole-to-part as the sighted child does. In other words, with sight, we can observe the object as a whole and then examine in more detail the individual aspects of it through the use of all our senses. But for children with a visual impairment, there is only what they are able to perceive at the moment, piece by piece. Hopefully, they are putting it all together through repeated and expanded interactions. Talking about such learners, McLinden and McCall (2002) write that “effective learning through touch rarely takes place in a social vacuum” (p. 14). Learning is shaped by the partner in interactions with the child’s world; once again, joint focus is a critical piece in the development of communicative intent. Because of all this, it is evident that such learners will require time for routine and repeated exposure to and practice with topics (Rowland & Schweigert, 1993; Smith & Levack, 1996), if they are to develop a familiarity with and interest in them enough to want to communicate about them.

**Means of Expression**

The fourth element of communication is how the child communicates. It’s probably the element readers are most familiar with, and might explain our tendency to often look at this first. Unfortunately, it is sometimes the case that we don’t look beyond it to the other elements. This is not to say it isn’t an important piece to consider, but it must be considered in the context of the other elements. Before we can talk about symbolic communication for children with multiple and sensory disabilities, we must consider their presymbolic foundation and specifically their communicative intent. In order for such learners to develop an understanding of communication and their ability to influence others through their own behavior, they must demonstrate a means of expression that others can detect and respond to. Means of expression must encompass not just the symbolic forms, but also the presymbolic forms. Behaviors such as a slight turn of the head, orientation of the body, change in respiration, or opening/closing of the eyes that are more subtle and difficult to detect also must be considered. The behavior must be consistently detectable and responded to reliably. It must be doable for these learners so that they can repeat it often enough, and with enough ease, to enable them to develop an understanding of contingency awareness (i.e., I did something that caused this to happen and every time I do that this same thing happens). At times, it may be necessary to employ technology to enhance the detectability of the behavior or make it more doable in a manner that helps learners connect their behavior to the world and particularly the social world (Schweigert, 1989; Schweigert & Rowland, 1992). We must not simply think about the conventional gestures that we all recognize and use, but also the nonconventional gestural forms such as tugging on the partner to get their attention, taking the partner to the topic, or taking the topic to the partner. For the symbolic communicator, do-ability may mean that the partner allows enough time for the child to respond by accessing a device, forming the sign, or scanning an array of symbols.

Finally, regarding means of expression, we need to consider the applicability of the behavior as well. Is the behavior appropriate and acceptable to the communication situation (Rowland & Schweigert, 2004)? For many children with the most significant disabilities, their repertoire of behaviors may be quite limited (Reinhartsen, 2000). This may necessitate a reconsideration of appropriateness in light of what is actually doable for such a learner.

These four elements of communication become readily apparent when there is the intent to communicate. Table 1 is the profile from the Communication Matrix (Rowland, 1996, 2004) and it describes seven levels of expressive communication covering a developmental period of approximately 0–24 months of age. In each level, the relative presence of the four elements is evident, however, their relationship to one another changes from one level to the next. This is the distancing process that was described earlier. To illustrate, Level I describes a child for whom communication involves direct contact with the receiver and is about topics that are for the most part internal to him (e.g., comfort or discomfort). Everything is in the here
and now. Level VII, by comparison, describes a child who has a symbolic form of communication that allows him to communicate beyond the constraints of space and time. Because he understands symbols, he can now convey ideas, label things, and make requests for things that are not physically present by stringing several symbols (signs, spoken words, pictures, three dimensional symbols, etc.) together, according to the rules of grammar.

Table 1. Communication Matrix profile reprinted with permission from Rowland, C. 2004.

Meaningful assessment must identify where learners are now in their communication ability. Do they have a clear understanding of what communication is about? Is the presymbolic foundation solid? This will require a tool with that degree of sensitivity and view of communication. Without a good sense of where the learner is now, it will be difficult to build on his or her competencies.

Viewing communication in terms of its four elements, as just described, gives us a perspective of intervention that looks beyond just the form. This becomes even more important as we consider the communication challenges faced by learners with multiple and sensory disabilities. We are encouraged to look at the senders, their understanding of control, and their relation to the world, both in terms of topic and other people. Communication intervention thus begins to encompass the development of contingency awareness, building rapport, and a sense of reciprocity with other people, and of accessing and exploring the environment for potential topics to share or reasons to communicate. It also shines a light on means of expression that are best suited for that child at the present time, rather than something that he or she may not be ready for or is beyond his current understanding. Thinking about the communication in this way expands our view of possible approaches for these children.
Helping to explore the environment may well be a significant part of your communication intervention for a child who otherwise would have limited access to such opportunities. Initially, this may take the form of reinstatement interactions (e.g., Nelson, van Dijk, Oster, & McDonnell 2009; Rowland & Schweigert, 2004). Here, the partner engages the child around a particular topic such as bouncing on a ball. The partner then pauses to allow the learner to express a desire, or not, to continue. In this simple interaction, the partner has exposed the child to a topic, established a role for himself or herself, and, hopefully, established a reason for the child to want to re-engage the partner. By responding to an indication of enjoyment from the child, the partner has created an opportunity for the child to link her or his behavior with her or his world (i.e., I do this and get more bouncing.).

Let’s return to the vignette described by Rowland & Schweigert, (2002.)

Up until now her exploration of the environment has been focused on providing the labels for various things she is exposed to. It has not necessarily been done with the idea of helping her develop interests. Her interactions with other people have been directive rather than truly interactive, and the means of expression was determined more by her disability (i.e., she is deaf-blind therefore she should sign) than by what made sense to her right now. Although she demonstrated purposeful behavior, her sense of control as it related to other people was very limited. Interventions were now re-focused, not by dropping her exposure to sign language but with heightened attention to her pre-symbolic forms of expression. Interventions also targeted exploration of her environment in a shared way so that a rapport could be established. This helped to create a reason and desire for interactions with another person. As she gained familiarity and interests in her world she was also given the opportunity to discover how her behaviors could affect those of another person in these shared experiences. The familiarity with potential topics led to an expression of preferences and ultimately to informed choice making. She developed a broad repertoire of pre-symbolic behaviors to express herself. She was communicating intentionally, seeking out other people, and directing behaviors to them through her gestures regarding specific topics that she tactually examined. All the elements of communication became evident. Her intent to communicate and desire to engage her world led to the development of a 3-dimensional tangible symbol system (Rowland & Schweigert 1990, 2000) for her. This expansion of her means of expression could now afford her the ability to communicate about things beyond the immediate time and space in a manner, once again that made sense to her. Sign language continued to be a receptive part of her communication with others.

**Conclusion**

Communication intervention for the learner with sensory and multiple disabilities is about more than just form. It is about contingency awareness and access to topics. It is about developing a desire to engage other people and understanding the necessity of doing so. Intervention requires us to consider forms of expression from the perspective of the learner with reduced sensory and physical abilities. And perhaps most importantly, it is about building a presymbolic foundation that is solid enough to support the meaningful development of some symbolic means of expression.

**References**


