



Idaho Project for Children and Youth with Deaf-Blindness Fact Sheet

Five Critical Features of Receptive and Expressive Communication

What are they?

Five critical features of receptive and expressive communication are: forms, functions/intents, content, partners, and the physical environment. Everyone's communication system is made up of these five features (McLean & Snyder-McLean, 1978).

Forms. The ways in which we receive and send communication are the "forms" of communication. All children start out using concrete simple forms of communication before they use speech, sign language, or other abstract (symbolic) forms. Young children who are deaf-blind may need adaptive forms of receptive communication so that they know what is about to happen to them. Nonsymbolic forms of communication include vocalizations, body movement, use of objects, and gestures. Symbolic forms include manual signs, speech or the use of symbols on electronic alternative devices (as an 8-plate switch). Most typical children use one primary form to communicate expressively and receptively (speech). Children who are deaf-blind may use one form for expressive communication (gestures, body movement, etc.) and a different form for receptive communication (objects, pictures, etc.).

Functions/Intents. The function of communication refers to the speaker's "intent" of communication. The function explains the reason for communication. Children typically learn to express simpler (basic) functions of communication before they use the more complex functions. Some basic intents/functions of communication may include protesting, gaining attention, requesting something or someone, commenting, offering, and questioning. Some more complex functions include joking, lying, and persuading.

Content. Each form and function used communicates something. The "something" that is communicated involves the people, locations, actions, possessions, and

feelings that are in the child's life. Children must experience different people, objects, and activities before they will be able to communicate about them.

Partners. Children's caregivers are their first partners for communication. All persons who interact with children who are deaf-blind must be able to understand and use the same forms that the children use. Partners must communicate frequently with the child in order to teach him or her the many forms and functions of communication. Siblings and peers are also very important communication partners.

Physical environment. The physical environment refers to the location where a communication interaction takes place. Children's major environments are their home, school, and community. Within these environments, each child has varying environments such as the family room, the kitchen, the playground, and the movie theater. It is important that children have access to many environments in order to learn what to communicate about within environments and to be able to generalize across those environments. The child's hearing and vision needs should always be taken into consideration when communicating in different environments.

Important points to remember:

It is important to determine how the individual child understands and uses the five critical features of communication for the following reasons:

- They should all be used as considerations in assessment.
- They should be considered in IEP development.
- They should be used in program planning and evaluation.
- An assessment of a child's needs and strengths in social, cognitive, motor, and sensory development can be used to plan ways for the child to communicate more effectively.

Parent Tip

Facilitate physical contact by explaining to others why touch is important for a person who doesn't see and hear.



Center on Disabilities and Human Development
College of Education

For more information contact:

Robin G. Greenfield, Ph.D., Director
Idaho Project for Children and Youth with Deaf-Blindness
University of Idaho, Boise Center
322 East Front Street, Suite 440
Boise, Idaho 83702
208-364-4012
e-mail: rgreen@uidaho.edu

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