

## *Using Routines and Functional Activities to Enhance Communication*

### *What are they?*

Caregiving routines and functional activities such as bathing, eating, and socializing are events that happen frequently in our lives. There are many opportunities to teach and enhance communication within routines that happen everyday in the home and community. Routines can be daily caregiving activities (dressing, eating, etc.), play interactions with friends and family, or community outings.

### *Why are they important?*

Teaching communication within routines and functional activities is important because it provides a meaningful and repetitive structure for children to learn and practice communication. Routines and activities give children and adults something to talk about and provide the basis for development of concepts such as time and sequence. They also provide a child with a sense of control over events. The steps of a simple routine or daily activity can serve to cue the child about the next step in the activity. Children can focus more attention on learning communication within the context of routines that are predictable and safe (Klein, Chen, & Haney, 2000).

Teaching communication within the context of routines enhances development and generalization. Daily routines and functional activities also provide an age-appropriate teaching environment that can promote interactions with family, siblings, and peers.

### *The sequence of a routine*

Caregiving routines and functional activities typically have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is important for a child to know when an activity is going to start and when it will be finished. This contributes to the development of concepts of time and sequence.

The nature and type of a routine or activity that is chosen and the specific targets on the child's IFSP/IEP will determine which forms and functions of receptive/expressive communication will be used within the routine. Opportunities for using receptive and expressive communication should be embedded into the routine or activity, and opportunities for reinforcing motor, vision, hearing, and cognitive skills should also be built into the routine.

- The *beginning* of a routine or activity should clue the child into what is going to happen next. There should be a consistent form of communication (object cue, picture, sign, spoken word or a combination) that tells the child what activity is to follow (example: an object cue, sign,

- word, or picture that represents “it’s time to eat.”) Make sure that the child is ready for the routine (glasses are on, hearing aids in, positioning is correct, etc.) so that optimal learning can take place.
- The *middle* includes all of the steps that happen as part of the routine or activity. During the activity, the sign, object, picture, or word chosen should be reinforced so that the child connects the activity to the communication attempt. The process should be simple and consistent. The child should be encouraged to participate in all aspects of the routine. Opportunities for communications should be provided.
  - The *end* of the routine or activity should indicate that the activity is finished for now. The word “finish” or a finish box for object/picture cues may be used. Transitions into new routines may serve as the end of the old routine.

### *Examples of routines and activities*

#### Routines:

- Eating/feeding
- Dressing/undressing
- Social interaction games with young children
- Toileting

#### Activities:

- Going to the store
- Going to the park
- Cooking
- Visiting a friend

### *Important points to remember:*

- When developing a routine, choose a word, sign, object cue, or picture that the child will easily associate with the activity to introduce and repeat during the activity.
- Be consistent with the use of signs, pictures, and objects.
- Encourage the child to participate in all aspects of the routine and use partial participation when appropriate.
- Include peers and siblings in daily routines.
- Make the routine simple so that the child does not get frustrated.
- Place materials and communication symbols where the child can access them.
- Allow for some flexibility; it is important that children learn to deal with change.
- Choose routines that other children of the same age are doing.
- Provide opportunities for communication.

## ***Parent Tip***

Label items in your home environment with your child's favored communication (sign, symbols, or words) so that everyone can use the same language.

## ***Receptive Contextual Cues***

### ***What are they?***

All children begin to show awareness and attention to people, activities, and places based on a combination of auditory cues, visual cues, movement cues, and smell and taste cues at a very young age. We are calling these contextual or environmental "cues."

Contextual or environmental cues may not always be used intentionally by a parent or service provider with a child who is deaf-blind. However, these cues are a natural part of early caregiving routines that happen frequently throughout the day, such as feeding or changing.

At some point the child may begin to demonstrate that he or she anticipates the activity or the next step in the activity. A child who begins to show anticipation is demonstrating an early cognitive skill. An older child may respond to the school bell as a cue to change classes.

Examples of how caregivers can incorporate cues into activities:

**Feeding.** Give the child a bite of food. After tasting and smelling the food, the child opens her mouth to indicate that she anticipates another bite.

**Changing.** Move the child to the changing table, and he begins the movement of "bottom-up."

**Bathing.** Run the water in the bathtub. The child hears and smiles in anticipation of getting a bath.

**Going for a ride.** Place the child in his car seat and start the car's engine. The child shows excitement about going somewhere.

**Hearing the lawn mower.** Dad starts up the lawn mower, and an older child hears it. He then goes outside to work with Dad.

### ***Why are they important?***

The contextual or environmental cues given by caregivers are important for several reasons. First, they allow the child to begin to use residual vision or hearing within the context of the activities and routines. Second, as the cues

begin to have meaning, they give the child opportunities to demonstrate skills such as awareness, attention, and anticipation. These cues serve as indicators that something “good” or “not good” is about to happen. Third, caregivers can begin to read the child’s anticipatory behaviors as “she likes this, she doesn’t like that.” The child’s reaction begins to be perceived as intentional communication. Persons interacting with the child who is deaf-blind should deliver contextual cues very intentionally and wait for a response from the child. If the child does not have time to process the information, then he or she will not have time to show anticipation. Once a child learns to anticipate activities, he or she will have a basis to begin to learn other skills.

*Important points to remember:*

- Children need to have a reason to use whatever hearing and vision they have.
- The child’s early responses to contextual cues provided by caregivers may be the first indicators that the child may have more functional vision and hearing than was indicated on a standard assessment.

***Parent Tip***

Try to be aware of natural opportunities to learn and to provide information and training.

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