

## 5. INTRODUCING SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION

After ensuring that the child is consistently able to signal attention seeking, acceptance, and rejection, the child may be ready to include concrete symbols in his/her communication repertoire within structured social routines. Two techniques for introducing symbolic communication include:

1. **Visual Schedules:** to represent the main activities in the child's daily agenda using whatever symbol system that is deemed most appropriate for the child (e.g. real objects, photographs, etc.)
2. **Talking Switches:** small, battery-operated devices which play a limited number of messages using voice output

When introducing symbolic communication using these techniques, it is important to remember that the child must demonstrate appropriate **joint attention**. Smith, McCarthy, & Beningo (as cited in Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013) point out that when an AAC system is involved joint attention involves four elements 1) the communicator 2) the communication partner 3) the AAC system 4) the target object

If the child is not exhibiting appropriate joint attention, the SLP should resume focus on pre-symbolic techniques

## REFERENCES

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Rowland, C., & Fried-Oken, M. (2010). Communication matrix: A clinical and research assessment tool targeting children with severe communication disorders. *Journal of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine: An Interdisciplinary Approach, 3*, 319-329.

[www.communicationmatrix.org](http://www.communicationmatrix.org)

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## Bridging the Pre-Symbolic to Symbolic Gap

in Young Children with Severe Disabilities



**5 STEPS FOR THE NOVICE SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST**

After completing an AAC symbol assessment, you've discovered that your client doesn't understand verbal or pictorial symbols. You've identified a beginning communicator. Now what?

First, you must determine at what level your pre-symbolic client is communicating.

A valuable resource for such a daunting task is **The Communication Matrix**, an assessment instrument for evaluating the expressive communication skills of individuals with severe or multiple disabilities (Roland & Fried-Oken, 2010). *The Communication Matrix* will help you determine if your pre-symbolic client is...

- Pre-intentional or Intentional
- Non-conventional or Conventional

This tool is available at [www.communicationmatrix.org](http://www.communicationmatrix.org) and [www.designtolearn.com](http://www.designtolearn.com)

After determining your client's communication level using the *Communication Matrix*, it is time to determine goals for intervention. Generally speaking communication treatment should focus on:

1. Creating a highly responsive environment
2. Ensuring that communication involves necessary basic elements of communication—sender, receiver, topic, & a method of expression

Cress and Marvin (2003) state that interpreting and responding contingently to behaviors is important for children who exhibit pre-symbolic communication. Contingent responses from the facilitator (e.g. SLP, parent, caregiver, etc.) teach the child that his or her behavior can impact the behavior of others in significant ways. Initially, it may be difficult for facilitators to distinguish between intentional and unintentional behaviors.

Beukelman and Mirenda (2013) provide some considerations for determining whether the child's behavior is intentional:

- Look to see if the child has an alternating gaze between on object and the facilitator
- Observe the orientation of the child's body. Is it directed toward the facilitator?
- When a behavior is produced and a facilitator response is given, does the behavior stop?
- When a behavior is produced and a facilitator response is given, does the child show satisfaction or dissatisfaction?
- When a behavior is produced and is not followed by a facilitator response, does the child persist by repeating or changing the behavior?

Beukelman and Mirenda (2013) also suggest that some children may benefit from intervention which targets clear, appropriate signals for three basic elements of communication: attention-seeking, acceptance, and rejection.

**Attention seeking** – To teach attention-seeking signals, the facilitator should interpret and respond to any behaviors that appear to function as a means of getting attention (e.g. banging on the table, loud vocalizations, eye contact, etc.). Once the child learns to use such behaviors consistently to receive attention, the facilitator can limit responsiveness to the most desirable behaviors (e.g. mid-intensity vocalizations) to shape more appropriate behaviors.

**Acceptance/Rejection:** Teaching acceptance and rejection signals follows the same contingent interpretation and response pattern to any of the child's behaviors that appear to function as a means of signaling satisfaction (e.g. smiling, remaining still, laughing, etc.) or dissatisfaction (e.g. crying, flailing, hitting, etc.). Once behaviors are used consistently for acceptance/rejection, the facilitator may shape more appropriate behaviors by responding only to those that are most desirable.

**Scripted Routines** are useful for providing children with opportunities for practicing using communicative signals. During interactive songs or games (e.g. Twinkle Twinkle, This Little Piggy, etc.) the facilitator can begin the action, then pause to elicit a communicative signal, and then respond contingently to that signal.