

The Need to Establish A Communication Bubble

Establishing what Susan Smith, the parent of two children with CHARGE, calls the “Communication Bubble” is essential if you want to make sure the child knows you are there and are trying to communicate. The concept of a “bubble” is a good one because you can imagine the space within which you need to be. As Eric Kloos says, you need to be “on the child’s radar.” Get outside the bubble and you might as well not exist. Too many times, we think the child is tuned out, not paying attention, or is too “retarded” to answer when, in fact, he/she may not even know that you are trying to say something.

Each parent should know how far a child can see what kinds and colors of objects, with or without movement, in different lighting conditions and against different shaded backgrounds. The eye doctor will usually not be able to tell you this except by guessing though some do this kind of testing. A vision teacher, however, can do a Functional Vision Evaluation, to help establish these visual abilities. Figuring out what the child hears clearly, at what distance and on which side is also important. Neither of these is easy to determine so parents and team members will likely have to engage in a continuing evaluation process.

What Types Of Communication Systems Are Available?

Emerging language	Touch cues	
	Object cues	
	Gestures	
	Pictures	
Formal language	Oral Language	Auditory/Verbal
	Oral Language supported manually	Cued Speech
	Sign Language	Signed English
		ASL, Auslan, etc. (the native sign language of a given country)
Total Communication	Combination of oral and sign languages	

Table modified from Rob Last

How Do You Choose the Right Method?

There is no one right answer to this question. Too often, however, the confusion results from passionate arguments for one method of communication, like spoken English or American Sign Language, without fully understanding the effects of dual sensory loss. **The most important thing is to get language into that developing brain in a form that can be consistent and effective.** What that form takes will likely be determined a team meeting of the parents and professionals. We learn any language by receiving it and then repeating it. We learn it fastest and best by total immersion. Learning it for an hour in the classroom twice a week or in bits and snatches with a word or sign here or there is simply not enough to become fluent. This means that whatever method is chosen needs to be woven into everything the child does, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night. Keep in mind that perfectly good language by whatever method is useless to the child unless it is delivered within the communication bubble. The other very important point is that a lot of communication precedes formal language. Every mother can “read” her child’s communication regardless of whether that child uses any formal

language. Sometimes it is guessing, but the child will let the mother know when she's got it right. Therefore, it is important to lead up to formal communication step by step. We use sight cues and verbal cues like outstretched arms with some encouraging words to let a hearing/sighted child know what we want to do next. For a child without good vision or hearing, concrete object cues and touch cues are used instead. DeafBlind project staff can help the regular and special education staff learn how to use these methods. As parents and educators we may get hung up on wanting our children to speak our own language using the method we use. That is as natural as immigrants wanting their children to continue speaking their language and remembering their culture. However, the issue is not the form but the substance. The child needs to learn that an object, touch, picture, word or sign is a symbol that stands for a thought. Many of them strung together convey complex ideas or stories. They include naming of objects, actions, remembering the past, anticipating the future and, later, getting into abstract thoughts and discussions.

So, above all, just get to it! COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE.