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Teaching Communication Skills: A Toolkit for Educators

This toolkit provides information about how to help students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) improve their ability to communicate, with a focus on teaching skills for **initiating**, sending a message, and skills for **responding**, receiving a message.

What is communication?

Communication involves **exchanging information between people**. For communication to take place, there must be at least two participants: a sender and a receiver.

The ability to communicate is different from the ability to talk.

- Communication can occur without speech. This includes sending messages with body language, facial expressions, and behavior. Sign language and written messages are also ways of communicating.

- Speech can occur without communication. You might talk aloud to yourself or repeat a phrase without expecting to get a response.
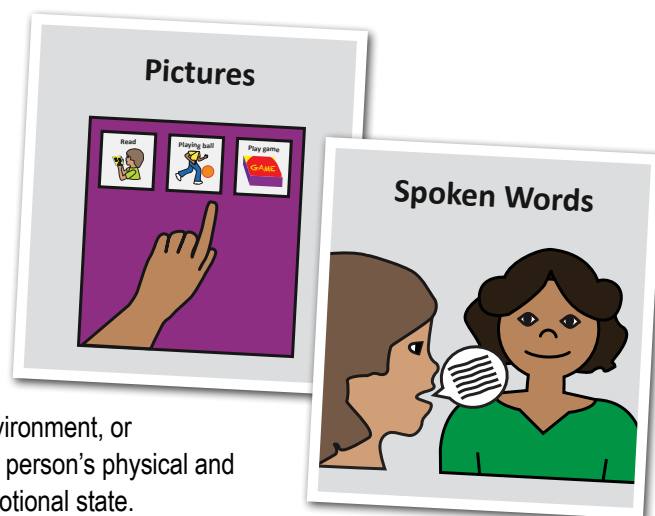
A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the online version of this toolkit, which can be accessed by registering for a free account at **triad.vkclearning.org** and accessing the information in the **Early Childhood** folder and **Early Childhood Communication Series**.

Communication comes in many forms.

- Spoken words–Use of words or phrases

- Signs or sign language–A formal system of hand gestures with specific meanings

- Gestures–Hand or body actions

- Sounds or vocalizations–Use of non-word sounds or vocal noises

- Facial expressions–Movements of the eyes, nose, or mouth

- Pictures–A visual method using photographs that represent vocabulary

- Line drawings–A visual method using drawings that represent objects or vocabulary actions

- Written words–For example, through a note or sign

- Physical behaviors–Behaviors such as running away, leading someone by the hand, giving someone an object, or turning away

- Aggressive behaviors–Behaviors such as pushing or hitting another person

- Eye gaze–Using eye contact or a gaze toward a person or object

- Echolalia–Echoing or repeating back someone else's words

- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)–Any communication other than verbal speech

These forms of communication range from concrete, such as throwing a tantrum, to abstract, such as spoken language. A person's communication skills may differ depending on the situation, what else is going on in the environment, or the person's physical and emotional state.

When students with ASD struggle with communication or respond to others in a way that is different than expected, it is often rooted in the core characteristics of ASD: differences in social communication and restricted or repetitive behaviors. *More information about ASD can be found at **triad.vkclearning.org**.*

Communication is a process, or a series of steps, carried out to achieve a goal. The process of communication starts with a desire to communicate, or a need to be met.

We can use the ABC framework to understand the *why* of communication. The ABC framework stands for Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence.

Understanding this framework can also help us set up situations that may result in increased communication from students.

> **MORE INFO** ▶ *See examples of the ABC framework in the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.*

ABC Framework

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
What happens right before the communicative behavior	Goal-directed actions to send and respond to messages	What happens right after the communicative behavior

Why teach communication?

- Being able to communicate with others is an essential skill across settings. Communication is important for expressing wants, needs, feelings, and emotions. It is important for interacting with others and building relationships. Communication skills are important at school, at home, and in the community.

- Difficulty communicating plays a role in many challenging behaviors. If students have a need and don't know an appropriate way to communicate for it, they may use less socially appropriate ways of getting that need met. Teaching communication skills can help reduce and prevent challenging behaviors.

- Teaching communication opens up opportunities for students. The more a student is able to communicate, the more successful social interactions they will be able to have, which in turn create more opportunities for learning and practicing communication skills.
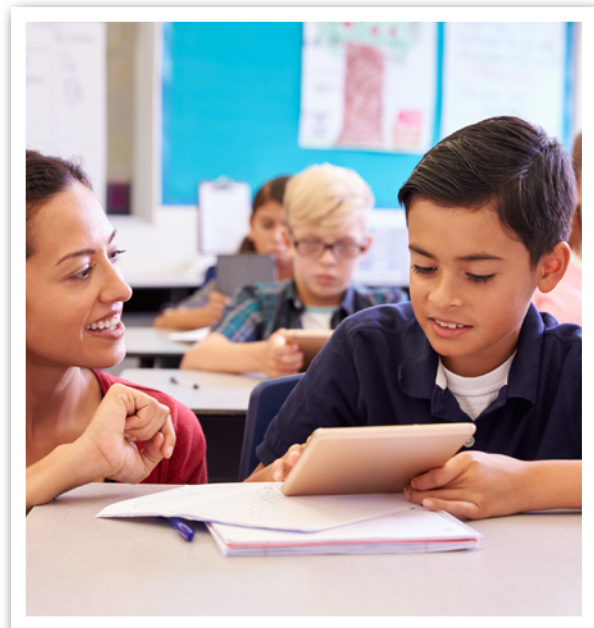
- Teaching communication also increases educational opportunities and students' ability to participate in different settings. The more a student is able to communicate and respond to others independently, the more able they will be to participate in a variety of educational environments.

Deciding what to teach

The first step in teaching communication is deciding *what* communication skill to teach. It is important to use your student's current communication skills as a starting place. Your ultimate goal for your student might be to communicate like his or her peers, or to communicate in an age- or grade-appropriate way. However, when choosing a communication skill to teach, think about **the best next step**.

The best next step for your student could be:

- A **replacement behavior** for a challenging behavior, such as teaching a student to touch a break card or say "no" instead of hitting others when she wants an activity to end.

- The best next **developmental step**, such as expanding the student's current form of communication to another setting or teaching a new communication method. For example, if a student touches objects to request them, a next step might be to teach the student to use pictures of objects to make requests.

- A **functional skill** to be used at school or home, such as teaching a student to ask for help, ask for a break, or answer a teacher's question.

Teaching Initiating

When we teach *initiating*, we are teaching a student to *start* an interaction. To teach initiating, we need to answer three questions:

1. What will motivate this student to communicate?

What is motivating to your student will depend on his or her unique wants, needs, and interests. In general, students communicate to **access** or **escape** items, activities, or attention. For example, a student might be motivated to communicate when he or she wants or needs help, wants an object but cannot access it independently, does not want to continue doing an activity, or needs a break from an overwhelming situation.

With a student's motivations in mind, you can set up the environment to increase opportunities for a student to initiate communication. Some strategies for setting up the environment include:

- "Sabotage"–Ask or tell students to do something that you know they will need help with. For example, place materials in a container they cannot open without help.

  Out-of-reach placement– Place items where students can see them but have to ask for them. For example, store materials in your desk or on a shelf higher than your students can reach.

  Forgetfulness–"Forget" necessary items for an activity so students must request them. For example, "forget" to put out dry erase markers after handing out dry erase boards.

- Novelty–Add something new and interesting to your classroom so students will comment or ask about it. For example, bring a new or unusual decoration into the classroom.

Once you have set up something in the environment to motivate your student to communicate, it is important to be close by so you can respond immediately when he or she initiates! It is also important to **intentionally wait** to give your students the chance to initiate on their own.

2. What behavior will we teach this student to use?

When choosing a behavior to teach, remember to think about **the best next step**, as described on page 3. The best next step will depend on your student's current skills.

3. How will we respond to the student's communication?

Your response to the student's communication depends on how the student initiates. We will respond in one of two ways:

- If the student uses the goal behavior, **reinforce** it immediately.

- If the student does not use the goal behavior, provide a **prompt**, or cue, to help them move closer to the goal behavior. Once the student uses, or comes closer to using, the goal behavior, provide the reinforcement.

> **MORE INFO** ▶ *For more information on using prompts effectively, choosing the most appropriate prompt for your student, and providing reinforcement, see the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.*

Once you have identified the **antecedent** that will motivate your student, the **behavior** you want to teach, and the **consequence** or response you will provide– you are ready to embed communication opportunities throughout the day by:

1. Setting up the situation
2. Waiting for the student to initiate
3. Providing reinforcement or a prompt
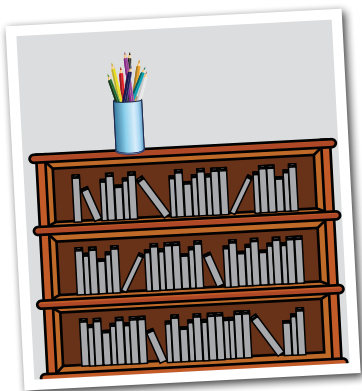
Example of teaching initiating: Ciara is a pre-school student who is not yet using words. When she wants a snack, she tries to get it herself. Her teacher wants Ciara to point to request what she wants. Her teacher puts snacks in containers Ciara cannot open. She holds two containers out of Ciara's reach. When Ciara reaches toward a snack, her teacher gives her some. Over time, her teacher uses modeling and physical prompts to help Ciara come closer to pointing.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher holds snack containers out of Ciara's reach	Ciara points to a snack	Teacher gives Ciara some snack

Teaching Responding

The difference between initiating and responding to communication is what comes *before* the communication. Students *initiate* communication when they are motivated or interested in doing so. When a student *responds* to communication, he or she is reacting to someone else's initiation. Successful responding relies on your ability to initiate communication with your student in the most effective way possible.

Just as in teaching initiating, there are three questions to answer when teaching a student to respond.

1. How will you initiate?

Think about what you want your student to respond to. In school, students are often expected to respond when an adult underlines gives a direction, asks a question, or makes a comment. This section focuses on teaching students to respond to adult initiations; however, similar strategies can be used when teaching communication with peers.

Initiating in an effective way increases the chances of the student responding successfully. Here are some strategies for initiating effectively:

- Limit distractions. Especially when a student is first learning a skill, practice at a calm time.

- Move closer to the student to make sure your student can see and hear you.

- Get the student's attention by saying his or her name, catching his or her gaze, or tapping him or her on the arm.

- Use the least number of words possible to give the direction or ask the question. For example, instead of "Let's use walking feet," say "Please walk."

- Pair your initiation with a visual support, such as an object or picture that clarifies what the student is supposed to do.

MORE INFO *For more information on visual supports, see the Visual Supports online training at* **triad.vkclearning. org**.

2. What response will we teach the student to use?

As with teaching initiating, the behavior you teach will depend on your individual student. Remember to think about the **best next step**.

3. How will we respond to the student's communication?

As in teaching initiating, if the student uses the goal behavior, **reinforce** it immediately. If the student does not use the goal behavior, first provide a **prompt** and then provide reinforcement when he or she comes closer to using the goal behavior.

Note: When teaching initiating, the reinforcement was directly related to the student's goal for communicating. For example, if a student communicates to request a snack, the natural reinforcement is receiving the snack. When teaching responding, the student may not be as motivated to communicate for the natural reinforcer. You may need to provide some extra reinforcement, such as specific praise, allowing them to earn a prize, or giving them a token towards a larger goal.

Once you have answered these three questions–the **antecedent** or initiation that will be provided, the **behavior** you want to teach, and the **consequence** or response you will provide–you are ready to teach the communication skill by:

1. Initiating
2. Waiting for the student to respond
3. Providing reinforcement or a prompt

See below for an example.

Example: Christopher is a sixth grade student who speaks in full sentences. He follows one-step instructions but needs support to complete multi-step instructions given to the whole class. His teacher would like to help him independently follow multi-step directions. The teacher creates a visual support listing the materials Christopher needs for math class. When it is time for math, the teacher stands near Christopher, says "Get ready for math," places the visual on his desk, and waits for Christopher to respond. If he needs an extra prompt, the teacher taps the visual.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher places a visual support on Christopher's desk and gives an instruction to the class	Christopher does not respond	Teacher gestures to Christopher's visual support

When Christopher responds to the prompt by getting out his math materials, the teacher provides specific praise and a high-five.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher gestures to Christopher's visual support	Christopher gets out his math materials	Teacher provides specific praise and a high five

Conclusion

Remember, an important part of teaching communication skills is deciding on the best next step for your student. Once you decide on a skill to teach, you will be ready to use the information in this toolkit to set up the environment for success, wait for your student's communication, and then prompt or reinforce their response to help them be successful.

MORE INFO ▶ *If you are interested in learning more about teaching communication skills, please see the full online Teaching Communication toolkit by visiting triad.vkclearning.org. Other resources on this website provide more information about visual supports, reinforcement, echolalia, and other topics.*

Resources

Visit **triad.vkclearning.org** for resources, information, and brief trainings related to autism spectrum disorder and evidence-based practices. Online trainings have been developed for educators and caregivers on topics including educational practices, mental health needs, and more.

If you are interesting in learning more about teaching communication skills, the following trainings and resources are available at **triad.vkclearning.org**, under the **School-Age Services (K-12)** category.

- ❏ Building Blocks of Communication
- ❏ Visual Supports
- ❏ Reinforcement in the Classroom

The following webinars are also available about this topic at **triad.vkclearning.org** under **Webinar Recordings**.

- ❏ Communication Plain and Simple Webinar Series
- ❏ The Social Communication Skills Network (TSCSN) Webinar Series
- ❏ Early Childhood Communication Webinar Series

Finally, the following printable resources that go into more detail about topics covered in this toolkit are available at **triad.vumc.org/resources**

- ❏ Autism Spectrum Disorders Tip Sheet
- ❏ Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorders

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