

MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION USE AUDIT

Guidelines

Everyone communicates, and everyone communicates using a range of different methods (or modalities). Usually, one modality is dominant - the spoken word for most of us, signing for Deaf communities - and increasingly, for all of us, digital forms delivered via technology: pictures, films, emojis, print... Families and other interactive partners are always interpreting all our communications - so, for example, I know exactly what my son-in-law means to convey by a particular smile - other people who don't know him well wouldn't be so sure!

For children and young people who have difficulties with spoken language, these other modalities become really important. It's well known that the natural language of Deaf people is sign, but hearing children too will develop their own patterns of language and communication using different combinations of modalities. To help them communicate effectively, we need to build up a picture of what they use to achieve particular communication purposes or "functions", with whom, and in what settings. We need to observe closely what they are already doing, and value their choices, before we embark on a formal assessment, and then dedicated intervention to expand and strengthen their range..

On the following pages you'll find a template for observing creating a child's patterns of communication. I've called this an "audit" because it will provide us with a summary of what we need to know. It can be used by speech pathologists and teachers: I developed it in classrooms and then as a guide for families. Ideally, this needs to be done carefully and thoroughly over a period of time (say 3 days). For some children, who are rather infrequent spontaneous communicators, you may be able to record everything. But if your child communicates a lot, don't feel overwhelmed. Instead, choose some periods of time, maybe 10 minutes every hour when they are with you, to do the records. Just make sure you note down what you are doing.

This is not designed to replace but to complement your existing records, including formal and diagnostic assessments and educational plans.

How to use this audit

Context

Just a quick indication - for example, we know that lots of families have conversations walking to school, in the car, at the shops, in a cafe, at dinner time, bedtime, personal care.... this helps us build a picture of where your child is most comfortable communicating. If you're a professional, you will develop a list of key contexts in and out of school which are important to the child.

Who with

Pretty obvious really - again, sometimes children have different types of conversation with different people. One child with CP for example, only used sign when she was conversing with other children; she stopped when she knew adults were around. It's important to note here what models are being provided to the child. Is s/he seeing good examples of how to be a multimodal, flexible communicator?

Modalities

We're asking you to make a snap judgement about the main modality through which a message is effectively communicated and the additional modality used. For example, one child may use eye pointing as the main modality, and vocalisations as a secondary modality. Others may use mainly speech and gesture or sign as back up. If they use two modalities equally, just put both in the main column. Here are the modalities to look for.

Speech (ie recognisable words)

Signs (recognisable and consistent signs or mimes which you would interpret as meaning the same as a word: for example SLEEP with head inclined and hand to cheek. Signs may not have been formally taught, children often develop their own system)

The next group would be pointed to by the child, or given in exchange

Written words

Pictures or photos

Symbols

PECS

Technology: use of ipads, mobile phones, communication aids (for example, voice output devices, or an app on the iPad with a voice output)

The next group are natural means of communication that everyone uses, and which sometimes convey particular meanings

Facial expressions (like a pout to mean “No I don’t want to...”; or raising eyebrows to mean “really???”)

Vocal sounds (like exclamations - “ow!” or “mmm” or a sound like “ah-ah-ah” which you know means the child feels happy and is always how she signals this)

Pointing - to people, places and things to give particular messages

Gestures -waving, arms out for a hug, clapping, shrugging to mean “I don’t know” flapping that clearly is used to communicate the meaning, “I am excited”. Some gestures are so clear in their meaning that they are effectively the child’s own sign system.

Body movements - turning away, pushing, grabbing

Eye gaze - directed looking that can tell you what the topic is, what is wanted, but also can signal events in the past, or particular individuals. Note if a particular device eg a frame is used.

Others - anything we’ve missed!!

Purposes

The reason for asking you to record these is to see how good the match is between what children need to communicate and the way they do it. For example, if you are asking for things (requests) or telling people what to do, pointing is better than just making loud sounds, and if you have signs or speech to articulate what you want, this is better still. On the other hand, if you are trying to communicate how you feel, using your face and vocal intonation is almost as good as words, and pointing is not much use (unless it’s to a picture of a sad face, or a word or symbol). Also this helps us to spot gaps in a child’s communication profile. Here are the main ones we’d like you to look for. The first group are early acts of communication and the second group come later, so don’t worry if there are some your child does not seem to engage in:-

Requests - Asking for things

Commands - Telling you what to do

Telling, sharing experience - giving you information about something that has happened, or is going to happen

Feelings - saying how I feel

Refusing/protesting - saying no, letting you know clearly that they don't want to do something

Yes/no- answering

Play - teasing, joking, laughing together, pointing out something funny

Copying - imitating what you do, or something on the tv,

Social - hello, goodbye, please, thank you, kiss goodnight - all the little ways we get on with each other

Questions - asking a question (where, what, who, when, why, how)

Commenting or describing- use of descriptive terms “nice” “pretty” “big!” “fast” “red”

Narrating - telling you a simple story about something that has happened

Predicting - saying what is going to happen

Imagining - play and writing or drawing something imaginative; pretending

Explaining - telling you how something works, or why something happened

Problem solving - working out how to do things, thinking through what will happen if I do this...

Responding - when you are talking to them, nodding or smiling, or saying “oh no” “how awful”

Others - anything we've missed?

Comments

This is a space for you to write notes about anything that struck you at the time

Add in any other information about your child's communication that you think is important or that you have noticed.

Summary

Profile your observations, and make some plans

OBSERVATION TEMPLATE

Time of day

Context

With whom

Modalities used

Purpose

Comment

SUMMARY PAGE: MULTIMODAL PROFILE

MULTIMODALITY

Write a short description of the child's multimodal strengths.

Write a short description of the ways in which different modalities are being modelled TO the child. Is there a match between the child's preferred modalities and the forms s/he sees being used effectively?

Discuss the findings with others (family, teachers, speech pathologists, arts workers)

FUNCTIONS AND PURPOSES

What purposes of communication is the child using consistently and effectively?

What are the gaps?

How can different modalities be recruited to help increase the child's power as a communicator?

You can add modalities to a purpose that is in repertoire.

For example if a child is requesting primarily through flapping and vocalising, you can add in other modalities: reaching and pointing; directing gaze; sets of pictures (as long as you are absolutely sure there is good recognition!)

You can model/teach an existing modality for a new purpose

If a child is not telling you things, start with vocal and manual expressions that evaluate an event: wow! Yuck! clapping. Model them and encourage natural imitation.

And of course, you can bring in modalities that the child is not currently using. But always start with yourselves. Why would a child put effort into learning a new mode

AIMS AND ACTIONS

What will you work on together?

How will you do this?

List 3 or 4 specific, time focused, actions that you know will be easy to implement.

WHAT HAS THIS CHILD TAUGHT YOU?

How can you and the child work together so that you are genuinely exploring communication possibilities together as partners in learning?