Augmentative Communication Assessment

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Developing a functional communication system is a priority IEP objective for many students with severe disabilities. It is not an easy task and often requires numerous hours and many "trial and error" attempts before an appropriate system can be identified. In order to insure a good match between a learner's skills and the "form" that a communication system should take, time must be devoted to assessing the student, the listener, and the environments where communication will occur (Siegel-Causey & Guess, 1989).

Some people have the misconception that students who require an augmentative communication assessment should be sent or referred to someone who has expertise in this area. While this may eventually be necessary, it should not be the first step that a student's IEP team implements. First, and foremost, assessment should begin with the IEP team. Much of the information that is needed as part of the assessment can best be gained through the team members' combined knowledge about and direct experience with the student. A "one-shot" evaluation by someone who has never met or worked with the student will be ineffective unless the team is able to provide the evaluator with additional assessment results based upon their every day experiences with the student.

How then should team proceed with conducting an augmentative communication assessment? The key is in knowing what questions to ask. Although communication may take two forms, non-symbolic (gestures, facial expressions, body movements, etc.) and symbolic (objects, pictures, line drawings, or words that represent the actual item, person, or activity), augmentative communication is designed to assist individuals to communicate using symbolic forms. An augmentative communication assessment is therefore designed to provide information about an individual's level of symbolic representation and needs for communicating with these symbols.

A number of informal assessments exist for helping teams to collect information which can be used to make decisions about symbolic augmentative communication systems. Gamel-McCormick and Dymond (1994) have synthesized some of these instruments into an easy to use protocol that can help point teams toward the characteristics of a system that will work for the student being assessed. Although not comprehensive, the following provides a brief summary of some of the areas on the protocol that your team may want to consider as you begin the augmentative communication assessment process.

Student Skills

1. Expressive Communication. What does the student currently use to expressively request objects, continue an action, stop an action, request social interaction, express a feeling, make a choice, initiate an interaction, terminate an interaction, or request assistance?

2. Cognitive Skills (including receptive communication characteristics). Does the student have object permanence? Do they understand cause and effect or means-end actions? What type of symbolic representation (object, picture, line drawing, words) do you think the student best understands?

3. Motor Skills. Does the student have a hand preference? Do they have the ability to reach, grasp, grasp and release, isolate a finger, and/or point? In what position is the student able to optimally move and respond? What reliable, predictable motor movements does the student have?

4. Visual Skills. What is the student's visual acuity? What is the optimal lighting/contrast needed? Can the student fixate on an object and at what distance? Does the student know how to scan? How many items can the student scan and how long does it take them?

5. Auditory Skills. At what decibel level and frequency levels does the student hear best? Can the student localize to sound? Do they seem to like auditory feedback?

Settings Where Communication Will Take Place

This section of the protocol asks the team to identify each setting where they expect the student to use an augmentative communication system. These settings may begin by being very general, such as the home, school, and community; however, further definition will be necessary in order to answer the second question in this section. This question asks the team to determine the benefits and drawbacks of each of these settings in relation to the student's skills and abilities. For example, within the school environment one might want to consider how the noise level or visual distractions may effect the student's ability to communicate in the classroom, gym, cafeteria, art room, etc.

Probable Content of Communication

Once the environments where communication will occur have been discussed, the next step is to identify the types of communication the student will need in order to participate in activities in those environments. In addition to the student's basic needs (e.g., eat, drink, toilet), the team may also want to consider greetings, initiations, negotiation, requests for the continuation/conclusion of an activity, social interactions, ongoing discourse, requesting assistance, or expressing a feeling. The team can then begin to develop a preliminary list of the vocabulary that the student will need in order to perform these communicative functions. It is important to remember that vocabulary should be chosen based upon the student's preferences; that is, the events, people, and activities about which the student would most like to be able to communicate.

Probable Recipients of Communication

With what groups of people will the student be communicating (e.g., peers without disabilities, persons with disabilities who also use augmentative communication systems, adults, people in the community)? At what symbolic level do each of these individuals process information? What types of information are important for each group to understand from the student?

Student Preferences

A good communication system highly values the preferences of the student. In addition to vocabulary preferences, one must also consider tactile, visual, and positioning preferences. Knowing that the student strongly dislikes the glare from shiny surfaces means that the communication system should be designed to include visual aspects that are pleasing to that individual (rather than clear plexiglass or lamination which may create a glare).

Family and Care Giver Preferences

What preferences and concerns do the student's family and/or care givers express regarding an augmentative communication system? What do they want the augmentative communication system to be able to do? How can the system be designed for easy access in the home

environment?

Once the IEP team has conducted its assessment, the team is ready to make a determination regarding the type of communication system that appears to be most appropriate. Begin with "low tech" inexpensive options so that you can test the ideas your team has developed and determine whether or not they are effective. If problems with implementing the program occur, ask one of your team members to observe and provide feedback as you teach the student how to use the system; contact T/ TAC - Eastern Virginia and request some additional ideas; and seek an external communication evaluation if necessary.

References

1. Gamel-McCormick, M., & Dymond, S. (1994). *Augmentative communications assessment protocol for symbolic augmentative systems* . Richmond, VA: Virginia Commonwealth University.

2. Siegel-Causey, E., & Guess, D. (1989). *Enhancing nonsymbolic communication interactions among learners with severe disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

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