

Take 5: Practical Strategies for Improving Communication Partner Skills

As service providers, we often spend the majority of our time focusing on the communication skills of our students with complex communication needs (CCN). We sometimes forget to reflect on our own communication skills and make sure that we are fully equipped to support learning, communication and participation in the classroom. Research tells us that the success of a communication interaction for individuals with CCN is often dependent on the skills of the communication partner (Light & Binger, 2007; Drager, et. al, 2006; Bruno & Trembath, 2006). With this in mind, use the tips listed below and make a commitment to spend more time improving your communication partner skills.

Tip 1: Take 5 minutes to review classroom activities BEFORE initiating with your students.

There many pre-programmed pages in DynaVox Compass that will support classroom activities. By reviewing the activity prior to initiating with students, you will be able to locate appropriate vocabulary and be prepared to support them during the activity. In addition, by allowing your students to learn and use the vocabulary that is already in the system, you will be able to spend more time teaching and less time programming. This will allow your students to learn to generalize vocabulary across all environments. Listed below are a few tips that will help you prepare for classroom activities.

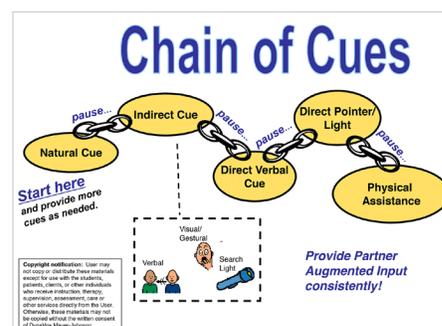
- Review the activity to determine how the student will participate and write down 2 ways they can use their device during the activity (ex. answer question, ask for materials, request help, choose a partner, etc.).
- Locate the vocabulary on the device that will support participation during the activity.
- Give many, many opportunities to practice skills.
- Provide a positive communication environment and use partner augmented input to encourage device use during the activity.

Hint:

To learn more about positive communication environments and partner augmented input, visit the Communication Partner Techniques Learning Path on the Implementation Toolkit at <http://www.dynavoxtech.com/implementation-toolkit/learning-paths/list/?id=3>. You can also download the Positive Communication Environment Instructions sheet and post in the classroom <http://www.dynavoxtech.com/implementation-toolkit/details.aspx?id=185>.

Tip 2: Count to 5 (two times or three times or four times...) when waiting for the student to respond.

Giving time for students to initiate and respond is so important. Many communication opportunities may be missed if time isn't given to process what is going on, plan a response and execute the message on the device. Remember that the amount of wait time will depend on the student. In addition, students with significant communication challenges can quickly become prompt dependent. Use the **Chain of Cues** to encourage independent communication and reduce the probability of prompt dependency.



Tip 3: Identify 5 ways that your student can use their device every day.

In order for your students to become proficient communicators, they must have opportunities to practice their skills. Make a plan and stick to it! Know when, where, why and how the device will be used throughout the day.

Tip 4: Teach 5 new words every day.

Learning how to communicate for students, who may have limited opportunities to practice and learn new communication skills, takes time. Don't expect that they will know what to do with a communication system. It is our responsibility to invest the time to teach students how to use their devices. In addition, we must be extremely knowledgeable regarding the content in the communication system in order to model appropriate use. If we don't know how the system works, then we can't teach appropriate use.

Hint:

For ideas for exploring new words on the DynaVox Compass, see [**Issue 2 – 20 Ways to Use Word Lists to Teach New Vocabulary**](#)

Tip 5: Update 5 comments in QuickPhrases to promote social interaction with peers every month.

Kids are always talking about the latest movie or event. Make sure that you are updating the vocabulary in your students' devices so that they can have the same social opportunities as their peers. Consider asking for help from same-age peers. They can be an integral part of the intervention process and can help students with who use AAC practice their new skills. They can also assist with updating social vocabulary.

References:

Binger, C. & Light, J. (2007). The effect of aided AAC modeling on the expression of multi-symbol messages by preschoolers who use AAC. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 23(1), 30-43.

Bruno, J. & Trembath, D. (2006). Use of aided language stimulation to improve syntactic performance during a weeklong intervention program. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 22(4), 300-313.

Drager, K. et al. (2006). Aided language modeling and children with autism. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*.