**Communication With Children Who Are Deafblind**

**Lesson 3 Part 1 Described Transcript**

**Narrator:** Teaching Children Who Are Deafblind: Professional Development for Educators

Communicating With Children Who Are Deafblind

Lesson 3: Symbolic Communication

**[Visual Description]** A young girl sits in a bed with a book of two-dimensional symbols open on her lap. She reads the symbols left to right as she points to each one with her finger.

**Child:** No, no, no, no.

**Mom off-screen:** What’s the next one pointing to? It’s a head and a shoulder. What’s between your head and your shoulders?

**Child:** Your neck.

**Mom off-screen:** That’s it!

**[Visual Description]** A girl looks at a number of two-dimensional symbols on a page. She holds a symbol printed on a small piece of paper in her hand.

**Narrator:** The move to symbolic communication represents a major step forward in communication and a significant developmental milestone.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy and an adult look at each other at a table and make the same sign.

It requires that a child understand that something—for example, a word, sign, object, or photo—can stand for something else.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl and her mother look at a book of symbols. The mother’s hand supports the girl’s wrist as the girl points to symbols and turns the page.

Symbols can represent just about anything: people, places, and things as well as activities, emotions, and a whole host of concepts. They allow people to talk not only about what’s happening close to them but also about things happening in other places.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy puts his hands over a teacher’s hands as the teacher signs to him. The teacher then shares a tactile sign and the boy explores it with his hands. The teacher moves his hand over his jaw and then to the symbol.

Importantly, symbols also allow us to refer to things in the past and things that might happen in the future.

An understanding of symbols is needed to learn a language, and their use supports higher cognitive development.

Before we begin, let’s check what you know…

True or False?

Children who use symbols to communicate, typically use either concrete symbols or abstract symbols, but not both.

It’s important to use symbol formats that match how a child accesses information using their vision, other senses, and physical abilities.

One way to support a child’s development to abstract symbols is to pair a method of communication they are comfortable using with a more advanced form, like brailled, signed, or written words.

We’ll revisit these questions at the end of this lesson.

Lesson 3 has three learning objectives. After completing the lesson, participants should be able to

1. Define the types of symbols typically used with children who are deafblind
2. Explain how to choose and use symbols that are appropriate for a child based on their vision, other senses, and physical abilities
3. Describe effective strategies for supporting a child’s use of abstract symbols

Part 1: What Is Symbolic Communication?

**[Visual Description]** A smiling boy sits in a chair while the adult next to him shows him a page of symbols in a binder. She points to a few as she talks.

Christian has learned he can make choices about what he wants to do. His teacher is showing him a book of symbols he has learned.

**Teacher:** Do you want to read a book? Or do you want to listen to music?

**[Visual Description]** A hand holds a crayon attached to a piece of black poster board. The word “crayon” is written in white.

**Narrator:** Symbols can be concrete or abstract. Concrete symbols have a clear relationship to what they refer to (their referents). For example, a symbol for “crayon” could be a crayon.

**[Visual Description]** An artificial leaf on a piece of black poster board. The word “leaf” is printed in white.

An artificial leaf glued to a square of posterboard could be the symbol for “leaf.”

**[Visual Description]** A page in a binder with three items attached: Two jello boxes and a small plastic milk bottle.

Concrete symbols are more or less permanent. You can hold them in your hand or recognize them by touch, sight, or smell.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl holds a symbol card with a small plastic spoon attached to it and the word “eat.” A piece of pumpkin pie sits on a plate in front of her.

Often concrete symbols are objects, like this plastic spoon attached to a flat background.

Sloan is totally blind and uses her hands and mouth to explore the spoon. To her, the symbol represents “time to eat.”

**[Visual Description]** A hand holds a red marker. An identical red marker is attached to a white piece of poster board that has the word “markers” written on it.

Typically, children who are deafblind start to develop an understanding of symbols using whole, identical symbols—things a child is very familiar with, such as a marker that’s an object symbol for a marker they often use.

**[Visual Description]** A hand holds a “markers” symbol card with a blue marker attached. Next to this is a ceramic cup holding markers of different sizes and colors.

Once they understand the connection, they may learn that a symbol can represent similar items that are not identical. For instance, here’s a marker that represents all markers, not just ones it looks or feels exactly like.

**[Visual Description]** A series of images - A piece of a plastic fork on a yellow background. A square of black poster board with a computer mouse attached and the written word “computer.”

Some children advance from whole object symbols to partial ones. So, for example, the end of a fork could represent a whole fork, or a computer mouse might symbolize a whole computer.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl sits on a living room floor with a specialist. She looks at a board upon which are attached a number of two-dimensional picture symbols. The adult shows the child a similar board that has four different picture symbols.

Educator: OK what book do you want to read?

Narrator: If a child has enough usable vision, they may be able to use two-dimensional visual symbols adapted for their needs, such as an enlarged photo, a line drawing, or an illustration on a background that provides good contrast.

**[Visual Description]** The young girl looks at the four different symbols, touches a few, then places her hand on one of them.

Maryn is being given a choice about what book she wants to read. The choices are displayed as four illustrations representing the books on a black background.

She makes her choice by touching the symbol for the Brown Bear book.

**Mom off-screen:** “Brown Bear?

**[Visual Description]** The child’s mother lowers the Brown Bear book in front of Maryn. The specialist takes the book and opens it up.

**Mom off-screen:** OK, here comes Brown Bear.

**Narrator:** Note that fine motor skills are needed for a child to make a selection by touching a symbol. Maryn is working on this.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy sits in a wheelchair. In front of him are several symbols attached to small squares of cardboard. An adult's hand extends toward him, and the boy picks one of the symbols and places it in her hand.

Providing choices like this is an excellent way to encourage communication development. Giving choices provides a sense of control—and children are more likely to engage in activities and communicate when they’ve made their own choice.

**[Visual Description]** A page of symbols for more, no, yes, help and other concepts. The symbols are, for example, a triangle made of small beads, pipe cleaners shaped into circles, and a cross shape made of construction paper.

Unlike concrete symbols, abstract symbols don’t look or feel like what they represent—in other words, there’s no clear relationship between the symbol and what it refers to.

**[Visual Description]** A square of black poster board with curly silver ribbon attached. The word “Frustrated” is written on the board.

Object symbols can be abstract. For example, a piece of curly ribbon on a small square of posterboard could be a tactile symbol that represents “feeling frustrated.”

**[Visual Description]** A series of images - A small dog sits and looks at the camera. The braille word “dog.” A person makes the ASL sign for dog.

Words, whether printed, brailled, spoken, or signed, are examples of advanced abstract symbols. The word “dog” doesn’t look or sound like a dog—same for the brailled word for dog…and the ASL sign.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy leans back in a chair and has a conversation with his teacher as they explore a symbol that represents the jaw bone. The adult gestures to show the boy his jaw bone, and the boy touches his own jaw bone.

**Educator:** “You’re talking about jaw bone, you’re touching, that’s the symbol for jaw bone.”

**Narrator:** Trey is building a vocabulary of tactile abstract symbols that represent body parts. Watch how he touches a symbol for “jaw bone” with one hand while feeling his own jaw with the other.

**[Visual Description]** A toddler boy sits on the floor and plays with a small toy chicken. Beside him is a container full of different plastic animals and other objects. He puts the toy in his mouth, wiggles it around a bit, then takes it out and waves it around in the air.

Some children who are deafblind use a combination of concrete and abstract symbols.

Tayen is two-years old and has CHARGE syndrome. Although he is farsighted and has astigmatisms and reduced depth perception, he’s able to receive information through vision as well as touch.

**[Visual Description]** Tayen lies on the floor while his nurse sits at his feet. The nurse shows him a diaper.

Watch how his nurse uses ASL signs (abstract symbols) for the words “diaper” and “change” and pairs them with a concrete symbol (a diaper) to help him understand they’re going to change his diaper.

And Tayen signs “diaper” and “change” back to her. He’s really making the connection between the symbols and what they represent!

Learning abstract symbols is an advanced skill, which we’ll talk more about in Parts 2 and 3 of this lesson.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage girl sits in a wheelchair in a school classroom. Her teacher rolls her chair over to the girl and talks to her as she makes several selections on the touch screen in front of the girl.

Some children who are deafblind have limited use of their hands or other physical challenges that impact their ability to receive information through touch.

Boston is 17 years old. She was born with a rare chromosomal disorder and has complex medical needs that limit her movement. She also has vision and hearing loss.

[On-Screen Wording] Leslie Miller, Boston’s Mom

**Leslie Miller:** She's never had words. And so when she was just younger we would kind of distinguish between her vocalizations, like she was angry or hungry, or we could, we could tell if she really needed us, or if she was just talking. So she, she was communicating in that way, and we would just kind of guess what we thought she needed.

**[Visual Description]** Boston looks at a touch screen in front of her wheelchair in her classroom. Her intervener sits beside her and touches the screen, making several selections.

**Narrator:** For most of her life, Boston communicated using verbalizations and limited body movement. But in the past several years, she’s been learning to communicate with eye gaze technology using an electronic device that allows her to make selections by looking at symbols on a screen.

**[Visual Description]** Boston pauses to gaze at a symbol on the screen.

**Computer:** Ok.

**Teacher:** OK thanks for telling us!

**Narrator:** This can be an option for children who have sufficient vision and understand two-dimensional symbols.

**[Visual Description]** Boston looks at a screen in front of her. The back of the screen shows the words she has paused on.

The device tracks her eye movements, and when she looks at a symbol for a certain amount of time, a selection is made.

**Computer:** “I like that.”

**[On-Screen Wording]** Emma Mayes, DD, M.S. Special Education

Nationally Certified Deafblind Intervener

**Emma Mayes:** This is my fourth year teaching her now. And she started out needing a lot of modeling. She actually started with me during Covid. So her mom was there, constantly modeling things and showing her stuff. And that was, I think, just her third year working with this eye gaze device, and so I've been able to see her come from needing all this modeling and all this support. And she’s now working on switching through pages by herself and she is able to successfully switch through pages.

**[Visual Description]** Boston looks at a screen in front of her. The back of the screen shows that she has paused on the words “I like that” and “Turn the page.”

**Emma Mayes:** But she has probably about 6 to 11 options on each page, and she has probably like 50 pages.

She can also, when she's not supposed to, go to a specific page and find her video games. And then she plays video games or listens to music, and we have to tell her, “You know what? It's not time for that right now. We gotta do some work.”

**[On-Screen Wording]** Leslie Miller, Boston’s Mom

**Leslie Miller:** The communication piece is so important, and we've been working on it for so long, because I feel like she has so much inside that we can't see. And so the progress of her communication has, it's been very slow, but at the same time it's like, from the very beginning of where she started to now, it's quite amazing where she's come.

**[Visual Description]** In her classroom, Boston looks at a screen in front of her as her intervener and teacher look on.

**Leslie Miller:** I feel like she, she has a voice now, and she knows she does. And so, however complicated it is, I think she still realizes that she's controlling it. She's making the choices, and I love that for her.

**Narrator:** Let’s take a break and check what you’ve learned.

What’s a key difference between concrete and abstract symbols?

Pause the video if you need time to think.

With concrete symbols, there is a clear connection between the symbol and what it represents. With abstract symbols, there’s no clear connection.

This ends Part 1 of Lesson 3. In Part 2, we’ll focus on ways to support a child’s symbolic communication.

**[On-Screen Text]** National Center on Deafblindness

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