**Communication With Children Who Are Deafblind**

**Lesson 3 Part 2 Described Transcript**

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

Communicating With Children Who Are Deafblind

Lesson 3: Symbolic Communication

Part 2: Choosing and Using Symbols

**[Visual Description]** A young boy sits at a table next to an adult. The adult selects a tactile symbol card from a board and gives it to the boy. He explores it with his hands.

Developing an understanding of symbols can take considerable time. It requires multiple opportunities to use symbols during meaningful interactions with others at school and at home.

**[Visual Description]** A child looks at a board that has several picture symbols.

If a child was born deafblind, it’s likely they’ve had limited experience observing and listening to others, which can make the transition from pre-symbolic to symbolic communication challenging.

**[Visual Description]** A girl holds a picture symbol in her hand while she looks at a paper on a lap desk that has a number of different picture symbols.

In this section, we’ll discuss how to select symbols and see examples of how they are used.

**[Visual Description]** A table top containing picture symbols and object symbols for crayons, markers, and books.

We’ll focus here on what are sometimes called tangible symbols—whole objects, parts of objects, textures or shapes, line drawings, and photos—as opposed to signs or words.

**[Visual Description]** A clipboard with a paper attached that reads “I am working for.” Attached to the page are a tennis ball and a jar of nail polish.

When deciding what symbols to start with, focus on what the child loves best.

**[Visual Description]** A granola bar wrapper affixed to a square of poster board.

Having an emotional—and motivating—connection with something makes it easier to learn, so choose symbols that represent a child's favorite items and activities.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl looks at a tray in front of her on a table. On the tray are an object symbol for play, a pumpkin, and a photo of the child with her name.

Make sure the symbols are in formats that match how the child best accesses information using their vision or other senses.

**[Visual Description]** A row of symbols including a small bottle with a cap, a toothbrush, a spoon, a picture of a banana, and a photo of a toy.

Be sure to ask the family what symbols are important to them. For example, symbols for daily routines, activities like going to the park, or items around the house.

**[Visual Description]** A board of tactile symbols to represent different people. For example, a card with black pipe cleaner shaped into glasses with the name “Ms. Angela” and a card with a lego piece and the name “William.”

Other important symbols are those that identify people in a child’s life. They can be used to let a child know, for example, who they’ll work with that day or who’s coming to visit.

**[Visual Description]** A toddler lies on his back on the floor. His nurse sits at his feet and holds a diaper above his head. He reaches for the diaper.

When deciding what to use as symbols, consider the child’s age as well as whether the symbol will age well. For example, a diaper might be a good symbol to communicate to an infant or toddler that it’s time for a diaper change, but could be stigmatizing when the child is older.

**[Visual Description]** A small bottle of hand sanitizer attached to a card with the words “Personal Hygiene.”

Select something appropriate regardless of age, such as a symbol for a personal hygiene routine, like a small bottle of hand sanitizer, which could be used at the end of the routine.

**[Visual Description]** A miniature cat figurine.

In addition, it’s almost never a good idea to use miniatures as symbols. For example, a tiny model of a cat that looks like a cat from an adult’s perspective, feels nothing like a real cat to a child who is deafblind.

**[Visual Description]** A toddler lays on his side on the floor moving his arms and legs while a cat snuggles up to his back.

See how this child interacts with his cat by feeling the cat with his body and hands.

**[Visual Description]** A piece of artificial fur attached to a symbol card with the word “cat.”

Better to use something that is salient from the child’s perspective such as a piece of artificial fur or a collar identical to the cat’s to represent what the child experiences when touching a cat.

**[On-Screen Text]** Donna Carpenter, Ed.D.

Kentucky DeafBlind Project

State Coordinator

**Donna Carpenter:** One time we were trying to come up with what a bus symbol would be. And someone said, “Oh, I can get the rubber, you know, from the tire.” And we said, “Well, does she touch the tire all the time?” And they go, “No.” And we said, “No, she needs something that's really gonna make the connection that she knows it's bus.” So we ended up with a seatbelt, you know the little click seatbelt. Because that's what she knew she had to put on when she was on the bus.

**[Visual Description]** A child sits with a toy electric guitar on his lap while looking at an open spiral notebook with a picture of the same guitar.

**Narrator:** When a child is beginning to use symbols, they should be individualized and personalized–that is, they should have personal meaning from the child’s perspective.

**[On-Screen Text]** Susan Bruce, Ph.D.

Professor and Coordinator, Program in Extensive Support Needs

Boston College

Deafblind Consultant

**Susan Bruce:** So in the field of deaf blindness, we do a lot with what I call personalized literacy, which is different from individualized literacy. Personalized means it's about the child's real lived experiences. And just think if you're sharing a book with someone who had an experience with you, you have shared memories, right? And now you can share it again at a later time and in a different place.

**[Visual Description]** A table top with a number of items, including a party hat, a plastic baggy with two birthday candles, curly ribbon, and candy wrappers. In the background is a plastic container labeled “Birthday Party.”

**Susan Bruce:** We do a lot of literacy lessons like story boxes and experience books, interactive homeschool journals that are about the child's life. It also promotes communication, because when you share something, the memory is there, they lived it right? So they can, the cognitive load is greatly reduced because it's a lived experience. It's easier for them to then express themselves about it, right? And then you can work on expanding vocabulary, asking them questions about the experience. And it just changes the whole interaction.

**[Visual Description]** An adult signs “Thursday” to a child while holding up the word “Thursday” printed on a small piece of paper. They are sitting in front of a board that has squares drawn on it, one for each day of the week.

**Narrator:** If a child can understand abstract symbols, other important symbols to teach will be those for certain concepts that might otherwise be difficult to communicate. For example, symbols for

* Start and finish
* Beginning, middle, and end
* On and off
* Wait
* And spatial concepts like up and down, in and out, and left and right

Keep in mind that concepts like these—and the symbols for them—may be difficult to understand and will need to be incorporated naturally into the child’s conversations and experiences throughout the day.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy and his teacher have a conversation by talking and signing while sitting in front of a large board showing the days of the month in April. There are a number of tactile symbols on different days. The boy places his hand over the teacher’s hand, and together they explore the symbols. At one point, they give each other a high five.

For children who are deafblind, symbols are often used in calendar systems, which come in many sizes and formats. They’re basically ordered containers (or spaces) that use a child’s symbols in ways that encourage conversation and communication development.

**[Visual Description]** A teacher uses words and signs to communicate with a girl about the week’s activities. Next to them on a table is a week-long calendar with different picture symbols attached. The teacher takes a symbol off the board and shows it to the girl as they talk.

Watch this teacher and her student talk about her calendar. Notice the patience she uses during their conversation.

**Teacher:** Yesterday it was Wednesday. You did the art delivery…you did the art delivery yesterday with Sarah.

**[Visual Description]** The girl picks a symbol off the board and puts it on the correct day on the calendar. The teacher hands her a black piece of poster board and the girl places it over that day of the week to cover it.

**Teacher:** All done. Today is what?

**Narrator:** The numerous benefits of calendar systems for a child’s receptive and expressive communication can’t be overstated. They help a child

* Know (and anticipate) what’s going to happen
* Understand time-related concepts and vocabulary
* Make decisions about their schedule
* Have conversations about upcoming events
* And communicate about the past

**[Visual Description]** Two plastic bins side by side. The container on the left holds a wooden toy with strings.

Calendars can be very simple, with just two-containers: One to hold a symbol for the activity that will happen next and another for when the activity is finished.

**[On-Screen Text]** Tracy Evans Luiselli, Ed.D.

Director, New England Consortium on Deafblindness

**Tracy Evans Luiselli:** There's another student that I worked with, who had, she didn't have any residual vision, and she had a moderate, profound hearing loss. And she loved the swings, absolutely loved the swings. And her team was great. Somehow they got a big piece of chain link, not chain link, but from the, the chain from the swing and put that into the calendar system. And it was so funny because we would present it each morning, and she would come in, and she was really receptive to at least exploring each item in the box. And then over that repeated exposure, she began to really anticipate and look forward to that preferred item in the boxes. And she would go over to each one and she would touch them, and then she grabbed the chains and hold them up over her head to say, “I want to go out on a swing.” So it works. It just takes time and persistence and commitment to everybody working together.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy lies on his side on a mat and his teacher sits next to him. The boy's hand is on top of the teacher’s as they explore the symbols on a calendar board.

**Teacher:** Yesterday. Right? That was Wednesday. And we did the obstacle course.

**Narrator:** In addition to supporting conversations about what will happen, calendars can also be used to talk with a child about what’s happened in the past.

**Teacher:** And, oh, this one, right? Church. Church. Church was last night. That was finished right? Finished right? Obstacle course, yesterday. Right.

**[On-Screen Text]** Donna Carpenter, Ed.D.

Kentucky DeafBlind Project

State Coordinator

**Donna Carpenter:** So at the end of the day, maybe you would take one of those objects out, and you would say, “Hey, we went to art today. Let's talk about what happened in art.” So you're having that communication, you're building on concepts. You're building literacy. All from what happened, using an object from the day. So a lot of times, that's what we're working on.

**[Visual Description]** A young boy sits in a chair and leans forward to look at a number of tactile symbols on a board.

**Narrator:** All children who are deafblind, including those who communicate with symbols, must be given access to the general education curriculum. And communication is what provides that access.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl sits in a wheelchair and rests her hands on the tray in front of her while watching something off to the side.

A child must have the ability to access information receptively and a way to demonstrate what they know expressively.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl sits at a school cubby as an adult hands her a tray that has a stuffed animal and a pompom on it. The girl touches the stuffed animal.

In other words, they must have the information and concepts—in whatever form they use—to ask and respond to questions from the teacher, make comments, and so on.

**[Visual Description]** A girl sits at a table in a classroom with her intervener. She is using a marker to write on a piece of paper. The intervener points to something on the page and asks a question. The girl looks up, answers the question, and bounces up and down in her chair.

And their communication system must be flexible enough to enable them to participate meaningfully in academic activities at an appropriate level.

Here’s an example of what access to the GEC might look like for a student who’s deafblind and in the second grade. Suppose the student has cortical visual impairment and moderate to severe hearing loss. He vocalizes to express his likes and dislikes.

**[Visual Description]** A young boy looks at a touch screen tablet showing a bright yellow moon, sun, and stars on a black background.

Let’s say the class is doing a lesson related to a standard on the earth’s place in the universe. To provide access to this content area, the child is working on a skill to match pictures of the sun, moon, and stars using vocalizations. To ensure engagement, it’s important that the pictures are presented in a way so that the child can see them, like using simple, uncluttered pictures of the moon and stars on a plain background.

A determination of the best way of presenting information must be based on an individualized assessment for each child.

As always, it’s important to give a child plenty of processing time.

**[On-Screen Text]** Susan Weigert, Ph.D.

Education Program Specialist

**Susan Weigert:** Even one child that you pick up and you introduce to a formal communication system, and that takes off with it. Not every child is going to move quickly through the symbols, but over time, you are changing the world for that child. When you do that, not only do they pick up those words and those symbols, but they understand that words carry meaning and that, that you can communicate with others through the use of these symbols, which is very life-changing.

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

How can you involve the family when deciding what symbols to introduce to a child?

Stop the video if you need time to think.

It’s important to ask the family what symbols are important to them. For instance, symbols for daily routines, activities, or items around the house.

This ends Part 2 of Lesson 3. In Part 3, we’ll focus on ways of supporting the use of more advanced abstract symbols.

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

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Special thanks to

* State deafblind projects
* The many young people, families, and educators who shared their photographs and videos with us for this program

The contents of this video program were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H326T230030. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Rebecca Sheffield.

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