**Communication With Children Who Are Deafblind**

**Lesson 3 Part 3 Described Transcript**

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

Communicating With Children Who Are Deafblind

Lesson 3: Symbolic Communication

Part 3: Supporting the Use of More Advanced Abstract Symbols

**[Visual Description]** A board showing abstract symbols for concepts such as more, no, yes, and help.

As we discussed in Part 1 of this lesson, abstract symbols don’t look, sound, or feel like what they represent.

**[Visual Description]** A boy smiles as an adult flips through a binder of picture symbols.

Up to this point, the ones we’ve talked most about are tangible abstract symbols–like parts of objects, textures, shapes, line drawings, and photos.

**[Visual Description]** A series of photos - A mom shows her daughter a drawing of the sign for the letter “O” as they sit on the floor. A practitioner looks on from behind them. A girl types on a brailler.

In this section, we’ll focus on supporting a child’s move to more advanced abstract symbols, including words—printed, brailled, spoken, and signed.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy and his teacher make the same gesture to each other.

And, we’ll see real life examples of children who are deafblind and how they’ve developed their communication over the years.

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy practices sign language at a table with an adult. The adult hands him picture symbols and the boy makes the sign for what is shown. They give each other a high five.

How do you begin supporting a child’s move to using these types of symbols? One way is to pair a method of communication a child’s very comfortable with—say using object or picture symbols—with a more advanced form.

**[Visual Description]** A mom shows a book of photos to her little girl. The mom uses sign language and points to photos in the book.

Here’s how it works:

This mom is helping her child learn sign language as they look at pictures of their friends and family. See how she pairs photographs with the sign for each person’s name.

The hope is that the child will gradually start to understand and use more advanced symbols (the signs), as a result of repeated association with the more concrete symbols (the photographs).

**[Visual Description]** A child touches a symbol that is a string of red beads in a triangle shape on a square of poster board.

As you think about what to pair and model, always consider a child’s cognitive abilities, and ensure symbols are appropriate given the child’s sensory and physical access.

**[Visual Description]** A young boy and his mother stick paper with the letters A and B and each letter’s ASL sign on a window. Letters A, B, and C and the names of several colors have been written on the window with markers.

Next, let’s meet a few children who are deafblind and see how the people in their lives have supported their communication development.

**[Visual Description]** A toddler girl sits on the floor with an adult supporting her from behind. The girl is touching a soft and colorful toy block.

You might remember Maryn from Lesson 1. She has cerebral palsy, hearing loss, and vision loss, including cortical visual impairment. Maryn has been working with her speech language pathologist to expand her communication and vocabulary since she was 7 years old.

**[On-Screen Text]** Debbie Perry, MS, CCC-SLP, ATP

Eat, Speak, Play!

Maryn’s Speech Language Pathologist

**Debbie Perry:** I would do things with her that she enjoyed and build communication around that. And I think that that helped. Also respecting her communication. So, say she was to say that, you know it was too loud, or she didn't like something—respecting that.

**[Visual Description]** Maryn as a young girl sitting in Debbie’s lap. Debbie is using hand-under-hand with Maryn as they make selections on a screen in front of them.

And I think it also helped, you know, in the beginning actually, what was really, really helpful with her is, I would put her in my lap and give her my hand. So she felt very, very grounded. So I'd say, for the first year or so, she sat in my lap for therapy.

**[Visual Description]** Maryn sits at a table with Debbie beside her. She makes choices on her electronic device that has rows of symbols.

**Narrator:** Maryn is now 16 years old and has learned to use speech generating (or voice-output) devices to communicate using a wide array of symbols. She’s also learning how to navigate pages on her assistive technology device.

**[Visual Description]**  Maryn smiles and laughs as she sits at a table with her speech generating device. An adult hand is making some selections on the device, then Maryn presses some symbol keys.

Maryn is becoming a skilled symbolic communicator who not only responds to questions but can express how she feels, comment on topics, request what she wants to do, and say when she wants something to change.

**Debbie Perry:** That has really been surprising, and even right now, while she's going through some difficult times, the other day she was arguing with me, and it was fantastic, you know. She was saying “no,” I said “yes,” and she's saying “no,” “yes,” and we just kept going back and forth.

**[Visual Description]** A series of videos - Maryn looks closely at her speech generating device and makes selections by pressing several symbol keys. Maryn and Debbie have a conversation by using the speech generating device in front of them.

And she's still learning, you know, every time I introduce her to something new in the past year or so we added these phrases because things were taking so much more energy. She needed to have ways to build, to just say quick phrases versus having to build sentences. And gosh, so she learned them so fast, you know. She's able to tell us, you know, “Let me see.” So you can pull the iPad closer or turn it up to make it louder and different things like that, you know.

She's certainly done lots of different things over the years to keep us on our toes and surprise us and show us that she's always learning and really wants to continue to.

**[Visual Description]** An infant sits in a highchair watching his mom as she signs letters to him. He tries to mimic her moving fingers.

**Jaxson’s Mom:**  K, L, M, N, O, P…

**Narrator:** This is Jaxson, You first met him in Lesson 1. He has CHARGE syndrome and was born deaf and has colobomas in both eyes. Jaxson now has bilateral cochlear implants. His mother has actively supported his communication development since he was an infant.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson sits on the floor between his mother’s legs as they look at a book in his lap.

She and Jaxson’s therapists have used a variety of strategies to expand Jaxson’s communication to more advanced levels.

**[On-Screen Text]** Donia Shirley

Jaxson’s Mom

Vice President, NFADB

State Liaison for the Charge Syndrome Foundation

**Donia Shirley:** And it's like, you know, one of my, my biggest worries for Jackson is that without a consistent mode of communication, whether it's pieces of sign, verbal communication, the iPad, whatever it is, that if he's unable to express himself, that we're going to start seeing behaviors come out that aren't going to be good for him. They may be self harm behaviors, and that was always my thing. And why communication has been so big for me.

So basically from the get-go, because I started looking into deafblind information on education and communication, it kind of, I quickly realized that there was like no one thing that was gonna necessarily work. And so my thought process was like total communication was gonna be the best option for Jaxson.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson sits in his highchair with cereal spread out on his tray. He has cereal in his hand and he gestures that he wants to put some in his mom’s hand.

**Narrator:** She began by teaching him gestures as well as pairing signs with verbal communication.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson as an infant making the sign for “mom.”

He learned the sign for “mom” at an early age.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxon, a few years older, sits in a highchair watching an adult’s hands using sign language. She reaches for his hand and helps form his fingers into the sign.

Over the years, with lots of repetition and interaction, Jaxson gradually began to recognize more advanced signs.

**Donia Shirley:** But we just found that he could understand it. So he's understanding sign. But he kind of stopped at very basic signs like “more,” “mom.” “iPad” is his favorite sign to use because he likes, yeah, a lot. So we were getting these very basic things. And we were struggling to kind of go over that in terms of his expressive communication. And when he was about, gosh, he must have been about 4, we, one day he was looking at a card that had a picture of the sign on it, and I can't, what sign was it? It was “help.”

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson’s mom makes the sign for help

So he was looking at it, and it was like showing this.

And you watched him. He looked at the card, and he was examining it, and then I saw him like, put his hand out, and then like, do this and do this, and I was like,“Oh, my gosh!

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson looks at a photo of a hand making the sign for “help” while his mom looks on. She models the sign. He slowly makes the help sign with his own hands.

So he visually sees this, and he's now copying it.”

So then we went on, this thing of like, I basically took pictures of every sign that I could find, like a stationary thing, for you know and say, like, I know that a lot of there's so much movement in sign. But I was like, “Okay, what's the way that at least he can get his point across like with help. It's, you know, it's “help.” But this works, too, you know.

**[Visual Description]** Two different kinds of blocks: One has a raised lowercase letter G and the braille for G. The other has a capital letter Y with raised dots and the braille for Y.

**Narrator:** Jaxson also started to become fascinated with letters, so his mom bought him blocks with raised letters that he could tactually explore. The blocks also had raised braille dots.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson uses his finger to trace the letter “g” on a touch screen.

Before long, Jaxson was writing and recognizing letters. What his mom didn’t realize was what would happen by pairing the letter with the braille on his blocks.

**Donia Shirley:** And one day, while we were working on handwriting, we noticed that Jaxson started putting dots on everything. So we thought that those dots were like, you know, the dots that you line up to make, to trace things. But the dots weren't in the form of letters. But we were like, “Oh, he doesn't get it.” But like he's doing the dots, he's modeling what he sees us do. And then one day our speech therapist was asking him to write the word “star,” and he put the dots, and it was like, lined up so perfectly. We all stared at it for a while. We're like “this couldn't be braille. This couldn't be braille.” And we looked it up. I don't know braille, and he had, he had like, drawn braille for the word “star.”

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson writes on a whiteboard with a marker, adding braille dots under written letters.

And then we just started testing him. We were like, what about “cookie?” What about this? And he, he knew every, like, the dot formation of every single letter, plus punctuation, plus numbers.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson writes letters for the word “quack” on a whiteboard. Written at the top of the whiteboard are the words, “the duck says…”

**Narrator:** They began experimenting with various devices, systems, and programs to see what worked best. Jaxson soon started recognizing more words and learning how to type.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson, a few years older, works at his desk, where three screens face him. Jaxson presses some of the letters on one of the screens. An adult’s hand next to him points at a drawing on another screen and he looks at it.

**Donia Shirley:** But I remember someone saying, basically that with kids who are deafblind, when it comes to communication, sometimes it's little pieces of the different modalities that are available that works for that child, so they may use tactile cards, they may use, you know, a little bit of sign, maybe maybe some vocals, you know. It's like, or even their own signs that they've made up. You know, it's like little pieces. And when I heard that, I kind of was like, okay, well then, let's throw everything at him, and whatever sticks will work with it. Like I, I'll figure out how to communicate with him if I can get him expressing himself.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson looks at a screen that has an activity with words and images.

**Narrator:** Jaxson is now 7 years old and is learning to read, write, and spell. He’s also adding to his sign language skills. And he’s very engaged in learning.

**Donia Shirley:** And I remember having this moment where they said to us, well, we're not sure if he'll ever be able to see, that he definitely can't hear. And I remember feeling so much grief in that moment because I was like, then what do we do? And then it was like this, my grandparents always used to say, “knowledge is power.” And there was like this moment where I was like, “yeah, but he can learn,” right? Cognitively he's able to learn. So if we can just figure out how to teach him and figure out what he needs to learn, then he'll be okay.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson works at his desk making selections and changing pages on a screen. An adult sitting next to him hands him a touch screen device.

And so, knowing that that has really come to fruition, and that we're in a place now where Jackson is learning he's communicating. He's doing all the things that I would have always wanted him to do if he had been born without CHARGE syndrome. But he's just doing it in a very different and unique way. And the journey there has obviously been much more challenging. It's like, makes me really proud. I'm like, I'm always saying to people, “Jaxson’s one of the most intelligent children I've ever met in my life. He's so smart.” And it's always really sad that people look at his diagnosis, and that's what they decide about him first, and it must mean that his intelligence is is somehow not there.

**[Visual Description]** Jaxson’s mom smiling with her arm around Jaxson.

But but it just, it makes me really happy. And then I feel like the sky's the limit for him, like I always say like, I'll say to him, “Jackson, if you want to be a rocket scientist, you could do it.”

**Narrator:** Let’s take a break and check what you know…

**[Visual Description]** Jaxon looks at a sheet of paper that has six circles numbered one through six. The page is titled “The Braille Cell.” Under the page is a white board where the letter “F” has been written. Jaxson takes three foam circles and places them on three of the circles outlined on the paper to complete the braille letter “F.”

Watch this short video of Jaxson and describe the technique his speech language pathologist is using and how it supports his communication development.

Pause the video if you need time to think.

She is using the pairing strategy, combining written letters with braille. Pairing helps a child who uses one type of symbol (in this case, written letters) learn a new type (in this case, the braille alphabet).

Now, let’s review our pre-lesson questions:

True or False?

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

False. Children often combine concrete and abstract symbols to communicate.

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

True! It’s critical that a child can access their symbols in a way that takes advantage of their vision, other senses, and physical abilities.

1. 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.

True! This strategy, called pairing, is an excellent way to support a child’s developing communication.

This is the end of Lesson 3. In Lesson 4, we’ll examine how children who are complex language users communicate.

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

Developed and produced by NCDB

Narrated by Shelby Morgan

Written by Ann Biswas

Edited by Brian Daigle

Content Expert: MaryAnn Demchak

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