

# TEACHER NOTES

### A. The development of communication in pre-symbolic stages

**Learning outcome 1:** Understand the development of early, presymbolic communication in congenitally dual sensory impaired people, and know how to share communication with people at these levels

Visual impairment can limit access to communication; visually impaired children are vulnerable to communication difficulties:

- Lack of eye contact.
- Inconsistent eye contact (early difficulties with caregivers who don't understand apparent lack of response).
- Limitation of communication: inability to share conversation topics/inability to see what's being talked about.
- Difficulty with motivation *even* when hearing is present.

Combination of both visual and hearing impairment causes severe difficulty in access to communication: a dual sensory impaired person has to work on earlier developmental steps in communication for longer.

Aim is to move up the hierarchy, but recognise they may not be able to accept and be inventive at the level a person is at.

### Definitions

People who are presymbolic do not use conventional signs, words, or pictures for communication.

- **Pre-intentional communication:** communication where one partner does not know that the communication will have an effect on another person, e.g. young baby crying because she's miserable, doesn't know that this will make the mother come. Nevertheless a message is passed.



- **Pre-symbolic communication:** communication using direct tool rather than symbol (most language is symbolic, and uses a sound or hand movement to represent an idea which is not identical with that sound or hand movement). Laughing is pre-symbolic, sound doesn't stand for anything else, it's just a laugh. Pushing your cup under the teapot spout when someone else is pouring tea is pre-symbolic. Pre-intentional communication is also pre-symbolic.
- **Symbolic communication:** (brief definition for comparison – detail is covered in C.) Symbolic communication is where something is used to represent an idea. Symbolic communication develops. Early symbolic behaviour is concrete – waving a cup at someone going to the kitchen while you are on the phone for example. Later symbolic is less directly related.

Most sighted hearing people use communication from all the groups, all the time in different ways.

### Pre-intentional communication

- Early stages of development, or people with profound disabilities. A common stage to very early typical development.
- Communicating a shared message – even if the dual sensory impaired person doesn't know they are giving it, and/or doesn't understand that it is affecting the other person's behaviour.
- Examples of this used by deafblind people.
- Examples of this which everyone uses.
- Effects of such communication on life for dual sensory impaired person.
- Importance of such communication for further development.
- People with dual sensory impairment and very slow development may stay at this stage all their lives.

Those working with them have to think how they can use their limited communication to improve their lives.

### Intentional pre-symbolic communication

- Intentional – person now knows that their behaviour creates change in other people.
- Concerned with here and now – past, future, abstract concepts not understood (e.g. relates



to dinner now – not dinner after swimming).

- Using actual events and things happening now – person now understands they are affecting others.
- Communication is not yet symbolic. Deafblind person will choose individual things to communicate with, from the context of their life.
- Examples of this which everyone uses.
- Effects of such communication on life for dual sensory impaired person.
- Importance of such communication for further development.
- People with dual sensory impairment and very slow development may stay at this stage all their lives.

Those working with them have to think how they can use their limited communication to improve their lives.

## Strategies for promoting communication – pre-symbolic

### Aspects of communication at very early levels

- Importance of routines for dual sensory impaired person, as a provider of information about what is happening.
- Routines build on security and promotes confidence.
- Ensuring that there are situations in which there are means, motive and opportunity to communicate.
- Examples of such situations at different levels.
- Importance of decision making, developing from preference (within a situation assessing distress/enjoyment) to giving choice opportunities for expressive communication.
- Difference between ability to express and understand communication in whatever form.
- Pre-intentional level – deafblind person does not understand communication, so most is expressive – they do not understand that what another person communicates will have meaning but there are strategies to help build this (see below).
- Use of routine, sequence and predictability for encouraging understanding in relation to memory.



## Means of giving information and expression

- Ways of signalling or cueing understanding of activities which take place now:
  - Visual.
  - Auditory.
  - Position.
  - Place.
  - Person.
  - Sequence.
  - Time.
  - Movement.
  - Object cues.
  - Touching the body in certain places (sometimes called ‘body signing’) to signal events such as feeding, changing clothes may be used.

This kind of cueing gives information about activities, in terms of ‘Who I do it with, where I do it, what has just happened, what happens after I’m put in my leg splints’ and so on.

- Indications of distress/enjoyment/lack of interest through:
  - Facial expressions (including smiling).
  - Vocalisations (including crying, sounds which continue game or activity).
  - Changes in breathing/body tension.
  - Actions (e.g. pulling towards/pushing away, opening mouth for food).
  - Deliberately going to a place something is/happens or reaching for something.
  - Gesture toward object, pointing, miming activity with object.
  - Repeating action which occurs within activity.

## Seizing opportunities for communication – Having a ‘chat’

- Using all opportunities to provide interpersonal communication – understanding that communication is something that happens between two people. This may include:
  - ‘Intensive interaction’.
  - ‘Chat’ – possibly without words (with no request/context, e.g. just sharing a joke, commenting on a task together, looking at photographs, etc).



- Giving opportunities for deafblind people to communicate with each other – this may be washing another person’s hair, or all hands in the same bowl of pastry – it’s often difficult, especially for those who use wheelchairs and are physically isolated.
  - Ensuring greeting words are available and used.
  - Creating opportunities for shared understanding and experiences which provoke communication – a trip together, or the visit of an unusual pet.
- Always building in opportunities to increase symbolic understanding while not forcing the pace.

## B. The development of communication in early symbolic stages

**Learning outcome 2:** Understand the development of early symbolic communication in congenitally dual sensory impaired people and know a range of means of communication with people at these levels

- **Definition: symbolic communication** is when a referent, something outside the here and now, begins to stand for an event or a person.
- To use symbolic communication, the person must have some idea of one to one correspondence (i.e. that one thing stands for one other thing only – a cup means drink, not dog or dinner or please) and must communicate intentionally (i.e. know that what they do affects someone else and do this for that purpose).
- Symbolic understanding is slow to develop for some congenitally dual sensory impaired people. Others will go through this stage and move to formal, abstract language – signs/speech/printed words, etc.
- Concrete symbols: clear representations of what they stand for, for a person to use, e.g.
  - Gestures used in the activity/with the object.
  - Photographs (of actual object).
  - Actual object used and handled by a person.
  - Actual sound made by an object/at event.
  - Occasionally, an actual smell involved – when it’s swimming or something really obvious.
- When use of concrete symbols are established, they can become increasingly symbolic -



general photographs, parts of objects, standardised symbols.

- At some point they become increasingly symbolic and can be moved further in space and time away from what it represents (e.g. a picture of the actual cup the person drinks from can be presented before the drink, so that they go to sit down at the table; but later, a picture of any cup can be shown after a picture for swimming, to show that there will be tea after swimming.)
- Symbolic development may continue by adding more symbolic systems, supporting development by shaping gesture into sign, by adding word to symbol, shaping object to Moon letter.
- This may gradually give access to more formal communication.
- People who follow more typical patterns also engage in these behaviours, waving a cup to a colleague going to the kitchen while on the phone, or a child going to fetch the car keys to indicate they want to go out.

## Communicating with those with early symbolic communication

### Expressive and receptive language at early symbolic levels

- Important to understand the difference between ability to express and to understand.
- Range of means for communication, depending on vision, hearing, motor skills and other variables. These may be expressive or receptive.
- Importance of using the same method for receptive and expressive, so the person has something to imitate.
- If a person is using symbols to communicate, then the person offering information or asking questions should use symbols too – and also chat with other staff in their presence using symbols.

### Methods and opportunities for communication

Range of means for **early symbolic communication** and how these can be linked to more symbolic means, e.g.

1. Photographs (cut out of actual shape, actual object⇒rectangle, common object).



2. Drawings (actual object⇒standardised symbol system). Symbols such as PCS, Rebus: generally available on computer. These are both visually based systems. For visual systems, ensure that they are presented appropriately – correct colours, background, correct size, not too much detail, on good side, etc.
3. Objects (actual whole object⇒part object⇒symbolic object, such as a ping-pong ball for football. These are objects as referents – objects used to signify something (NB. to be able to use objects as referents, the deafblind person must have one to one correspondence, intentional communication, and for objects, object permanence which is often slower to acquire if blind).

Advantages of these systems:

Both visual systems (photographs, symbols and pictures) and object systems have advantages of:

- being available for pointing or eye pointing (for people with physical disability)
  - being available in an array – a whole series can be seen at once, diminishing the load on memory
  - being able to be labelled (for transparency to others) with conventional communication symbols, e.g. writing.
4. Sounds (voices, object sounds⇒simple words, simple voice output aids).
  5. Movement (gestures⇒signs). Signs may be drawn from BSL but used in English word order, or key signs only used. The Makaton vocabulary, signalong and other systems use signs drawn from BSL and may allow for progression to BSL. Signs may be delivered visually (when contrasting background for signers hands, distance from signer, lighting all become important) or tactually, hand under hand – when the signer places the listeners' hands on hers to read the signs. In some cases, to teach signs, help may be given to shape the congenitally deafblind person's hands, but this may be aversive and may lead to a reliance on prompting so should be very limited.

As they move through symbolic means, they may move onto more conventional means of communication, such as:

6. Speech (cued speech has been used, sometimes with good results).



7. Signs – in Sign Supported English (SSE) or BSL word order (BSL potentially allows access to the Deaf community, but SSE may support the use of simple English for wider community involvement).
8. Alphabet systems, for voice output communication, for deafblind manual or block, or for Braille/Moon or print.

Systems may work alongside, supporting each other and person may have very idiosyncratic communication style.

Some people will remain at concrete symbolic level for their whole lives.

### Encouraging the development of communication at early symbolic levels

- Providing situations in which a person must make their own decisions/not always through prompting, to allow development of independence.
- Using sabotage strategies to make a person communicate (e.g. favourite drink is not on the table, shopping list does not include their favourite food), at an appropriate communication level.
- Important not to assume that all communication is a request. A congenitally deafblind person may be saying 'bath' because they want you to remember with them the incident of the overflowing bath last week, not because they want to get undressed and get all wet.
- Greetings, comments, jokes, are all equally important aspects of communication.
- Using appropriate levels of vocabulary/communication considering deafblind person's development, e.g. focused around here and now, concrete concepts only, terms within experience only, as appropriate (e.g. you may want to warn them about safety, but unless they have a concept of 'danger', teaching the sign won't teach the concept).
- Using all opportunities to provide interpersonal communication – understanding that communication is something that happens between two people, this may include:
  - ensuring greeting words are available and used
  - ensuring there is something worth talking about – as simple as a new recipe, to a trip



canoeing, within what can be a restricted lifestyle

- always building in opportunities to increase symbolic understanding while not forcing the pace.
- Some systems (symbols, pictures, using objects) mean that the more competent communication partner has control over the vocabulary. This should be very carefully considered as to what vocabulary is really important to the congenitally deafblind person. (e.g. 'toilet' may be important to the carer, but 'chocolate' is likely to be more motivating.)

### C. Understanding Individual Needs

**Learning outcome 3:** Understand the individual needs of congenitally deafblind people in relation to development of communication

Use of assessment by a qualified/experienced professional in dual sensory impairment, for ascertaining current communication levels and planning programmes.

#### Working with the individual

- Understanding why standardised materials are not appropriate for people at presymbolic levels.
- Understanding how to use a deafblind person's strengths to choose early symbols, e.g.
  - a person using object cues is very unlikely to be able to understand more than thirty and more probably five
  - a person using first signs can't suddenly understand the concept of 'roof' if they've never seen it – even if the communication partner understands the sign.
- Range of communicators require individual methods which depend on:
  - visual ability
  - hearing ability
  - movement ability
  - cognitive ability
  - age/interests/environment (home, school, college, care service).



- Use of appropriate vocabulary (no child with typical language development asks for the toilet as a first word) for interests, age, communicative stage.

### Importance of the environment

- Importance of the environment for supporting learning, e.g.
  - Appropriate people who can use the communication methods that the person uses/is learning (it's no good if they are the only person who uses symbols and if no one communicates to them using symbols – they can't learn them by imitation).
  - Wherever possible, peers using the same system.
  - Consistent availability of resources; such as symbol book, photographs, etc, if they are used as communication.
  - Opportunities and time to communicate – rather than having things done for them, waiting for them to ask for a coat if it's cold outside.
  - Opportunities for comment, discussion, greeting, question by a deafblind person – not only request and answer.

### Consistency and transparency

- Consistent use of methods appropriate to an individual.
- Neither underestimating nor overestimating the ability to communicate but providing such opportunities as frequently as possible to influence a person's life and ability to interact.
- Use of opportunities to develop communication which will be understood by more people when possible: if an individual is acquiring many non-conventional early symbolic 'words' are they capable of moving into more recognised ones?
- Provide transparency where possible, e.g. if using symbols, label them with the meaning in letters, even if the deafblind person can't read them.

### D. Acknowledging the 'voice' of the client

**Learning outcome 4:** Understand the importance of the congenitally deafblind persons voice in decision making, and the strategies which may be used for obtaining it

- Views of the deafblind person should be represented in major and minor ways whenever



possible, to promote independence and improve quality of life. (Why shouldn't they have another cup of tea, or a drink of coke when everyone else is having tea?).

- Deafblind person's view is just as important when they can't express it in words as when they can, but it's obviously harder to find.

### Understanding choice and opinion

- Important to recognise a person's limit on understanding about situations outside their own, e.g.
  - Can they understand things that happened yesterday or tomorrow or only comment on things happening now?
- Can they understand that something they choose could change outcomes for them forever?

### Discerning preference/choice

- Recognise limits on a person's ability to express choice – whether this is:
  - preference (ability to recognise within situation and express enjoyment or distress, but not outside it)
  - forced alternatives (can choose from a list offered)
  - free choice (can offer own perspectives and ideas).
- Understand how to enable them to express this at the best possible level.
- Where there is some symbolic understanding, be able to offer ratings using symbols, e.g.
  - Which do you like best?
  - Which do you like/which don't you like?
  - What would you do first, then second, etc?

### Other ways of discovering views

- Recognise other ways of representing a person's voice, e.g.
  - Asking a peer.
  - Asking an advocate.



- A consensus amongst people who know the person well (including where appropriate, parents or family members).
- Use of a devil's advocate (to review the things others have thought and challenge the evidence).
- Reporting on a deafblind person's views as accurately as possible, while representing difficulty of communication method.
- Relating their preferences to decisions made (e.g. likes the sensory room – should go to a school where there is one, etc).
- Communication passports: a record of a person's abilities and preferences, difficulties and dislikes, which is easily portable and can travel with a person to different places. While it can be highly personal, it is also important that there has been some way of checking/crosschecking for evidence, that what is written is the case (checking with a range of people for example).

