

Disability Awareness Begins With You



Severe Communication Impairment (SCI)

What is communication?

Communication is the passing of information from one person to another by any means - signs and gestures, alphabet boards, video displays, speech synthesizers, anything. All people, whatever their age, education, or ability, need to communicate. Individuals are described as having severe communication impairments when their speech and handwriting are insufficient to meet their communication needs. The term is usually used in relation to people with no speech or very little intelligible speech, but it may also be applied to people whose speech, while clear and fluent, is still not meaningful or representative of their real thoughts, for example, people whose speech is echolalic. Most people whose speech is severely impaired also have difficulty with handwriting.

People with SCI and hand function impairments are particularly vulnerable to having their cognitive abilities underestimated owing to the dependence of standardized intelligence tests on speech and hand skills. People with SCI who achieve effective communication aid use may reveal previously unsuspected competencies. Some people with SCI have picked up some reading skills, either in literacy classes or from incidental exposure to written language. These skills will often have gone unrecognized because of the person's expressive impairments.

Many children with SCI find themselves caught in a downwards spiral: assessed as significantly intellectually impaired as a result of their speech and motor impairments, they are placed in a school where their speech and motor impairments are seen as being the unavoidable corollary of their intellectual impairments. They are unlikely to receive an occupational therapy assessment, and speech therapy is likely to be at a pre-

miuum. The combined effect of continued failure, low expectations and lack of therapy is likely to be deterioration or stagnation rather than improvement. The student's behavior is often as poor as their academic performance.

As assessment of students with severe expressive problems is so difficult, no student should be excluded from a communication training program on the basis of previous negative assessments. Often the training is a prerequisite for accurate assessment. Always give the student the benefit of the doubt.

What is facilitated communication?

To facilitate is to make easier. In facilitated communication the task of using a communication aid is made easier for a person with a severe communication impairment. The degree of facilitation needed varies from person to person, ranging from an encouraging hand on the shoulder to boost confidence, to full support and shaping of a student's hand to enable isolation and extension of an index finger for pointing.

Facilitation may be most useful for people with severe communication impairments who walk but cannot sign or write. They need to use small, easily portable communication aids with their hands. Such aids display a set of choices - pictures, words or letters - and the user makes selections from these choices, reducing the demands on fine motor skills, motor planning and memory. Unfortunately, many potential users do not have the pointing or selection skills necessary to use such communication aids effectively.

Facilitated pointing can provide a temporary remedy for the hand function impairments of some of these people and may result in a permanent improvement in hand function when used as part of a structured teaching program.

Augmentative Communication

Augmentative and Alternative Communication is the formal title for non-speech communication. In fact, the difference between augmentative and alternative communication is merely the difference between partial and total dependency on non-speech communication. Speech may be replaced or augmented by:

1. gesture and body language.
2. manual sign.
3. handwriting.
4. communication aids.

Communication aids are devices developed or adapted for use by people with severe communication impairments. Because they have very varied skills, needs and problems there is a large range of communication aids.

Some people with severe communication impairments can use their hands; others cannot, and have to use alternatives such as mouth sticks, headsticks, switches or eye-pointing. Some can read and spell; others cannot, and need communication aids on which language elements are represented by pictures or symbols. Some individuals use wheelchairs which can accommodate large communication devices; others walk and need small, light aids.

A communication aid may be as simple as a piece of cardboard with no and yes written on it or as complex as a laptop computer controlled with one switch which speaks and allows the user to talk on the phone, access the Internet or type an essay.

The best non-speech communication strategy (or combination of strategies) is the one which allows the person with Severe Communication Impairment to communicate as freely as possible in as many situations as possible to the maximum number of people.

Information provided by:
Communication Centre, Inc.

For more information contact:
Division for Children with
Communication Disorders
The Council for Exceptional Children