



The Florida Outreach Project Family & Friends Newsletter

Choice Making for Communicators with Challenges

When a learner with multiple disabilities does not show interest in communicating, we must ask if he perceives a **need** to communicate. Parents, caregivers, and teachers frequently take away the challenged communicator's need to communicate. When we come to know a child well, we can anticipate her needs and meet them before she realizes that she has a need. Materials, clothes, and food magically appear without any expectation that the beginning communicator will ask or choose (Miles & Riggio, 1999).

As we promote a communicator's development of receptive and expressive skills, it is important to offer choices and allow natural opportunities for choice making--within the context of familiar but flexible routines (Miles & Riggio, 1999).

Schedule Choice-Making Opportunities

Caregivers and service providers may not recognize the abundance of opportunities for making choices throughout each day. Even in the context of a mandatory schedule or "program," the communicator with multiple disabilities may choose what to wear, what foods to eat, and whom or what to play with (Downing, 1999). A communicator may choose social activities, sports, and reading materials (Miles & Riggio, 1999). Caregivers and teachers can plan and schedule choice-making opportunities as an important part of the daily routine.

Offer Opportunities Across Environments

Typical daily routines include a variety of opportunities for gaining access to preferred items or activities. A meal at a restaurant or cafeteria could include choices from a menu or buffet. Free time at home might involve choosing a music CD, TV program, magazine, book, or game. While on vacation, a communicator may choose to go to the beach, go to the pool, or go shopping (Reichle, et al., 2004)

Offer Opportunities Across the School Day

The school day may seem too structured and pre-planned to allow for much choice making. But even within the structure of subject areas and lessons, potential choice opportunities abound. A preschool communicator may choose a snack, a center, a toy, or a playmate (Downing, 1999).

Offer Opportunities at Every Level

In elementary school, communicators can choose a story to read, a pencil, marker, or crayon for drawing, an instrument for music class, or colors of paint for an art project. Middle and high school students communicate their choices of classes, projects, seating, and study companions. Students with disabilities, at all levels, may choose a classmate to serve as a peer helper (Downing, 1999).

Pay Attention to Preferences

Most parents and teachers can tell you what foods, activities, and items a child prefers. A challenged communicator may open up eagerly for ice cream but purse his lips at Jello. She may skip happily to the water table but turn away from the sand box. Yet a beginning communicator's preferences are often ignored. Respecting the choices a communicator is already making, however they are demonstrated, is the best way to teach the skill of choice making (Miles & Riggio, 1999).

Motivate the Challenged Communicator

A challenged communicator will probably be motivated to demonstrate preferences, especially if these choices are the first opportunities she has had to influence her routine or environment. Engaging in a preferred activity is positive reinforcement for communicating a choice. If the communicator will not make a choice, the options provided may be of little interest. Learning what interests and motivates a challenged communicator will assist us in identifying the best choice making opportunities (Downing, 1999).

Offering the challenged communicator some control over his environment and routines can be powerfully motivating. For a student who has lacked choice and control in the past, obtaining desired objects and engaging in preferred activities are attractive rewards (Downing, 1999).

By beginning with clear choices, offering individualized options, and responding attentively to attempts at communication, caregivers and practitioners can ensure the success of challenged communicators as they begin to make and convey their choices.

Kids Are Communicating Choices

Molly, an 11-year-old girl with autism, stands on the sidelines of a basketball game and begins to vocalize. A student approaches Molly, asks if she wants to join the game, and passes her the ball. Molly catches the ball, smiles and laughs, and passes the ball to another player (Reichle, et al., 2002). She has chosen to join the game and communicated her choice to her peers.

Shannon uses a switch to call for her teacher's attention. The teacher gives Shannon a "sample" of leg play, asking if she wants to bounce her legs. Then Shannon's teacher gives her a sample of arm play. Shannon raises her arm to indicate that she wants to bounce her arms (Rowland & Schweigert, 2004). She has made and communicated her choice.

It is math time for Danny, a first grader with communication challenges. By showing the actual items, Danny's teacher offers a choice between UNO (number recognition and matching) or dominoes (counting and pattern recognition). To help Danny make this decision, his teacher shows him the actual items. Choices within routines are appropriate for many lessons across age and ability levels (Downing, 1999).

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Kenny is a twelfth-grader with disabilities who uses his eyes to express his choices. He enjoys listening to his peers in choir class. Kenny is allowed to choose where he wants his wheelchair positioned in the choir formation (bass or tenor section). Kenny is asked to choose which of two students he wants to sit by. If he looks at the tenor, that student pushes him to the tenor section. Otherwise, Kenny's other peer will push him to the bass section (Downing, 1999).

Want to begin choice making with your communicator?

Call 1-800-667-4052 to speak with a FOP specialist.

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The **FLORIDA OUTREACH PROJECT** welcomes **DR. JUNE DOWNING**,

Dr. June Downing is a national leader in the field of education for students with severe and multiple disabilities, including deaf-blindness. As a professor of Special Education, at California State University, Northridge, and prior to that, at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Dr. Downing prepared teachers to work with students who have moderate to profound disabilities. She currently continues her training efforts as an independent educational consultant. She has published numerous articles, chapters, and books on communication, literacy, assessment, vision use, and tactile strategies. Her work and writings emphasize the benefits of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Dr. June Downing has served on the Executive Board of TASH (formerly The Association for persons with Severe Handicaps) and as a past president of the Arizona and California chapters of TASH.

Dr. Downing will be speaking on the topic of **communication development** for persons who are **nonverbal and/or challenged communicators**.

NOVEMBER 15 – 16, 2007

Hawthorn Suites, Lake Buena Vista, Orlando 1-866-756-3778

Mention "Florida Outreach Project" for a special room rate.

Space is limited. Reserve your room, as soon as possible.

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The FLORIDA OUTREACH PROJECT welcomes

DR. JUNE DOWNING,

NOVEMBER 15 – 16, 2007

*“Supporting Communication for Students with Deaf-Blindness
or Other Severe Disabilities”*

Day One: Dr. Downing’s presentation on “Supporting the Communication Skills of Students having Deaf-Blindness and Other Severe and Multiple Disabilities in Natural Settings” will address strategies and techniques for promoting communication with individuals who are nonverbal (not speaking or signing EFFECTIVELY).

Day Two: “Teaching Literacy Skills to Students with Severe and Multiple Disabilities, Including Deaf-Blindness” will be a presentation of literacy materials and strategies for supporting students with severe and multiple disabilities in literacy learning.

Day Two, Evening Presentation: “The Effective Use of Tactile Strategies to Support Students with Severe and Multiple Disabilities” will provide information on tactile instructional approaches and symbols for students who are not able to make effective use of vision.

The registration cost of \$60 covers food and beverages served during the workshop.

Visit www.deafblind.ufl.edu for additional info.

Call Pam Kissoondyal or Shelly Voelker at 352-846-2757 for more information.

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**FAMILIES with Children affected by Deaf-Blindness
or other Disabilities**

Does your child struggle to communicate?

If your child is not using speech or sign EFFECTIVELY,
And you would like to learn how to support better communication,

**YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN US
in a Communication Learning Lab
Saturday, NOVEMBER 17, 2007**

Our featured presenter, Dr. June Downing
and Florida Outreach Project Specialists
will be available to meet with families and children,
facilitate hands-on activities,
and discuss your concerns and questions about communication.

We'd like to meet your family, learn about the strengths and needs of your child with communication challenges, and **assist you in developing strategies and techniques** for improving communication at home and in school.

This Saturday Family Workshop is FREE to registered families and children.

Hawthorn Suites, Lake Buena Vista, Orlando

Mention "Florida Outreach Project" for a special room rate. 1-866-756-3778

**Space is limited. Please call Pam Kissoondyal or Shelly Voelker at 352-846-2757
to learn more or apply to participate.**

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