Encouraging people to take the initiative – the importance of waiting

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Article 7 in the series Facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. All the articles are available to download from my website at

http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A list of all the articles in the series is provided on the website.

This article is based closely on a document used to support the Communication Policy adopted at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning. As Lead Speech and Language Therapist there, I took the lead in writing the original document in 2010.

For further information about RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, go to www.rnib.org.uk/pearscentre

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, states that children have the right to give their opinion (Article 12) and to seek, receive and share information (Article 13). As Potter and Whitakker (2001) state:

One fundamental aspect of achieving this freedom of expression is the ability to communicate spontaneously … to be able to initiate interactions with others … The importance of this attribute cannot be over-emphasised, since it is the means through which individuals begin to exert control over their lives. (p.15)

Children who initiate communication early on are more likely to have positive social-communicative outcomes (Koegel et al., 1999, cited by Prizant et al., 2006). Spontaneous communication allows children to participate more in everyday activities, to have greater control and to communicate their needs better; thus the children are less likely to develop challenging behaviours (Prizant et al., 2006). Brown (1976) goes so far as to claim that, without the desire to initiate, performance appears inhuman.

Promoting spontaneous communication must, therefore, be a major focus for facilitators (Potter and Whitakker, 2001; Prizant et al., 2006). Although these writers refer specifically to sighted autistic children, the same principle applies to all those who have communication difficulties, including people who have visual impairment and additional needs. They must be able to take the initiative if they are to have some control over their lives.¹

Unfortunately, many people with visual impairment and additional needs are passive.² Passivity is very disabling because, without the ability to be spontaneous, you have little control over your life:

- you have to wait for others to give you what you need and want, or offer you choices
- but being offered choices is not ideal: see below

¹ See article 8.
² See article A.
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- you may have difficulty rejecting and communicating No clearly and readily; this means you may have to tolerate being given things you do not want and being asked – or even made – to do things you do not like doing
- very sadly, you are at risk of being exploited, neglected and abused.

Some facilitators compensate for people’s lack of spontaneous expressive communication by offering choices. However, this actually serves to reinforce the inability of those people to initiate, because offering choices reduces the opportunities for spontaneous communication. But offering choices can be problematic for other reasons:

- offering choices to a person with no understanding of spoken language and little or no sight can be extremely difficult, as it may not be possible to demonstrate non-visually the items being offered
- the choices offered will depend on the facilitator, who may offer A or B at a time when the person actually wants C, or D, or E……
- many sighted autistic people find it very difficult to make choices; this is also likely to apply to people who have visual impairment and autism.

Another way in which facilitators compensate for people’s lack of spontaneous expressive communication is to prompt frequently. This is perfectly understandable. Such facilitators take every opportunity to encourage the person to communicate. This may involve

- asking a great many questions such as What’s this?; Where’s the box?; What are you doing?
- giving instructions such as Tell grandma what you did at college last week.

Unfortunately, frequent prompting is likely to have the opposite, rather than the desired effect because it fails to address the fundamental issue which is that the passive, communicatively disabled person lacks the ability to take the initiative. No amount of prompting will facilitate this ability.
It is very hard for some facilitators to accept that their strategy of frequent prompting does not work. Indeed, they may believe they are not trying hard enough, and instead of looking for an alternative strategy, they simply try even harder to encourage and persuade. But from the passive, communicatively disabled person’s point of view, this comes across as being pestered and nagged, even ordered. It can result in the person being put off altogether, feeling alienated and becoming withdrawn.

Even worse, it may set up a vicious circle. The passive, communicatively disabled person may become aware when a facilitator is anxious, play on that, and “wind up” the facilitator. So, the situation may be this:

- the passive, communicatively disabled person rarely communicates
- the facilitator becomes anxious and tries really hard to encourage and persuade the passive, communicatively disabled person to communicate
- this doesn’t work
- the facilitator becomes even more anxious and tries harder
- but it still doesn’t work
- at the same time, the passive, communicatively disabled person becomes aware that the facilitator is anxious and plays on that, becoming even less communicative as a result of the pressure
- and so on.

Sadly, then, frequent prompting only serves to reinforce the communicatively disabled person’s passivity.

What passive, communicatively disabled people need is not frequent prompting, but a responsive environment. A responsive environment is one in which the person

- obtains responses to what he or she does
- is given opportunities to respond to other people
- is allowed to take the lead in interactions.

The two most important points here are the first and last. Indeed, the last one is crucial. It is essential to give the person many opportunities to take the lead. When a passive, communicatively disabled person does take the lead, it is essential that the facilitator responds in a positive way.
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Giving the person opportunities to take the lead requires the facilitator to hold back and wait for the person to do something. This seems to be counter-intuitive – it does not seem to make sense. But it works.

Many facilitators feel very uncomfortable when they first try waiting. This is because they feel as if they are doing nothing when waiting. But they are not doing nothing – they are using a strategy that actually works.

Many experienced teachers, speech and language therapists and researchers have discovered that waiting is crucial. The following are some relevant excerpts from the writing of such workers.

For example, Hodges (2000) wrote

*Waiting for children is one of the most important things that a teacher does with her time.* (p.175)

Lee & MacWilliam (1995) stated that

*It is necessary sometimes for the adult to wait a long time with long gaps in the interaction, to show the visually impaired child that if he wants an action to happen again he has got to do something to make it happen. Many adults find this very difficult and can in fact render the child more passive through their own best intentions. Many feel that if nothing is happening they have to make it happen by doing something else to arouse the child.* (p.18)

Warren & Yoder (1998) stated that

*The ability… to wait for the child to initiate… is often an under appreciated skill.* (p.379)

Ware (1996) stated that

*Waiting for the child to respond is a critical feature of a responsive environment.* (p.10)

A responsive environment is essential. A responsive environment has several features. For practitioners facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs, these include

- valuing each person for who he or she is, for what he or she likes and for what he or she does
- putting no pressure at all on people to communicate
- waiting
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- allowing people plenty of space and time to initiate
- responding positively whenever a person does take the initiative.

A useful strategy for facilitators is to join the person in favourite activities – but with no pressure at all to communicate. The important aspect is the sharing of the activity. It can be anything: listening to music, watching *Eastenders*, going to the pub for a drink, going to MacDonald’s, jointly doing the actions to a favourite song such as *Row, row, row your boat*. A very useful approach is *Intensive Interaction*, in which waiting is also a central feature.

Perhaps the most important element of a responsive environment is waiting. This is crucial: waiting allows the passive, communicatively disabled person opportunities to take the initiative. Some of these people need practitioners to wait for what can seem like a very long time. But there really is no other way:

> Watching and listening quietly for minimal initiations... is essential with clients who are used to adopting a passive role, since there is no other effective treatment. (Andersen-Wood & Smith, 1997; p.87)

**References**


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3 For more information on Intensive Interaction, visit [http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/](http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/) (Website accessed 04/04/12.)

4 For more information on responsive environments, see article 14.
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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art13](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art13) (Website accessed 04/04/12.)
