

Therapy

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AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

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WHAT IS AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION?

When a non-verbal means of communication is used in conjunction with an individual's residual/existing abilities to speak or to write, it is technically referred to as an augmentative communication strategy. It supplements, augments or increases the ability of a person to meet his communication needs.

Example: When a person with poor speech skills communicates using a sign language, he is said to be using an augmentative communication strategy.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES?

The different types of augmentative communication available in India can be classified into two types:

***Gestural modes:** This involves no instrumentation but requires some slight control movement on the part of the person, such as head-nodding, eye blinking, hand movements, etc.*

Gestural-assisted mode: This involves instrumentation and some body movement to achieve effective communication. For example, a Bliss board, wherein the user points (gestures) to the symbols (instrument) on the board in order to communicate.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING AN AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION AID.

Bearing in mind the aim of augmentative communication, it is important to assess an individual's skills and potentials which would help in the selection of a suitable augmentative communication strategy. The following aspects are considered :

Motor control: As pointed out above, augmentative communication modes require some movement to achieve communication. Hence an idea about the body movements that the child/adult can make will help in designing the augmentative communication mode. A capacity to operate a switching mechanism and to point at the display boards has to be assessed before designing an appropriate strategy.

Intellectual level: Logistics and a person's ability to solve problems, make decisions and to observe relationships influence the choice of a communication aid. An individual who has difficulty in using abstract symbols due to learning deficits will naturally have difficulty in relating to complex ideas.

Sensory functions: A person's ability to see, hear, touch and feel movement partially determines the augmentative communication aids that he could possibly use. The need for each of these functional assessments is discussed below:

Hearing: It is important to assess the hearing ability of an individual as hearing loss can interfere with speech comprehension. If the person is hearing-impaired, he could use manual signing and speech-reading to communicate.

Visual: If the individual has a loss of visual acuity or has visual perceptual problems, it could interfere with reading, typing, indicating message components on a communication board or activating an electronic mechanism. A thorough, visuo-spatial assessment is a must before deciding on a relevant strategy.

Sense of touch or movement: Disturbances in this area could interfere with manual signing, writing, typing or indicating a message on a communication board.

Language status: An assessment of the person's ability to use symbols, understand speech, non-verbal communication and/or read, as well as assessing his actual speech skills, will all directly influence the augmentative communication strategy to be selected.

Communication needs of the person: Augmentative communicative modes with suitable components for different environments are based on specific needs.

The optimal aid for a person should be the one that comes closest to allowing him to effectively meet his communication needs and is:

- *Acceptable to him and those in his environment.*
- *Well-understood by others who are minimally trained to interpret messages transmitted by the aid.*
- *Portable.*
- *Easy to learn to use.*
- *Cost effective and*
- *Efficient and interferes as little as possible, if at all, with the on-going activity.*

CONDITIONS IN WHICH AN ACS HAS BEEN FOUND USEFUL

Children and adults lack adequate speech or communication skills due to a variety of reasons. These individuals benefit from augmentative communication. The conditions include:

Dysarthria: Where the function of the speech mechanism is impaired due to damage in the central nervous system. Dysarthria is a very common problem for people with cerebral palsy.

Mental Retardation: *Slowness in all areas of development due to brain damage. Many persons with intellectual impairment have defective speech, poor language development and limited vocabulary.*

Childhood Autism: *A condition that appears to begin early in childhood, wherein the child is in less than normal contact with his environment and completely withdrawn from social interaction. Many research studies are available on environmental stimulation and language development. Isolation and withdrawal are not conducive to effective communication skills.*

Aphasia: *Injury to the brain leads to a deficit in one or more aspects of language such as speaking, understanding, reading, writing and computation. The brain trauma could be caused by illness, accident or infection.*

Deafness: *Refers to a profound hearing loss because of which the person receives little or no information, necessary to understand speech, via hearing. Without any input, it is impossible to have speech.*

Verbal Apraxia: *A condition that prevents a person from producing the muscle movements required for speech on a voluntary level. The condition is a result of neuro-muscular incoordination. Therapists point out that a person with apraxia produces involuntary muscle movements, has perceptual problems and, therefore, does not have intelligible speech.*

Dysphonia (including laryngectomy): A voice disorder resulting from defects or anomalies of the larynx (voice-box) that make voice-production very difficult or impossible.

Glossectomy: Refers to surgical removal of all or part of the tongue, usually because of cancer.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION

Everyone appreciates that speech is one of the main means of expressing our thoughts, emotions and sharing knowledge. Hence, in the absence of adequate speech skills, it becomes important to provide other means of communication. This enhancement of speech skills is called augmentative communication.

The impact that an augmentative communication strategy has on communication depends on a number of factors, some of these being cognitive (intellectual), motor, sensory, language status, desire or motivation and the aid used. The more normal these factors are, the more the impact augmentative communication is likely to have on the communication potential.

Another important aspect of an augmentative communication strategy is its impact on speech. Experts' reports and experience suggests that augmentative communication does not reduce the individuals motivation for communication. In fact, it has been found to facilitate speech in some children and adults.

CONCLUSION

The impact of augmentative communication on users and others has been found to be highly desirable and the users have shown decreased frustration, increased confidence, attention span, independence and improved performance.

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