

Tip of the Month – December 2013

Emergent Communicators by Fern Jones (SLT)



Working with clients who are just starting to learn about language and communication can be tricky. It can often feel like there is so much to work on you aren't sure where to start. Supporting emergent communicators puts them onto the pathway for developing the skills to start to use more complex communication systems.

At TalkLink we regularly work with clients who are in the very early stages of developing their communication skills. Here we've put together the top 12 things to work on to get your clients on the pathway to developing good communication skills.

1. Find the motivators

Everyone is motivated by something. Sometimes it is harder to work out the motivators but there is always something we can tap in to. Using motivating activities allows our clients to learn new skills whilst doing something fun. This could be anything from a simple chase game or peek-a-boo, to sensory play such as splashing water or spinning to blowing raspberries to flicking paper in a book. Watch your client during a normal session and look for signs of enjoyment or excitement.

2. Develop meaningful cause and effect skills

Developing cause and effect is an essential part to becoming a competent communicator. Ask yourself if your client understands this yet. Some great cause and effect games are:

- a. **Peak a boo** – does exactly what it says! Mix it up by using interesting materials to cover the client or yourself in
- b. **Blowing bubbles** – blow some bubbles, wait, then point to a symbol/use a single message device and say “more” then blow some more.

- c. **Dance/move/sing** – have a target word or phrase on a single message device or symbol. If your client looks, signs or points at the symbol/device, dance/sing/move.
- d. **Turning something on/off** – this is a really easy and effective one. Press pause on a song that’s playing, use a fan in the summer or a blender when making a cake and work with your client turning it on and off. If your client has difficulty with fine motor skills try using a Powerlink to change ordinary house hold appliances into a switchable activity.

3. **Develop joint attention skills**

Joint attention is a client’s ability to understand that two people can be attending to the same object/activity at the same time. It is such an important skill to have as a communicator. If you understand that we are looking at/listening to/experiencing the same thing you can learn to understand that we can communicate about it too. One simple way to do this is blow up a balloon, say “look” to your client, then when they look at the balloon let it go. You can do similar activities with bubbles. You can also put highly motivating items out of reach of your client, when they ‘ask’ for it (this could be through looking, reaching, pointing) you then give them the object. Playing these games regularly can really built joint attention skills.

4. **Expose your client to core words**

Giving your client the opportunity to learn about language in a motivating activity in context is the best way to support them to use language. Research tells us that if we want clients to use AAC we have to use it with them and model using the communication system. Think about using core words as part of their communication system such as ‘more’, ‘finish’, ‘ready, steady, GO!’, ‘like’ ‘don’t like’. These words are great control words and great places to start. Teach them in games by pointing to the symbol yourself whilst carrying out the action. Give them the opportunity to see more language being used than they may necessarily use themselves.

5. **Develop attention and listening skills**

Listening can be a hard task for a lot of our clients with emergent communication skills. If your client finds it hard to listen and attend to a task, working on attention and listening will ultimately benefit their play, receptive and expressive language. Some tasks might be watching and waiting activities that build up their anticipation. These tasks can move quickly to begin with and slowly build up. Jack in the box can be a great anticipation toy. Other ways can be asking the client to join in a repeated line in a song or story on their single message communication device such as “Old McDonald” – sing “Ei Ei O” into the device and then wait for your client to join in or show them how they can join in by pressing the device yourself.

6. **Develop their skills in making a choice**

Present your client with different choices and develop a consistent way of making a choice. For some of our clients this will be as easy as reaching or pointing. For others it could be learning to look with their eyes and then look at the person they are communicating with. This gives our clients some control over their environment too e.g. allowing them to choose something to eat, what they want to wear, which DVD they want to watch. You can do this

with real objects, photographs, signs or symbols. Be sure to be consistent. Linda Burkhart recommends making choices of actions to get more natural repetition within the activity and for increased motivation e.g. choosing to make a car go fast or slow vs just choosing the car activity.

7. Ensure you model, model, model!

We cannot emphasise this enough at TalkLink. The clients where we have seen the most progress are those clients who have had great modelling. This can be done by you, other adults, peers, siblings, extended family – anybody! Modelling shows your client how they can use their communication system. This is simply pointing to a symbol, using a sign, pushing a button or using the communication device to convey your message from your point of view e.g. if I'm listening to some music with my client then I will use their communication system to talk about the music we are listening to "I like this", "my favourite", "let's choose a different one".

8. Raise your expectations

We communicate because others expect us to. When we do not expect a client to communicate this can lead to passive communicators or learnt helplessness. Clients often become passive because things are done for them or they are asked lots of questions and aren't expected to initiate. One of the best ways you can make your client an active communicator is expecting them to say/do something in an activity. It might mean waiting a long time or helping your client at first but phasing out the support. Use phrases like "Johnny tell us when you want more" and then point to the 'more' symbol/button/use the sign and wait expectantly. Give Johnny praise when he attempts to communicate. Everyone has the ability to learn, some just need more time than others.

9. Spend time building a relationship with your client

Developing a relationship with your client can be the key to success. Strategies such as Intensive Interaction can be a great way to develop a relationship with your client and develop their communication skills.

10. Shape your client's method of gaining attention

For some of our clients simply gaining attention is hard to do. Think of functional, effective ways that your client could gain attention and develop these in context. This might be a gesture such as waving your arm, it might be a specific sound that your client can say or it might be pressing a button which says "I've got something to say". It is important that everyone around your client agrees on the same movement and also that this information is passed on to new team members. If your client uses their "attention getter" make sure to respond to it – this will teach them how to get attention. Sometimes this is a mistake. That's OK, the more your client uses it in context, the better they will become at using this strategy.

11. Continue to work on understanding of spoken language

Whilst focussing on what your client can say is important, don't forget to keep building up their receptive language. Even very emergent communicators can be working on early

linguistic concepts such as “more” and “stop” or following one step instructions. Remember to keep language simple, but provide lots of opportunities for learning new words in context.

12. Follow your client’s lead

Having goals is important to be able to evaluate the benefit of therapy, however be sure to follow your clients lead. If your client is disinterested in the lovely activity you made, abandon it, use what they are interested in. This might be a bike outside, something interesting on the wall, a noise they can hear. Be flexible. If your goal is for your client to use control words such as stop/go these can lend to a wide range of activities.

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