



Exploring Communication Choices: Combined Communication Strategies

Families who have just had a child diagnosed with hearing loss often have many questions about how their child will be able to communicate. There are four main ways, or roads, to communicate with children who have limited or no hearing. This article is about combining the four main ways into tailored communication strategies for individual children.

Learning to communicate is a journey. At the end of that journey, most families want their child to be a successful communicator and learner.

Your task: Learning about hearing loss and its possible impact on listening and communicating is unexpected for most families. In some ways it's similar to being told you need to make an unexpected trip. Your trip needs to start as soon as possible and it will take time to get there. There are several different roads and all of the roads are available to you and your family on this journey. Some roads may be more difficult or may really slow you down; other roads may be much easier for your child and family. You could start down one road and then switch to another if it helps your child. Or, as is described in this article, combine your own route using more than one road for your journey. Your task is to figure out which road you want to take first. There will always be mile markers so you know where you are and people to ask for directions along the way.

Which road? Each road is a different way you can share thoughts, ideas and feelings with your child. Each way will take extra effort by you and your family because a child with hearing loss needs help if they are to learn language well.

What to think about as you plan your route:

1. How much can your child hear? Can he hear at all?
2. How important is it to you that your child learns to speak clearly?
3. How important is it to you for your child to sign or communicate visually?
4. Are you willing to learn a new language or a new way of communicating that you would use whenever you are with your child?

COMBINED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES as a route to communication development

The main goal of combining communication strategies is to provide both auditory and visual forms of language at the same time so that the child has the communication tools available to learn complete language. This is sometimes called Total Communication or Simultaneous Communication. Or – families may use different strategies at different times.

- **Total Communication** is a philosophy of speaking, signing, lipreading, finger spelling, writing, using hearing, Cued Speech, gestures, etc. – any means of communication that will support the child in learning complete language.
- **Simultaneous Communication** is speaking and signing at the same time.
- **Strategies combined for different purposes or activities** occur when sign is used sometimes, speech other times, cued speech for some activities, gestures at other times. Not all of the different strategies need to be used.

What to think about as you plan your route: Combined Communication Choices

1. **HEARING:** Parents and professionals try to make the most use of a variety of the different ways that children with hearing loss can communicate. Children who are trying to access communication by using hearing and vision typically wear hearing aids or cochlear implants so that they can get the most out of their hearing. They also work on developing listening skills along. There are some times when children who are good at listening and using their hearing to learn may be very challenged and can benefit from relying on visual supports, such as when it is very noisy or when they are without amplification (i.e., swimming).
2. **SPEECH:** People who use combined communication strategies typically talk and sign words or concepts at the same time. Children are expected to speak as well as use sign language, gestures or Cued Speech when needed.
3. **VISUAL COMMUNICATION:** Many children may hear a lot of speech with their hearing aids or cochlear implants in quiet settings when they know the topic. In a typically noisy classroom when there is new information and different people are talking both near and far away, some children need visual support, such as signing, extra gestures or Cued Speech for them to be able to receive all of classroom instruction.
4. **FAMILY MEMBERS LEARNING A NEW WAY TO COMMUNICATE:** The family needs to be aware of what the barriers are to the child's understanding and provide whatever visual communication support is needed at the time so the child can understand and be fully included in family life. This may mean that everyone around the child will use signs for each word or concept at the same time that they are expressing it in spoken words. Alternately, the family could combine speech with Cued Speech. Signs or Cued Speech can be used sometimes and not others. If family members and playmates sign what they are saying, then the child can be more fully exposed to language. Babies will learn **any** language that is used around them all the time, every day. Babies who live with family members who sign and talk will learn language visually through sign and auditorily through hearing.

Combining Communication Strategies:

- Provide a way for people with hearing loss to make use of visual and/or auditory information that is most useful to them at the time. Sometimes, if it is very quiet and people are close together a child may use their hearing more than signs to understand. Other times, like when it is noisy, the child may rely totally on the signs or other visual cues used to understand language.
- Use signs that are common to American Sign Language (ASL). The sign vocabulary is used in English language word order. This sign-and-speak method does not actually use signed language (ASL is a different language than English).
- Use signs for each word or concept. Word endings, like 'ed', or 'ing' can also be signed at the same time as the words are being spoken. Speaking and signing with use of all of the endings and parts of English words is called Signing Exact English or Manually Coded English.
- Requires the mouth (speech) and hands (signed speech) to move at the same time to send a complete message.
- Use both hearing and speech. It is as important to maximize hearing and provide spoken language clearly as it is to sign each word, including all the endings.
- Require that a large vocabulary of signs be learned. This vocabulary needs to expand as the child's language develops. Therefore families will need to be open to learning many new signs as their child grows.
- Require careful attention to be sure that all of the parts of language are being provided to the child, all of the time.
- Take practice to do quickly so the rate of talking is not slowed down.

Other Questions to Ask in Your Community

1. Do other families of children with hearing loss use Total Communication or Simultaneous Communication where you live? Is there someone that works with your local school district Help Me Grow program that can help your family to learn Total Communication or Simultaneous Communication? Are there children currently in your school district who are learning through the use of Total Communication or Simultaneous Communication in their classrooms?
2. Where can you go to learn Total Communication or Simultaneous Communication?
3. What do other parents of children with hearing loss and professionals who specialize in helping children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing say about these local services?

Your early intervention professional, your child's audiologist, or the deaf and hard of hearing teachers in your school district should be able to give you names of parents who have already gotten answers to these questions.

Remember

Each family is different.

There isn't a "right" choice for all children or all families. Each child needs different things. Parents are also different, and have their own hopes for their child. Some families choose to use one main way to communicate while other families combine communication choices.

Be flexible.

Follow your child's lead. You may feel stressed out over choosing one of the communication choices. It's important to be flexible. Give one method your best effort. If it doesn't work, be open to trying other ways to communicate.

Related Information

To view an example of Total Communication go to

<http://www.chsc.org/ME2/Sites/dirsect.asp?sid=AEC0B1711D8D4C95A88F05C445580B54&nm=Communication+Choices&SiteID=C15E877CB6334B3BABCD3E77C11C7FA9>

- Hands and Voices: Total Communication
<http://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/totalcom.htm>
- Beginnings for Parents: Total Communication
http://www.ncbegin.org/communication_options/total_communication.shtml
- Family Support Connection: Should I learn sign language, cued English, or any other communication system?
<http://www.familysupportconnection.org/html/HOHissues.htm>
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders: What are the Communication Considerations for Parents of Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing Children?
<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/staticresources/health/hearing/CommunicationConsiderations207.pdf>
- Raising Deaf Kids: A World of Information Children with Hearing Loss: Total Communication
<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/communicating/choices/tc.jsp>
- What Parents Say About Communication Choices
<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/meet/parents/communicating.php>
- About.Com: Deafness. Why parents chose Total Communication
<http://deafness.about.com/cs/communication/a/totalcomm.htm>

Developed by Karen L. Anderson, PhD for the Minnesota Department of Education Parents Know website, 2011 (<http://parentsknow.state.mn.us>).