



Fact Sheet

Communication: A Basic Overview

What Is He/She Trying To Tell Me?

Some students with combined vision and hearing loss may not be able to express some or all of what they want to say through speech, sign language, fingerspelling, writing, or gestures. When students cannot express themselves in these traditional ways, they often choose other ways of expression. The students choose the way that is easiest to get their message across. This expression is communication. The student may communicate through facial expression, body movement, posture, vocalization, crying, tantrums, etc. These reactions are frequently seen by parents and/or professionals as behaviors that need to be eliminated, when in fact the student is working to communicate and becomes more and more frustrated when his or her communication is misunderstood. If, instead, the student's attempt to communicate can be acknowledged and expanded, difficult behaviors may begin to decrease.

Points to Remember

1. Look at all of the student's behavior as an attempt to communicate.
2. Be sure the student has had medical problems eliminated. A student may be hitting his or her head due to a headache, an ear infection, or another source of physical discomfort.
3. Attempt to understand the student's communication efforts. Work to understand the message behind the "behavior" – is the student needing food, sleep, comfort, wanting something, refusing something, responding to a condition in the environment that feels positive or negative, and so on?
4. Teach the student a more acceptable way to communicate what the student has to say, after showing you understand the effort. The primary focus on the student's educational program should be to ensure that the student has a means of receiving and expressing communication messages. All members of the student's educational team, including especially the family members, should work together to design the communication program based on the sensory, motor, and cognitive needs of the student.

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Fact Sheets from the Colorado Services to Children and Youth with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss Project are to be used by both families and professionals serving individuals with vision and hearing loss. The information applies to children, birth through 21 years of age. The purpose of the Fact Sheet is to give general information on a specific topic. More specific information for an individual student can be provided through personalized technical assistance available from the project. For more information call (303) 866-6681 or (303) 866-6605. Updated: 11/09

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