Low-Tech Strategies for Facilitating Mealtime Communication

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One part of a dual emphasis that we have developed in our work as consultants and providers of school-based pediatric dysphagia programs:

- Development of safe and improved oral-motor and feeding/swallowing skills and

- Improved mealtime communication and social language skills

For children with disabilities, unstructured social times such as school lunchtimes can be socially difficult.

For children with significant cognitive disabilities and/or physical disabilities that affect feeding/swallowing skills, mealtimes can be even more difficult.

Mealtimes can be a naturalistic opportunity to nurture, build trust, and bond with children. It can be a perfect opportunity to build their social communication skills.

Some children may withdraw from personal involvement in the meal when their communication signals are ignored or misinterpreted.

Many children communicate their needs and wants during mealtime through negative behaviors:
- spitting food
- knocking food off the table
- taking food from another child
- pushing their head away from the feeder
- refusing to eat
Mealtimes can become less problematic when adults take time to observe, listen, and interpret what the child is saying.

- hunger & fullness
- choice-making
- wanting/not wanting more
- wanting something different
- pace of eating is too fast/slow
- social exchanges
- information exchanges
- finished/not finished with this meal
- comfort/discomfort of position
- liking/not liking food
- reactions to the environment (i.e., It’s too loud in here!)
- requests
- others...

Choice Making and Encouraging Self-Determination Skills

- Discover ways in which you can increase children’s opportunities to make choices

- Offer choices during the meal→ Let children choose between two liquids, or two foods, number of bites they want, where to sit, and even utensil choices

- Giving choices helps children feel more in control

- Don’t offer too many choices at once as children may become over-stimulated

Whenever possible, a child’s attempt to communicate should be acknowledged and given a response.

Simple, verbal feedback that can be given as a response:
- "You are looking at the glass. That tells me you want a drink"
- "Your quiet mouth is telling me you are ready for another bite"
- "Your face says you really like the potatoes"

When children learn that their communication behaviors are understood, they may use them with intention and use them more often.
Other Naturalistic Communication Strategies

Naturalistic communication intervention techniques can also include strategies such as:
- Expansion/extension
- Commenting
- Direct questioning
- Use of an expectant look
- Use of strategies to direct attention to an AAC device (when used) and visual communication aids, such as saying “Let's talk” or “Tell me about…”
- Use of leading questions (i.e., “Do you like…?” or Do you want more…?”)

Visual Schedules can help students:

- see logic and order
- make easier transitions
- share/discuss events as a communication aid
- improve language and vocabulary
- with time concepts
- sequence activities before, during, and after meals
- reduce or eliminate behavior problems related to transitions and changing activities
  o (Hodgdon, 1995)

Choice-Making Symbols: Using symbols to allow for choice making

- When implementing choice-making interventions with students who are first learning the concept of “choice,” use real, meaningful items.
- Once a child is able to make choices successfully with real objects, begin to incorporate symbols.
- Present choice-making symbols to cue students to use social/pragmatic skills previously taught.
- Symbols can also be helpful for those who are verbal but have trouble regulating specific behaviors.
  o (Beukelman & Mirenda, 1998)
- A small communication board or book with conversation topics that can be used everyday is another way to interact during mealtime.
- Questions like “how are you?” and “how was your night?” can be asked everyday and become part of a conversation routine.
- A small container like this one, labeled “Peeter’s Lunch Box,” is a creative and useful way to store and interact with mealtime communication symbols.
Other Commonly Used Mealtime Messages:

- More
- I'll do it
- Yes/No/Stop/Go
- Wait
- Slow, or slower
- Scoop
- Bite
- Chew
- Swallow
- Tongue
- Teeth
- Cheeks
- Lick
- Spoon
- Cup
- Bowl
- Juice, or other drinks
- Food items
- Bathroom
- Emotion vocabulary (tired, surprised, excited, scared, happy, mad, etc.)
- I need help
- I need a break
- I want to feed myself
- I'm hungry

Social vocabulary:

- Hi!
- What are you eating?
- What did you do last night?
- See you later!
- Let me tell you about...
- What's your favorite...?
- I like or don't like...
- Where are you going?
Resources


