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The Other Side of the Communication Coin: Understanding

Tony brought his son Ryan to the school. Tony was concerned that his son had still not developed speech even though he was now three years old. Tony also was worried that his son might be deaf. I asked him why he thought this was a possibility. Tony described how his son loved to take baths and that he took one every night. He said he would call Ryan's name and tell him it was time for his bath. If Ryan were playing in the living room, his father would say over and over, "It's time for your bath! Let's go to your bath!" Ryan would not even look up from playing with his trucks. However, if Tony turned on the faucet in the bathtub, Ryan would drop everything and run to the bathroom, taking his clothes off on the fly! Tony was confused as to why Ryan would not even blink when he shouted in his ears, but could hear the water being turned on upstairs in the other end of the house. Was hearing the same as understanding?

In Chapter One, we noted that communication involves at least two people. So far, we have focused our attention on the role of the person communicating with the second person. But how do we describe what the second person is doing? Usually, if I am speaking, you are listening. However, the word "listening" will not be broad enough to describe everything the second person might be doing because, as we have pointed out, there are other modes of communication. For example, the authors are writing and you are reading.

Both listening to speech and reading words involves *understanding*. To help children become more skilled at communication, we need not only to improve their ability to communicate but also their ability to understand when others communicate.

Just as we focused on certain behaviors to help define functional communication, so we will focus on particular behaviors to help define “understanding.” That is, the only way we can know if someone understands our attempts at communication is to observe changes in what they are doing. If they don’t change their actions, then we would conclude that they “didn’t understand us.” So, while we often think of “understanding” as something that happens within us, we must *show* that we understand by doing something different than before. Therefore, understanding is demonstrated when the communicative partner responds to the contents of someone else’s communication by changing behavior in a direct (i.e., a material or specific outcome) or social (i.e., praise, encouragement, etc.) manner.

The questions we asked about *communication* also are important to ask about *understanding* communication, often referred to as **receptive language**. The first question to consider is “Why understand what others communicate?”

Why Is It Important to Understand the Communication of Others?

Just as there are two primary reasons to communicate, there are also two primary reasons to understand what someone else has communicated. For example, imagine that a girl walks into the living room and begins picking up pillows, looking under chairs as if she is searching for something. Her mother tells her, “You put your candy on the TV!” The girl smiles as she walks to the TV, picks up the candy, and begins to eat. In this case, the girl listened to her mother because understanding her mother’s words led her to find the candy she wanted. As this example illustrates, sometimes we listen to what others are saying because if we understand what they say we can get the things we like (as when we are called to dinner, to go outside to play, to see a friend, etc.).

Next, imagine that a boy is playing in the living room. His father says, “Bring me the newspaper!” The boy stops what he is doing, finds the newspaper, and brings it to his father. His father immediately says, “Boy! What a great helper you are!” In this case, the boy responded to his father’s words to get an item not for himself, but rather for his father. What the boy received was his father’s praise and other social

reinforcers. As this example illustrates, sometimes we listen to what others say because if we understand them, we obtain social attention.

There are times when a child may respond to something said for a variety of reasons. For example, if she hears her mother call her name, "Mary!" she might approach her mother because 1) sometimes her mother gives her something to eat or to play with (direct reinforcement), 2) sometimes her mother gives her hugs or starts to play a game (interactive reinforcement), and 3) sometimes her mother tells her to start a chore and later praises her for completing the task (social reinforcement). In this situation, when she hears her name called she may not perfectly anticipate what will happen next but she has had lots of experience in receiving different types of reinforcers when she responds to her mom when her name is called.

Table 2-1 | Types of Receptive Communication

Setting	Child's reaction	Outcome	Type of communication
Mom says, "Bring me the popcorn"	Child brings Mom the popcorn	Mom says, "Thanks"	Follow instruction to benefit someone else
Mom says, "Eat some popcorn"	Child gets popcorn	Child eats popcorn	Follow instruction for personal gain

At times, the social attention is indirectly provided. That is, there may not be any immediate reinforcement provided for responding and yet reinforcement may be on its way. For example, imagine a young girl who gets home from school. Her mother asks what happened in school that day. The girl proceeds to talk on and on about what happened with each of her friends and teachers. In this case, the girl listens to her mother's communication because it leads to additional social outcomes (that is, a longer conversation with her mother). Sometimes this type of listening occurs when there are direct questions (e.g., "What did you play with?"), while at other times we listen to indirect cues (i.e., "Boy, did I like that movie!").

When we are very young, we learn to listen because of the immediate consequences. As we mature, we learn to listen even when the

consequences are delayed. For example, we listen to what our teacher says because we know there will be a test at the end of the week. We listen to the nightly news report because we may have a more informative conversation with a friend later in the day. However, whatever the time delay to the consequence, we can still distinguish differences between direct versus social benefits for having listened.

What Do We Listen To?

As young children, we learn that certain sounds are important. We hear a door opening and run to see who's there. We hear a certain tune outside and we know the ice cream truck is on our block. We hear a dog snarl and run the other way. We hear the water running into the tub, as in the example that begins this chapter, and know that it's bath time. Each sound becomes important because it is associated with particular events. We hear these sounds and anticipate what comes next.

However, listening to someone speak is different from hearing an important sound. The words used by people consist of particular sounds and sound combinations. Each language has its own sets of each. These sounds are combined into words and phrases and we must learn to understand what each combination means. That is, we are not born understanding the words of our own language. Fascinating to note is the experimental evidence that infants, shortly after birth, react differently to the sound of their mother's voice than they do to other sounds (including their mother's voice scrambled in novel ways). That is, even before formal language develops, children demonstrate different behaviors when listening to voice-related sounds versus other environmental noises. Therefore, the basic "what" we listen to in a communication framework is the vocal sounds produced by other people.

When we defined functional communication in the Introduction, we noted that it is critical that children learn to approach a communicative partner. To add to that definition, it is also important that children respond to the communicative attempts of other people. A child may learn to run outside when she hears the bell of the ice cream truck, but that involves a different type of learning than understanding when mom says, "Let's go outside and I will buy some ice cream for you." The set of sounds in the phrase "ice cream" is important only because the group in which the child communicates (i.e., those who speak English)

specifically arranged for that sound-set to be associated with real ice cream. If a child grew up learning another language, say French, she would not respond the same way to the sound pattern “ice cream.”

The community in which a child learns a language teaches her what specific sound-sets to listen to (rather than simply hear). For some children who have not learned to communicate or to understand, our voices are no more important than other sounds in the environment.

The “How” of Listening

When we discussed the “how” of communicating in Chapter One, we noted that there are many different modalities for successful communication. One modality involves sounds we produce when we speak. However, we also can use hand gestures and signs to effectively communicate, as well as written words, visual symbols, and various types of pictures. Furthermore, we can combine words with gestures, thus often refining or completely altering the meaning of our words.

In a similar fashion, we must learn to understand different forms of communication from other people. Not only must we learn to listen to words, but we also must learn to understand many types of visually based signals or communication. That is, we learn to understand the gestures of other people, including simple pointing, and may learn to respond to more complex actions, such as formal sign language. We learn to understand visual symbols, from traffic signs, to line drawings, to printed words. For our children to become effective at understanding communication in the broadest sense, we must arrange for them to understand many types of visual as well as auditory modalities.

It also is important to remember that even those of us who are very competent at using speech also rely on many forms of visual systems. For example, when you come to an agreement with your employer, banker, or realtor, you don't simply trust that you (or the other person) will remember the verbal agreement. You make sure there is a written (visual) contract. That is, with your boss, you make sure that there is a visual representation of all of the critical aspects of your contract to work (i.e., how much and when you will be paid, what are the benefits, how can you renegotiate, etc.).

Furthermore, most of us use some type of calendar system to help us keep track of the what, when, and where of the many things we

do each week. In other words, we do not rely on our memories alone to help us recall what we are doing today, when we are supposed to go where, etc. A calendar and its entries form a visual system to help us structure the events of our lives. On a more immediate basis, we rely upon clocks and watches to help us “tell time” without trying to simply guess how long it has been since some past event. In part, we teach these skills to our children because if it is good for us, it will be good for them.

When Do We Listen or Understand Others?

When are we more likely to listen to what others have to say? Generally, the greater our motivation to obtain something, the more likely we are to listen to (or watch for) communicative signs pertaining to what we want. At the end of a long school day, for instance, a student is very likely to pay close attention to the teacher’s announcement that school is over so that she can go outside and play.

On the other hand, sometimes it is other people who decide that it is time to listen. For example, if a girl is playing outside the house, she may hear her mother call her name. She’s likely to now run to her and ask, “What?” Hopefully, she hears something important or interesting. Of course, some times, she merely finds out that there is one more chore to be done! In this case, when her mother calls her name, the girl is less likely to pay attention to what is said next.

There are a variety of phrases designed to get someone’s attention, including, “Listen to me! Look at me! Come here! Stop what you’re doing and listen! Pay attention!” The list is indeed long! If someone is too far away to hear your words, you may gesture for her to come closer, as when you wave your arms or motion for her to come. Only when she is close do you continue with your message.

Where Do We Listen?

While we take our ears everywhere, we don’t always listen well in every setting. We learn to pay attention to what someone else is saying in certain places but in others, we may pay little heed to what we hear. To be successful in a classroom, a student must learn to listen

for the teacher's voice above all others. Yet in the cafeteria it becomes more important to listen to what the children around you are saying.

Some children with autism act as if they are self-focused and seem not to pay attention to what is being said to them. In quiet situations, other children with autism spectrum disorders may readily attend to the only other person in the room. The goal is to teach the child to pay attention in other situations, even when other children and adults are present. To promote this type of learning, it helps to make it more rewarding for the child to listen to us—by using powerful motivators in the group situation or other settings where she does not otherwise listen to our communication.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've focused on issues related to understanding the communication of other people. Remember that a person's use of functional communication skills may be independent of his or her ability to understand the communication from others. Some children understand what we are saying but have great difficulty learning to speak or use other modes of functional communication. Other children learn to speak but have tremendous difficulty understanding what others are saying. Some children might learn to use one modality to communicate and another one to understand others' communications. For example, one child may be able to speak but understand others best when they use visual signals. Another child may use visual communication strategies to communicate, but be able to understand what others are saying. Finally, while we all prefer that children learn to understand what is said to them, we also want them to learn to understand various visual signals so that they can become effective members of our community.

Resources

Harris, S. & Delmolino, L. (2004). *Incentives for Change: Motivating People with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Learn and Gain Independence*. Bethesda: Woodbine House.

Hodgdon, L. (1995). *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication: Practical Supports for School & Home*. Troy; QuirkRoberts Pub.

(Many helpful and practical suggestions for the use of visual aids and strategies for those with various disabilities.)

