Communication and Children with a Multi Sensory Impairment

“Communication is the Exchange of Information by any means possible.”

This is a useful definition of communication by Helen Bradley as it embraces all forms of communication we use with each other e.g. facial expressions, gestures, e-mail, minicom, speech etc. Many of the pupils we support do not have the ability to communicate through formal means such as speech and writing. Therefore we need to consider a total communication approach, using a range of methods of communication, which need to be individual for every pupil.

In order to communicate, we need:
- Someone to communicate with
- Something to communicate about
- A means of communicating

It is therefore a 2 way process.

Receptive and Expressive

Communication enables comprehension and understanding as well as a means to express ourselves. The person ‘listening’ is as important as the person ‘speaking’. If there is a problem with one half of the process, then there is likely to be a breakdown in communication.

When developing a communication system for a pupil, who has a multi sensory impairment, the communication partner is very important because they often have to interpret the reactions of the pupil to different experiences/activities. This is particularly important at the pre-intentional stage of communication.

Communicative responses include verbal and non-verbal elements. We all communicate through a wide range of means both in socially understood ways and in ways, which are more personal and more fully understood by family and friends. This is especially true for pupils with a multi sensory impairment. It is important to consider the pupil’s communication skills when deciding which methods of communication will be the most appropriate.

Communication skills:

It is important to look at the communication skills available for a pupil with a multi sensory impairment taking into account their level of vision and hearing as well as their cognitive understanding.

At the pre-intentional/pre-symbolic stage it is crucial for the pupil to gain meaning from experience, learn to anticipate and predict, and learn to control the learning environment. The emphasis needs to be on routines, the use of concrete objects and tactile clues, signals and natural gesture on the pupil’s own body.

At the symbolic stage the pupil is moved on to using more symbolic use of objects of reference, signing, pictures and symbols.
In determining what communicative skills a pupil with a multi sensory impairment has you need to consider how they are able to make sense of what is going on in the world. We tend to limit pupil’s necessity for communication by anticipating their needs. Try and observe their daily routines and evaluate the opportunities the pupil has to exercise control over what happens to them.

Consider:

- Does the pupil show pleasure/distress?
- Does the pupil indicate I want more or I want to stop?
- Does the pupil indicate I’m here I want attention/leave me alone?
- Do they react in a consistent way in similar situations? How do they respond? Is it by?
  - Facial expression
  - Eye movements
  - Stilling to listen
  - Body movements
  - Vocalisations - crying/happy sounds.

Are their attempts at communication understood and reinforced?

**Methods of Communication:**

**Augmentative and Alternative Communication** is a term used to describe methods of communication, which can be used to add to the more usual methods of speech and writing. They include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology.

**Unaided Communication** is how we describe methods of communication that do not involve a piece of equipment. For example body language, gestures, pointing, eye pointing, facial expressions, vocalisations, British Sign Language and Makaton.

**Aided Communication** is how we describe methods of communication, which involve additional equipment, such as a picture chart, a computer or a special communication aid.

- They may be low-tech communication systems including pen and paper to write messages, alphabet charts, charts and books with picture symbols or photographs, and tangible symbols.
- They may be high-tech communication systems requiring at least a battery to operate ranging from simple high-tech e.g. single message devices, pointer boards, toys or books which speak when touched to very sophisticated systems e.g. specialised computers and programs, electronic aids which speak and/or print. Some people may need to use a switch to control scanning systems or a specialised pointer.

**Body Language and Facial Expressions**

We all use body language - facial expressions, gestures etc. It tells our families and friends how we feel or may be when we are telling fibs. For many pupils with a multi sensory impairment body language is central to their communication. These nonverbal methods of communication might be the only way they can express themselves, for example:

- Yes and No response.
- More response.
- Eye pointing or fist pointing.
It is therefore important to observe the pupil and respond appropriately. This will allow the pupil to understand their subtle body language is understood. It is therefore crucial that all the people working with the pupil are aware of the range of ways they may be communicating.

Using an ‘Intensive Interactive Approach’ or ‘Learning Together – Movement, Gestures and Signs’ will help the pupil move from a pre-intentional stage into an intentional stage of communication.

**Speech**

It is important to encourage the pupil to express herself/himself vocally, if only to express basic needs e.g. come here, I don’t like this etc. Whenever possible we should encourage the pupil to use their voice for communication.

Even for a profoundly deaf pupil it is important that the adult still uses speech and talks to the pupil. It encourages you to emphasise facial expressions and gives you a context to sign.

We should not worry that the use of other methods of communication will prevent a pupil from requiring speech, it tends to be the reverse as it reinforces that it is worthwhile to communicate and therefore encourages a pupil to speak.

**Objects of Reference**

Objects of reference are objects that have special meaning assigned to them e.g. they stand for something, in much the same way as words do, whether spoken, signed or written. For example, a cup might be used to signify a drink. Objects of reference can be used to present:

1. an activity e.g. plastic ball for ball pool
2. a person e.g. feeling a wristwatch for class teacher
3. or a place e.g. door chime for classroom

Objects of reference can be used to encourage the pupil to make choices as well to tell them what is going to happen. They can also be used as a calendar to outline the activities for the day with the pupil. They can be reduced or cut down to the significant feature e.g. handle of a cup or completely symbolic.

Often objects of reference are linked in with the landmarks used within the school.

**Symbol and Signing Systems**

If we can speak our words act as symbols for what we want to express. Pupils who are not able to speak need some other symbol system to enable them to get their message across (expressively communicate). There are a number of symbol systems: some are pictorial while others are based on manual signs and gestures.

**Signing Systems**

**British Sign Language (BSL)**

This is a language in its own right. It is a sign language used across the deaf community and is an alternative to spoken English. It is a visual means of communication using hand signs and facial expressions. It has its own word order and grammar, a huge vocabulary and the potential for creating more words as needed.
Sign Supported English
It takes its signs from BSL but follows English word order.

Visual Frame Signing
This is a sign language or any sign system, which is used within the specific ‘frame’ or visual space, defined by the individual who is receiving the signs. It is important when signing to any pupil that you are signing within their visual fields. The adult needs to be observant, as the pupil may not be able to tell you.

Finger spelling/Manual alphabet
The alphabet is represented by placing the fingers of one hand on the other in a variety of positions to represent different letters. This is used to complement signing systems (for names and places). It is not a signing system itself.

Deafblind Manual alphabet
This method used the slightly modified finger-spelling alphabet where the letters are spelt out by positioning the fingers on the pupil’s hand.

Block
Each letter of a word is spelt out in capital letters onto the palm of the hand. The letters are placed in the centre of the palm ‘on top of each other’ - not spread out across the hand to form the word.

Makaton signs
A basic vocabulary based on the signs of BSL. Makaton is used at the same time as spoken English. This vocabulary was originally designed to be used with people with learning difficulties to help them understand spoken language and to allow a basic form of self-expression.

Signalong
It is based on SSL and used at the same time as spoken English, following the English word order.

Tactile Signing
This is when the signs are signed directly onto the child’s body. Often using Makaton signs but, also the Canaan Barrie Signs found in “Learning Together” by Mary Lee and Lindi Mac William.

Hand over Hand Signing (Coactive)
This is when you make the signs with the child. You need to consider the child’s acceptance to touch and co-operation and only signing key signs.

Hand under Hand Signing
Some considerations when signing:
- Signing within the pupil’s visual fields also distance.
- Good colour contrast - e.g. hands against your clothing.
- Speed and movement of signs - e.g. is the pupil able to track your hand movements.
- May need to adapt some signs for individual pupils or accept their approximations.
Photographs

Photographs can be used if a pupil understands what they mean. Instead of using objects of reference you could use photographs of familiar objects, toys, places, family and friends. They can be used so that the pupil knows what is going to happen, to let them choose what they want to do or to let you know something.

Pictures and Symbols

Pictures and symbols can be useful as a way of making communication less specific. A photograph of a particular cup really only relates to that specific one. However a more abstract symbols of a cup for example a makaton symbol could mean, “I want a drink”, “Where’s my cup?” or “Is it drink time?”

They can also be used so that the pupil knows what is going to happen, to let them choose what they want to do or to let you know something e.g. visual timetable

There are a number of symbol systems, such as:

- **Makaton Symbols**
- **Rebus Symbols**
- **Bliss Symbols**
- **PCS Symbols**
- **Board maker**

Most of them are now available as a software programme so the reproduction and enlarging them to suit different situations is so much easier. For example, Widgit and Board maker. These symbol systems are used to make charts and books, the pupil may have a communication book with colour coded section which they use by fist pointing or eye pointing. They are also used in the high-tech communication systems, which speak when touched or highlighted, by using a switching device (VOCAs).

**Signs, Objects, Photographs and Symbols in the Environment**  It is important that the pupil with a multi sensory impairment has access to their means of communication at all times. It can be useful to have their communication method visible, for instance:

- A timetable of the day displayed using objects of reference/symbols
- Appropriate photographs or symbols on the wall in the canteen.
- Appropriate pictures up round the sand pit or water tray.
- Pictures/symbols/objects available or pinned to the wall above the bathroom sink.
- If a pupil uses a high-tech communication system it is essential to have a low-tech communication aid as a back up.

**Some considerations to enhance a Good communication environment**

- Every effort should be made to develop an environment that will meet an individual’s communication needs.
- Conditions such as lighting, background noise and the time of day should be considered so that all interactions take place in the pupil’s own optimum environment as far as possible.
o Good lighting with the light coming from behind also the adult should avoid standing in front of a window. Create a good visual environment by considering having blinds on the windows, use of task lights, and reduce glare and visual contrast.
o Create a good listening environment by reducing hard surfaces, which cause Sound reverberation. Also consider creating mini environments e.g. little room
o Hearing aids, establish good hearing aid use and management to amplify sounds and develop listening skills.
o Glasses, establish good use of glasses and make use they are kept clean.
o Provide landmarks and tactile/scented or auditory markers to help the child’s understanding of the school.
o Physical routines give structure to the day e.g. circuits, physiotherapy linked to music or massage with a particular song. A very structure routine helps the child anticipate what is happening through constant repetition of actions and events.
o Songs and ditties can also help the pupil anticipate regular activities e.g. “This is the way we wash our hands”.
o Initially you may have to restrict the number of adults involved with a pupil with a multi sensory impairment so key workers get to know the pupil and how they communicate. This reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding his or her signals, which can be frustrating for everyone especially the pupil.
o When approaching the pupil always speak using their name before touching them and tell them when you leave. Always tell them where you are taking them and what is about to happen, using objects of reference/symbols/signing etc.
o Offer choice and allow the pupil to have control.
o Enhance sensory information.
o Use of scented materials to identify places and activities.
o Provide consistency.
o Timing and pace is important, give the pupil plenty of warning before a change of position, or activity, time to adjust and respond.

Bibliography:

Websites:
www.sense.or.uk
www.rnib.org
www.rnid.or.uk
www.scope.or.uk
www.communicationmatters.org.uk