

Chapter 3

Developing natural gesture

“By treating the learner as social and communicative, she/he gradually becomes so. We show the child through our actions that what she/he does has meaning to us. We treat the behaviour as meaningful... In this way the learner begins to understand that a behaviour can have a shared meaning.” (Hewett and Nind 1993)



As the child develops an increasing ability to understand and eventually to control interactions, attention may shift from the close relationship between adult and child, to include a greater interest in objects and the environment. We may have to intervene to compensate for a lack of visual information, and structure the child's environment to take this into account.

The child with visual impairment has ways of expressing his interests and needs which are very personal and may appear unusual, for example, he may move his fingers slightly if he hears the sound of an object he likes and lower his head to listen more intently. It is important that these gestures are carefully observed and understood. It can be difficult for the adult to know what it is that the child is referring to because of the child's unconventional means of self-expression. If a mis-match in interaction continues over time, there is the danger that the child gives up trying to get his message across and retreats within himself.

Observing the child

It is necessary to observe the child's repertoire of gestures, movements and vocalisations, and the context in which they are used. The earliest of these tend to be very basic, eg a mouth movement to express hunger or thirst, an arm movement to express like or dislike. These gestures can be picked up by the adult and reflected back to the child. That is, they can be used by the adult when talking to the child to show him that he has been

understood. Gradually the child realises that these particular movements and gestures elicit a consistent reaction from the adult, and thus he becomes aware that what he does affects those around him and that these gestures carry meaning.

The importance of the adult role within everyday interactions must always be stressed. The adult has to carefully observe and interpret what the child is doing. She has to be able to respond and adjust her behaviour appropriately to suit the child. All the time she is monitoring the situation, following the child's lead, so that he is experiencing what it is to be in control.

This way of observing and interacting with the child should be carried on, not only within the movement interaction sessions, but also in the routines and activities of the class day. This is much more difficult in an everyday context. There are the usual constraints of a busy school timetable, specialist teachers and therapists coming in, mealtimes, toileting and curriculum goals to be met! All these can put pressure on staff, so that children tend to be rushed through activities to be on time. We need to take a step back and think "What are we trying to achieve? Is this timetable really in the child's best interests?" The most important thing we can give our children and ourselves is time. Time for them to express themselves, time for ourselves to be watchful.

All children have ways of communicating, through facial expression, crying, laughing, personal vocalisations and movements. There is often a tendency to underestimate what a child is communicating, particularly if they have severe physical difficulties. There may not be eye contact that sends the message "I am talking to you!" We have to be particularly watchful as to whether the child is attempting to communicate or not, as they are less aware of the listener or the listener's needs. Time for observation is therefore one of the most important elements of a busy schedule. Opportunities should be made to share these observations with other members of the team and with the family. Good teamwork will ensure consistency of approach through discussion and consensus.

At the same time as observing closely what the child is actually doing in the everyday environment, we are looking for ways of extending and developing his communicative abilities.

"The most important thing we can give our children and ourselves is time. Time for them to express themselves, time for ourselves to be watchful"

Bringing objects into a movement session

The beginning stages of shared attention (see section entitled "Mother-child interaction") can be addressed by bringing favoured objects into the movement interaction session. This has to be done with care. Children with visual impairment may be more interested in people than objects, and resent their inclusion in the secure, established relationship.

However, at the right stage and in the right way, in order to widen their experiences, children should be encouraged to take an interest in objects.

To begin with, the object should be a part of the interaction itself:

- Tom and Jane, his teacher, are sitting opposite each other, clapping rhythms in a turn-taking exchange. Jane picks up a ball and holds it between herself and Tom, and she begins to tap Tom's rhythms on the ball. Tom picks up the ball and holds it to his head, Jane presses her head to the ball and shakes her head from side to side. Tom laughs and throws the ball backwards over his head.

In the above example, the ball is secondary to the interaction between adult and child. However, gradually through games such as these the child begins to accept and share objects with another person. In time the properties of the object itself take on more significance and the communication becomes more about the object.

- Laura and Pat, her carer, are building a tower with large beanbags. They lift the heavy beanbags together, one on either side. Laura reaches for the next beanbag and Pat holds back a little, waiting to see if Laura will ask for help. Laura realises that the beanbag is too heavy for her and holds it out to Pat to ask for her help. Pat takes the other end and together they lift the beanbag.



Giving and receiving communication

One of the more difficult concepts for children with visual impairment to grasp, is that communication is a two-way process. It may be that they do not yet see themselves as separate individuals and therefore have a poor understanding of reciprocity and the need to alter their response to take account of their partner. They may be able to send a message and initiate interaction but still have only a vague understanding of how that message is received by another. How can they understand that a sighted person can see their gesture?

Many children may be seen to be using symbolic gesture eg tapping the table to indicate the keyboard, but they may not be aware of having to convey that message by gaining the attention of the adult first. The situation is still dependent on the adult interpreting the behaviour as meaningful. This unevenness in communicative development is not uncommon. It is vital to provide continuing experience of movement interaction as well as opportunities in the everyday environment in which children can learn to draw attention to themselves by indicating "I" or "me".

- Laura was sitting in morning circle when Joan, her teacher, said, "Who would like to be first this morning?" Laura began to rock vigorously in her chair. Joan tapped Laura on the chest and said, "Oh, Laura says 'Me, I want to be first!'"
- James went to the computer, where Joan, his teacher was sitting, and began to tap on the keyboard, wanting the computer to be switched on. Joan did not immediately respond, waiting for him to convey his request to her more directly. After a while he turned and tapped her on the arm insistently. Joan turned the computer on saying, "Right James, you want me to turn the computer on."

Adult referenced gestures

One of the earliest gestures some children use in order to draw attention to themselves, is to pull the adult towards them or to put the adult's hand on the thing that they want. These can be very effective means of communication and act as precursors to more symbolic natural gestures. If we analyse the message that these gestures give, they mean "Come here" and "I want this" respectively. In order to move the children forward, we must analyse very carefully exactly what each gesture means and respond accordingly.

- Mary was sitting playing on the swing. Linda, her helper, was pushing the swing for her. The swing came to a stop. When the swing had stopped, Mary hesitated, then pulled at Linda's dress. Linda knew what Mary wanted, but she went and stood quietly behind her, interpreting her gesture as meaning "Come here". Mary thought for a while, waiting for Linda to start pushing the swing, but nothing happened. So Mary began to rock her body up and down, as if to say, "I want to swing". Linda responded by saying, "Swing, swing", and pushed the swing again.

In the above example the adult is beginning to be more proactive. This must be done with care, ensuring that the child is ready. If he is just beginning to realise that he can influence another by tugging at them, then that signal must be responded to immediately and reinforced. Any delay in responding could result in the child withdrawing, feeling that he has not been understood. If the child is well aware of his abilities to get what he wants, then it is perhaps time to gently encourage him to be more precise and to use more symbolic gesture.

Linking objects and natural gestures

Once this awareness is established, we can begin to extend the child’s communication skills through adult intervention. An object or activity can be chosen that is known to be motivating to the child and this can then be linked to one of his own natural gestures or body movements. This must be done with sensitivity and observation will be crucial.

By observing closely, we need to establish the child’s:

- favourite activities and playthings
- gestures used, if any, to request these
- gestures used while playing with objects
- range of natural movements and gestures.

Once we know what a child likes to play with, and have a good idea of his range of movements, the adult can intervene to link an object or activity to one of the child’s natural gestures which seems to relate well to the chosen activity. Sometimes this will be a body movement that the child makes while playing with the object.

Although the adult may have helped with the link, at this early stage it is important not to impose (ie manipulate the child’s hand into an unfamiliar hand shape) any sign on the child if it is not already a part of his natural repertoire. By using familiar movement patterns he will already be aware of how the gesture is made, and will only have to learn the symbolic aspect – what it stands for. Thus, it is easier for the child to understand and eventually to use the gesture as a sign.

- Jason, a totally blind child, used many tapping gestures on his face and head. He also loved snack time! One of his gestures, a tap with his index finger against his cheek, was chosen as his sign for biscuit. This was established relatively easily since it was a known movement for him and motivation was high.

“An object or activity can be chosen that is known to be motivating to the child”

Examples of ways that natural gesture has been used with some children are:

- Music – kick a leg
- Fan – wave both hands
- Electric massager – rub hands together
- Guitar – scratch the table
- Light – wave hand near face.

This symbolic understanding can take a long time to develop, and even those children with quite good communicative ability are likely to move through a stage where they appear to confuse signs. Although some children are aware that their movements and gestures can convey meaning, they may not understand that a specific gesture has a specific meaning. When the first signs a child uses are within his own physical repertoire, it will be easier for him to progress through this stage.

Vocalisations

Vocalisation is a very early means of communication, such as crying for displeasure, or making sounds to indicate pleasure. Some children play with their vocalisations, not necessarily in a communicative way, but for their personal enjoyment. These vocalisations can be used in the same way as individual body movements or gestures, and, like them, they can take on meaning. An example of this is a “raspberry” sound, frequently made by a certain young child, particularly at times when he was enjoying himself. Since he had also shown that he enjoyed an electric massager, the vocalisation was linked to this particular object and so became his way of requesting it. In some cases the vocalisations made will be imitations of the noise made by the object, and are very effective methods of intentional communication.

Examples of this include:

- a “drr” noise with the tongue for an electric toothbrush
- a quiet vocalisation, rising in pitch, for a fan
- a high-pitched cry for a whistle.

“Some children play with their vocalisations, not necessarily in a communicative way, but for their personal enjoyment”

Repetitive gestures

These are gestures that the children may use time and time again. Care must be taken not to judge these habitual gestures as being purposeless, and close observation is required to try to ascertain the meaning of these movements. In the first instance these gestures could have been communicative or exploratory, but because of a lack of appropriate response or stimulation at the time they first developed, they have become habitual. Very often they serve the purpose of blocking out what may be a confusing and threatening world that the child is unable to make sense of. Repetitive actions can make interaction and exploration difficult to establish. Research suggests that they develop from the natural, repetitive behaviours of the young infant eg kicking or hand gazing, but in the child with developmental delay, this repetitive behaviour has not yet been replaced with the more complex behaviour that usually follows. (Murdoch 1997) Unless the child is harming himself or others, the behaviour should not be regarded as something to be changed, but as part of the child’s communicative repertoire for us to give meaning to.

Experience has shown that when children start to use these gestures communicatively they are less likely to use them in an obsessive or ritualistic way since they have now acquired significance and meaning.

- Iain spent much of his time sitting on his own scratching or rubbing the surface in front of him. A range of different tactile surfaces was put around him, and he soon discovered that his scratching produced a greater range of tactile and auditory feedback. This encouraged him to move about and start exploring the different surfaces in his environment. Later he was given a guitar, and discovered that his scratching enabled him to make exciting new sounds. This became a favourite object, and in time his scratching gesture became his way of referring to the guitar. Although he still used this same movement to explore, the context in which it was used made it easy to determine whether it was explorative or communicative.

Songs

Many children enjoy music and songs and develop ways of requesting their favourites. For some children this can be a good way of encouraging them to initiate or make choices, as motivation is high. Methods of requesting may include:

- one of the child’s personal gestures
- an attempt to vocalise a part of the tune
- a movement that is part of an action song.

This is often an activity when family members are happy to supply examples of gestures used for favourite songs at home.

Recollecting experiences

A natural way to communicate with a child is to talk about shared activities. This might be an outing made together or a shared game or activity. While recalling the events, the adult can illustrate the story by reliving the activity using actions and gestures that formed a part of the activity. Similarly sounds may be used eg the sound made by the green man bleep when crossing the road. Such sounds may well have been a very significant part of the journey for the child. In this way the child is helped to remember activities that have taken place and learns how to relive his shared enjoyment with the adult. He can begin to develop both memory and imagination.

Conclusion

It can take a long time for communicative understanding to develop. Children may sometimes use one natural gesture to convey different meanings, or perhaps they will run through a whole series of them in the hope that one gesture will get them the desired activity, object or person. They have understood that their actions can convey meaning, but they have not worked out that each individual movement or vocalisation stands for a specific object or activity. In other words, they have not yet acquired true symbolic understanding. However, experience and repetition will help the child to develop this understanding. Once the idea of the symbolic nature of gesture has been established he is well on the way to being an active communicator.

“Once the idea of the symbolic nature of gesture has been established he is well on the way to being an active communicator”