



National Center and State Collaborative

NCSC's Commitment to Communicative Competence

Communication at some level is possible and identifiable for all students regardless of functional “level,” and is the starting point for developing communicative competence. Communication competence is defined as the use of a communication system that allows students to gain and demonstrate knowledge. Many people with severe speech or language problems rely on alternative forms of communication, including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems, to use with existing speech or replace difficult to understand speech.

All students can benefit from communication supports and services regardless of the severity of their disability.

AAC includes all forms of communication (other than oral speech) used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas. We all use AAC when we make facial expressions or gestures, use symbols or pictures, or use print. Special aids, such as picture and symbol communication boards and electronic devices, are available to help people express themselves. The ultimate goal of

AAC for students in educational settings is to provide a method for communication, social interaction, a sense of self-worth and engagement in academics, and other school-related activities (e.g., extra-curricular, work-study). The students will also be prepared to communicate effectively and seek assistance for a variety of situations throughout their lives, including letting someone know that they have been harmed if they are suffering abuse and/or neglect. This reduces the risk that they will be victimized.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities should receive early intervention services and other supports from the school system addressing the use of AAC. Most students should develop a level of communicative competence by kindergarten and be supported to use AAC in order to maximize their access to and progress in the general curriculum. Studies suggest that increasing communicative competence for students with significant cognitive disabilities is often a matter of systematically acknowledging the student’s intent to communicate and adding low/no cost solutions to the student’s routine. Teachers and other service providers may need additional training to accurately interpret and increase the communication efforts of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Therefore, professional development is essential in assisting the Individualized Education Program team to meet the communication of needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

NCSC Communication Beliefs

- All individuals communicate regardless of age OR disability.
- All output (gestures, cries, noises) can be communicative.
- Communication at some level is possible and identifiable for all students regardless of functional “level.”
- Every step toward improved communication, attention and interaction leads to enriched quality of life and independence
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities can improve their skills with appropriate communication interventions and instruction linked to grade-level standards.
- Communication programming goals should improve students’ opportunities for increased integration and interactions with peers and the community in general.
- Students with the most significant disabilities benefit from interactions with typical peers.
- Typical peers benefit from interactions with students with the most significant disabilities!
- No more fundamental outcome of education exists than the right and the ability to communicate.

National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) Student Data

Data from NCSC states show that most of the students (69%) who take an alternate assessment on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) are able to communicate using spoken or written words. About 20% have identifiable communication methods (e.g. consistent patterns of gestures, signs, or pictures). The remaining 10% of students who take an AA-AAS also communicate. However, they do so in ways that may be difficult to identify or understand. These two groups of students should be provided with AAC so they can communicate even if the students do not develop oral speech. However, in a NCSC study of 18 states, only 40% of the students in these groups used AAC as part of their educational program, even though 20 years of research demonstrate positive communication changes from AAC use. In addition, research shows that students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn to use AAC quite quickly.

Communication and the NCSC Instructional Resources and Assessment Framework

In the NCSC framework, the three components of curriculum, instruction and assessment inform each other and are directed toward the goal of college, career, and community readiness. In order for students to benefit from challenging curriculum and high quality instruction, they must communicate what they know and can do. Therefore, communicative competence is the base for the NCSC framework. Consistent communication intervention is needed to ensure that students can access the academic content. There is no more functional life skill than communication.

NCSC is committed to helping educators ensure that students have an effective way to communicate their knowledge and skills. Educators and/or other service providers must identify the best communication methods for each student. Generally, more than one method must be used for effective communication. NCSC will provide online professional development modules for educators and for parents on how to develop communicative competence for students with significant cognitive disabilities.