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Communication - Low Tech Methods

"Low tech/Mid tech" methods include devices with voice output, but only one choice or one page recorded on them.

Switches
Through the use of cause and effect she learns "If I do this, something predictable will happen." At first, use the switch to activate something she already enjoys such as turning on her favorite song, TV show or movie. She may need help to steady her hand or press harder. To connect a switch to an electrical, rather than a battery run device, you will need an extra piece of equipment to change the current. Explore different switches to see which works best, looking at pressure needed for activation, size, pressing versus swatting, etc. Pictures or even objects can be velcroed or taped onto switches to show a message which you can record and change as often as needed. Switches can be placed in strategic locations at home or in the classroom, so she can indicate bathroom, food, music or whatever she chooses.

Switches can be used to operate computers and communication devices, both for simple cause and effect programs and for more complex programs which require scanning. This can be a difficult concept, because a girl must follow a light or box as it moves across a line of pictures and be able to press a switch to stop it as soon as it reaches her choice. Some simple communication scanners called clock scanners can contain several pictures, and a switch is hit to start and stop a dial as it moves around the set of pictures.

Positioning And Switch Placement
Positioning her for maximum hand use and accuracy is important. Her feet should be flat on the floor or on some other supporting surface. To get her to use her hand to activate a switch, place her non-dominant hand in her lap or hold it down gently. This will help break up the hand movements which interfere. Try placing her dominant forearm on a table or desk for support and stability needed to activate a switch. She may need instead to have room to wind-up and use her arm to swat at the switch. You can use any part of her body which works to activate switches, including cheek, chin, foot, knee, or elbow. Look for where she has the most functional movement.

Beginning Use Of A Switch
To start with her hand, try placing the switch just to the inside (thumb side) of her dominant hand. It should be positioned so that it is as easy as possible to activate. In the beginning, she may press the switch accidentally. Soon she will begin to understand the connection and learn to press it on purpose. If she doesn't attempt to press the switch herself, you can tell her to "press the switch" and wait a few seconds. Then, if needed, help her move her hand onto the switch by gently lifting her arm just under her wrist, telling her again to "press the switch." As she gets better, gently tap under her wrist to "cue" her to move her hand along with your verbal cue. Gradually, as she improves, tap or touch further back on her arm to cue her. Your goal is to fade out both the physical and the verbal cues so that she is initiating switch use herself.

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This should not be a problem if you have found a movement she can use voluntarily and a resulting action or activity she really likes. Remember that she will probably become bored quickly unless you change the activity frequently, though many girls have certain favorites which they can repeat infinitely.

When choosing a device, try to find a speech-language therapist who is trained in AAC and familiar with a variety of devices, their advantages and disadvantages, and can train people to use them. It is best to try out several different devices to see her reaction, and ability to activate messages, and to explore the complexities of their programming. When doing a trial, allow for plenty of time for her to adjust to and learn the system. Try to obtain a device which she can use effectively now, but which also provides room to grow as her skills improve. It may take awhile for her to realize its usefulness or she may quickly figure it out and use it functionally. It may take a long time before she initiates its use. Many devices are expensive, but you may have insurance coverage that will help. Medicaid pays for devices in almost every state, and schools are required to fund appropriate devices which are needed to work on IEP goals. The law also says that if a student needs assistive technology equipment to complete homework so that she can benefit from her educational program, the device must be available at home. Communication in all settings including home is necessary in order to learn how to communicate at school, so using her talker can be considered her homework.

Voice Output Systems
Use of a voice output device or VOCA (more easily referred to as a "talker") is attractive for a number of reasons. It gives her a voice, which changes the way people look at her and what they expect from her. People are more likely to speak to her if they realize she can speak back. It also allows a message to be broadcast across the room, when no one is with her. Voice output devices are considered assistive technology equipment, thus they are covered by education regulations.

Multiple Message Systems
A Sequencer is a one-hit device that sequences messages. For example, the first selection says the first part of a message, and the second selection says the second part of the message and so on. There are a number of different styles of sequencers available through Enabling Devices. The device can be used to read a repetitive line in a story in group time, say the Pledge of Allegiance, tell what she did last night or what she did at school, tell a joke, count or recite a recipe. They are an excellent inclusion tool, and excellent for turn taking in a conversation. An excellent way to use them is to record what she did during the day to tell at home, and to record what she did at home to tell her classmates.