

Communication Signal Inventory

Adapted from Cynthia J.Cress, Ph.D., CCC-SLP (2017)

Everyone communicates; even an individual with no speech and little movement can give communication “signals”. Gesturing, looking, moving, and making noise are some of the many ways people use signals to communicate. Some meanings of signals are known to all—like nodding “yes” or “no”, while others may be subtle or unique, making them difficult for everyone to recognize. Often, an individual may give communication signals which go unnoticed or misunderstood by less familiar communication partners—such as extended family, casual acquaintances, and new people. Missed signals can lead to frustration for both the individual and less familiar partners.

A “Communication Signal Inventory” can prove helpful for new staff orientation and for people who aren’t familiar with an individual’s way of communicating. The “Communication Signal Inventory” lists how an individual’s signals look, what the signals mean, and how others should respond. Sharing the Inventory can help others to recognize, understand, and react appropriately to the individual’s communication. Design the inventory to best meet the need; signals may be recorded in writing, a photo, or a video clip to be shared with communication partners.

An example of a Communication Signal Inventory might include:

1. **What the person does.** What is the communication signal? What is the individual doing?
2. **What it means.** What does the signal mean? What is our interpretation of the individual’s behaviour or communication signal?
3. **What you do.** What should the communication partner do when they recognize this signal? How do we acknowledge that we “got it”?
4. ***Communication Strategy.** Should the partner ask a yes/no or choice question? Should they model words or phrases on the person’s communication system? Can they model a conventional/functional gesture or facial expression (head shake/nod)? What visuals should the partner use to support communication? (emotion pictures, visual schedule, etc.)

*** This fourth column is especially helpful for stating what communication strategies the partner should use after recognizing a signal. The purpose is to shape or expand the communication signal into a more conventional gesture or symbolic representation.**

Example of a Communication Signal Inventory

Adapted from Cynthia J. Press, 2017 and Beukelman & Mirenda, 1992, 1998

What the person does	What it means	What you do	Communication Strategy
Smiles when asked a yes/no question	Yes	Respond according to situation	Model a conventional "head nod"
Looks at iPad and looks at adult	<i>Individual wants to use an app on the iPad</i>	Give the individual a choice of three apps to choose from then give them the iPad	Use auditory scrolling: Say each app while counting them on your fingers, wait for the individual to indicate "yes" or "no" to each choice
Reaches out his/her hand to other person	<i>I want to shake your hand (greeting)</i>	Say "hi" and shake the individuals hand	Model "Hi, how are you?" on communication board, button or system
Puts both arms around his/her stomach and tenses body	<i>I do not feel very good</i>	Look for other health signals like sweating, red eyes, etc. and review next steps in the individual's medical book	Use a "body" visual and have the individual point to where they feel sick
Moves hand to mouth	<i>Wants food</i>	If mealtime or near mealtime, help him/her to table or ask him to wait a few minutes	Model "I'm hungry" or "want food" on communication system
Chasing person with wheelchair	<i>I want to play chase</i>	Play "chase"	Say "go" and "stop" while pointing to symbols

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What the person does	What it means	What you do	Communication Strategy/Response