



COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

Total Communication

1. What is (total communication)?

Total Communication (TC) is philosophy of educating children with hearing loss that incorporates all means of communication; formal signs, natural gestures, fingerspelling, body language, listening, lipreading and speech. Children in TC programs typically wear hearing aids or cochlear implants. The goal is to optimize language development in whatever way is most effective for the individual child. Total Communication is truly a philosophy rather than a methodology. As a result, the implementation of the TC philosophy with one child may look entirely different than its implementation with another child.

2. What issues are at the forefront of (total communication)?

The term Total Communication is often confused with “Simultaneous Communication” or “Sim-Comm,” which, unlike TC, is a methodology, not a philosophy. Simultaneous Communication refers simply to the simultaneous use of sign and spoken language. It is driven by the natural word order of English, and most often does not include function words and word endings. The completeness of the sign component of Sim-Comm is dependent on the skills of the signer.

Although flexibility is at the very core of the TC philosophy and teachers are encouraged to use whatever communication tools are most effective for the individual child, it is often the predisposition, skills and experience of the teacher rather than the needs of the child that determines how Total Communication is implemented. An individual teacher may be very committed to the use of sign language, and in their enthusiasm to sign may neglect a child’s auditory and speech potential. Conversely, a teacher may

lean toward the auditory/oral aspects of Total Communication and may not provide a child with sufficient sign support to optimize language development. The reality of Total Communication is often an “anything goes” methodology, lacking in objective measures, guidelines and strategies.

A significant area of concern related to the simultaneous use of sign and spoken language is that the child does not get a clear representation of either English or American Sign Language (ASL). Given that ASL does not follow English word order, it cannot be “spoken.” Spoken language is, by nature, difficult to see on the lips, so the child is not getting the complete English message either. Some feel that is more effective to use either ASL without voice, or spoken English without sign. However, when used appropriately, sign can effectively facilitate the development of spoken language.

3. What should every parent or professional know about Total Communication?

The original intent of the Total Communication philosophy was to provide each child with the communication tools needed for that child to develop language competence. This should continue to be the goal of every teacher for every child. However, the philosophy of Total Communication has often been over-simplified and has been confused with the Simultaneous Communication methodology that simply combines sign and spoken language. Sign and spoken language can be effectively combined, but parents and professionals need to be sure that language competence is being developed optimally taking into consideration the strengths and needs of the individual child.

Where else can I find information about (total communication)?

Schwartz, Sue; (Editor) Choices in Deafness: A Parents’ Guide to Communication Options; Woodbine House, 1996 (2nd Edition)

Raising Deaf Kids: A World of Information Children with Hearing Loss;
<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/communicating/choices/>

Elizabeth D. Gibbs, Ann Springer, Betsy Gibbs; Early Use of Total Communication : An Introductory Guide for Parents; Brookes Publishing Company; 1994

Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that’s designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We’ve recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!