



CENTER FOR
DEVELOPMENT
& DISABILITY

Together We Connect! Supporting Meaningful Communication for Minimally Speaking Individuals

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Objectives

Participants will:

1. State at least three ways that an individual can communicate.
2. Name at least three reasons why people communicate.
3. Highlight two skills to target to support meaningful communication.

Allow me to step onto my soapbox...

- **Usage:** Being "on a soapbox" refers to someone passionately lecturing on a topic
- **Origin:** Late 1800s to early 1900s, when soap was shipped in sturdy wooden crates that doubled as podiums.
- **Purpose:** Speakers used these crates in parks or on street corners to gain a better vantage point when voicing political or social views.

The Foundation For Everything

- Quality of Life
- Belonging
- Personal Sense of Agency

“True belonging doesn’t require us to change who we are; it requires us to BE who we are.”

Brene Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*

Communication, Language, Speech

COMMUNICATION – An exchange of information between individuals through a common system of signs, symbols or behavior

LANGUAGE – communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals such as voice sounds, gestures or written symbols

SPEECH – communication by the articulation of words

Communication is a social behavior

Communication is a process that requires:

- A sender
- A receiver
- A topic of joint focus
- A method of communication

(Schweigert, 2016)

What is “Minimally Speaking?”

A term that might be described as:

- Fewer than 20 to 30 words
- A small set of spoken words or fixed phrases
- Words may only be used in narrow contexts or for limited functions
- May include echolalia or scripted language

Kent, D. & Hutchins, T (2025) Evidence-Based Strategies for Supporting Language in Minimally Speaking Autistic Youth. Speech-Pathology.com Course 11442. Available at www.speechpathology.com .

Bottema-Beutel, K., Zisk, A..H, Zimmerman J. & Yu B. (2025). Conceptualizing and describing autistic language: Moving on from “verbal”, ‘minimally verbal’ and ‘nonverbal’. *Autism*, Vol 29 (6), 1367-1373

Considering form...

“The ability to speak, sign or label and point to a picture does not ensure that communication will occur.”

Janzen, 1996

“When the focus is on successful communication, the form is reduced to its proper place of being a means toward an end, rather than the end itself.”

From Phillip Sweigert Workshop (2021), DeThorne et al 2014

Still let's talk a bit about “form”!

- Words
- Manual signs
- Actions
- Gestures
- Objects
- Pictures
- AAC...

Some thoughts about AAC

- AAC does not have to be seen as a “last resort”
 - Consider when speech is intermittent, not reliable in all settings, not intelligible to a variety of communication partners, requires too much effort (expense)
- For any form of communication, consider if messages are being sent and received in a way that helps this person achieve their function
- Ask yourself –
 - What do I observe?
 - Is the behavior/communication directed to another person?
 - What might be the purpose of the behavior/communication?

Kent, D. & Hutchins, T (2025) Evidence-Based Strategies for Supporting Language in Minimally Speaking Autistic Youth. Speech-Pathology.com Course 11442. Available at www.speechpathology.com

Hulbert, E. (2026) AAC is Everywhere: Embracing the Tech and Making it Meaningful for Young Adults with Communication Difference. Speech-Pathology.com Course 11392. Available at www.speechpathology.com

Has Communication Occurred?

- Is there an **exchange** of information?
- Is a message either **directed to** or **received from** another person?

Think about how the same picture, gesture or word could be interpreted either as communication or not

All communication is social!

Individuals may learn to talk or use alternative methods of communication...

But these have little value if social interaction skills are not developed to provide opportunities to use those skills for meaningful communication with another person

(Frea, 2015)



Why does any of this matter to me?

What foundations are important to consider when working with an individual/family to establish meaningful goals?

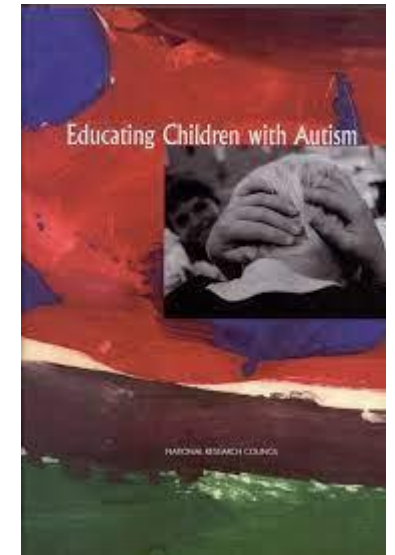
- Are you focused on communication, language and/or speech?
- How does the individual send messages?
- How does the individual best receive messages?
- What form of communication is the most functional and meaningful for this individual?

****Always consider the context!**

Core Communication Challenges

Joint Attention: coordination of attention between people and objects

Symbol Use: learning conventional or shared meaning for symbols



National Research Council, 2001

Joint Attention

- Orienting and attending to a social partner
- Shifting gaze between people and objects
- Sharing affect (emotional states) with another person
- Drawing another person's attention to objects or events in order to share an experience



What might be the impact of challenges with these skills be in supporting meaningful communication? How would you consider goals for intervention?

Symbol Use

Use of conventional gestures

Learning conventional meanings for words

Using objects functionally

Symbolic play



What is the impact on communication skills? How might you re-consider goals for intervention?

Developing Meaningful Communication

Thinking about function

- Tangible → *“I want something”*
- Escape/Avoid → *“I want out of something”*
- Attention → *“I want attention”*
- Sensory/Automatic → *“I want to feel good or better”*

Sometimes hard news:
you can't change the
function!

Better news: you don't
need to!

Getting down to the basics

A WAY TO SAY “YES”

- Looking
- Reaching
- Smiling
- Guiding
- Pointing
- Nodding
- Giving (to get help)...

A WAY TO SAY “NO”

- Walking away
- Pushing away
- Yelling/crying
- Physical aggression
- Shaking head
- Ignoring
- Saying “no”...



Why does any of this matter to me?

- How is your person currently communicating?
- What are they trying to “say”?
- How does their motivation for communication inform the development of goals?
- What would expanding on their current functions look like?

Intervention

KEY CONCEPTS

- **DIRECT TEACHING**
- **GUIDED PRACTICE**
- **FOCUS ON MEANING**

Direct Teaching and Guided Practice

- Learners might not learn social communication skills just by being around people who have skills they are interested in/we think they might enjoy learning.
- Social communication skills often need to be taught directly and explicitly in a variety of settings.
- Guided practice with immediate support and feedback helps ensure that the individual has access to skills they want to learn.

Taylor & Laurel, 2016

Meaning

Individuals may be able to remember chunks of information easily but may not be able to organize that content or sort out what is the relevant information ...think meaning, intent, purpose!

What might help when meaning is not clear...

Nonverbal prompting

Strong use of nonverbal communication

Visual supports

Limit partner language – “one up rule”

Avoid repeating

One communication partner at a time

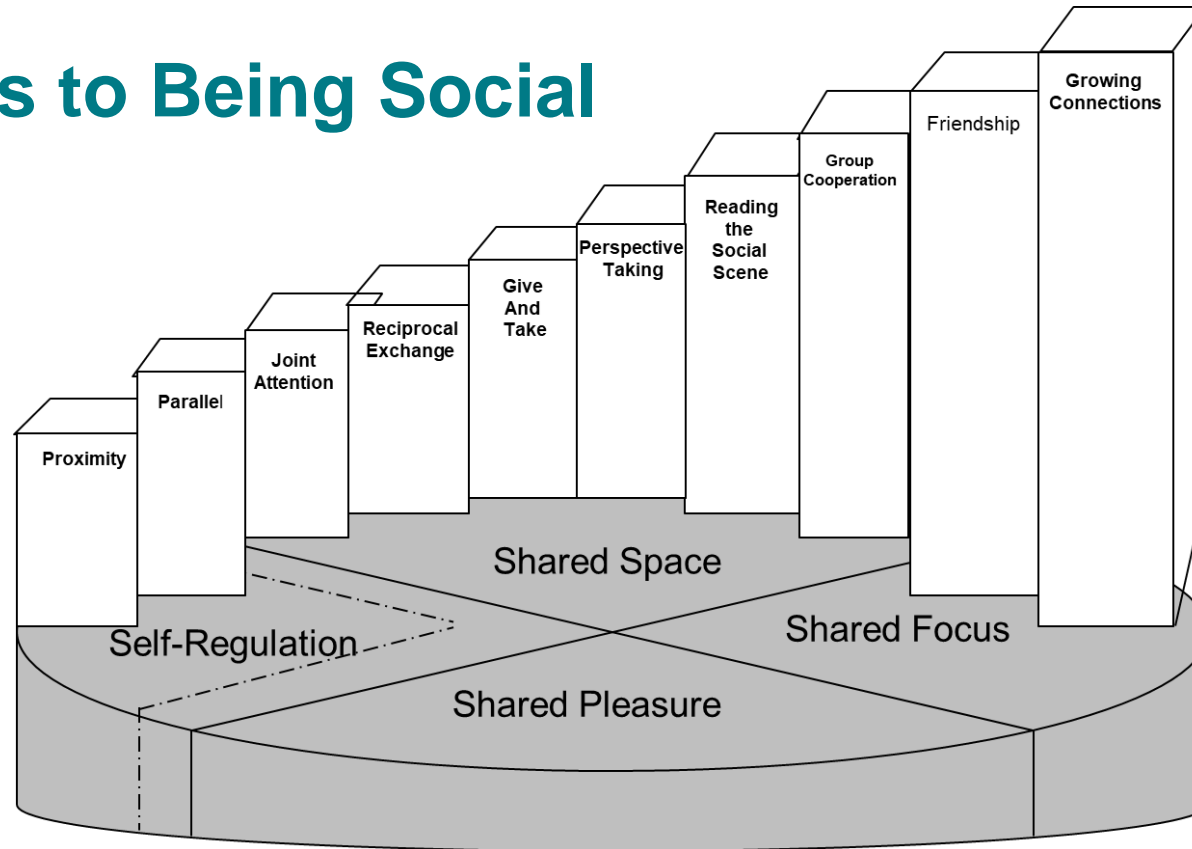
Face to face

Slow the pace

Wait and signal

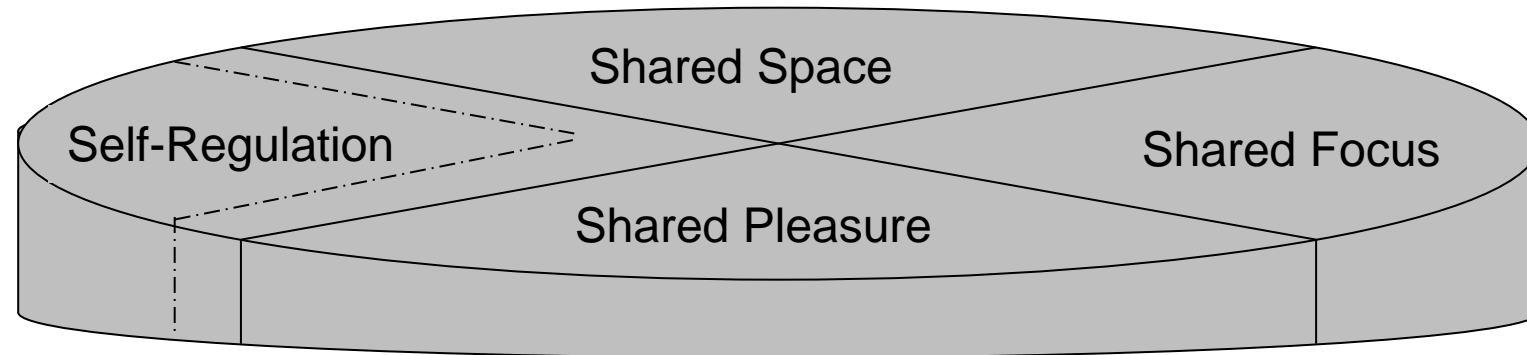
Thinking about foundations

The Steps to Being Social



Taylor, Laurel 2016

Engagement is the Foundation for all the Steps to Being Social



Taylor & Laurel, 2016

Some thoughts about self-regulation

CALM + ALERT = READY

**We cannot pursue social interaction
outside of a “ready” state**



What input have I observed that helps this individual be ready?

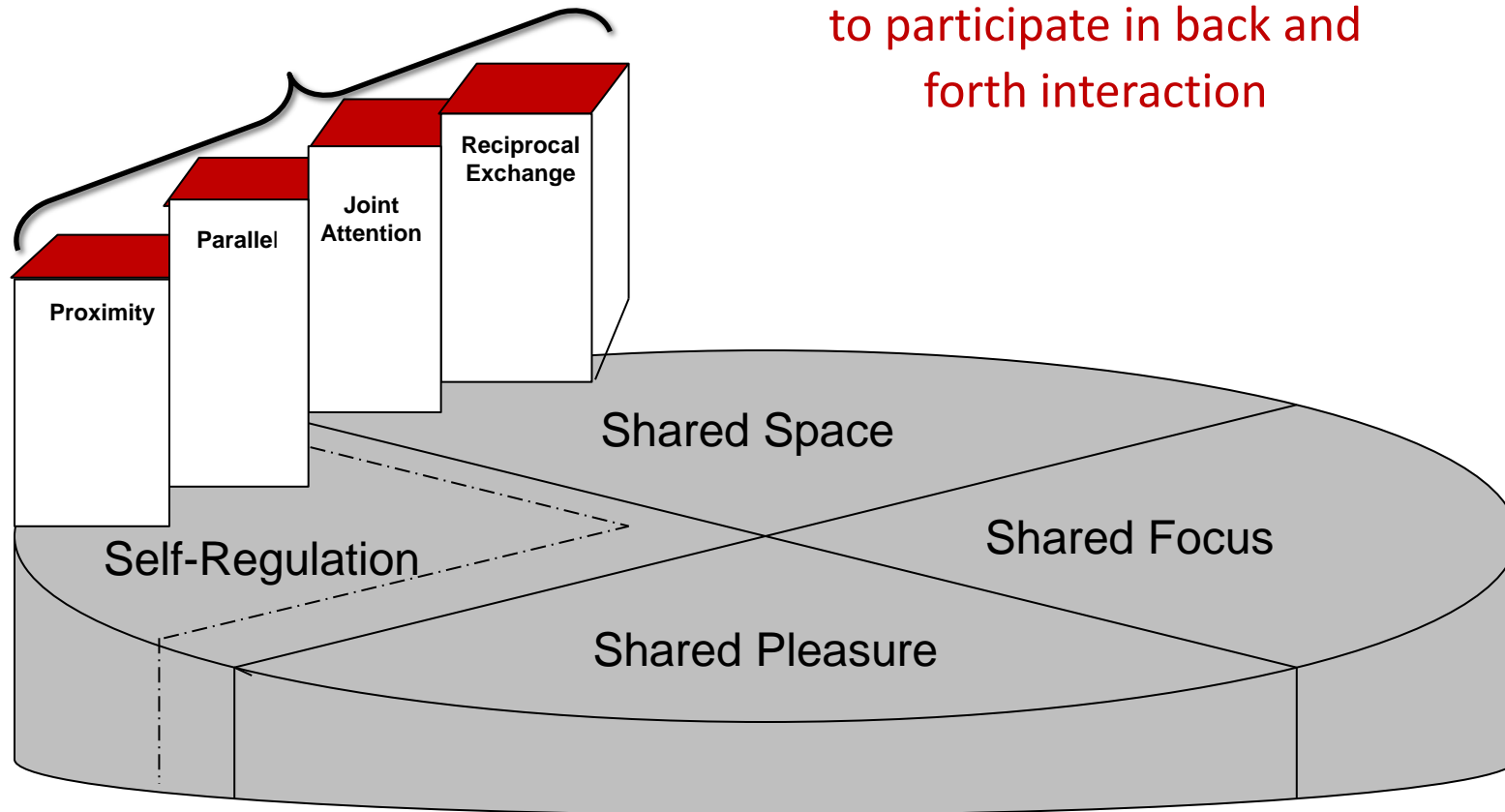
What is Happy Relaxed Engaged in ABA (2023). *How to ABA*, <https://howtoaba.com/happy-relaxed-engaged/>

Taylor, K & Laurel, Marci (2016). *Social Engagement and the Steps to Being Social*. Future Horizons

Skill Set: **LOWER 4**

Lower 4

Learning to be together with a social partner and beginning to participate in back and forth interaction



Taylor & Laurel, 2016

Some priorities for intervention

Priorities for Intervention: Social Engagement

- Shared space
- Shared focus
- Shared enjoyment

How will you visually define the space?

What is the individual most interested in?

What cues show their pleasure?

Sample skills to target:

Individual stays close enough (5 feet or less) to share focus and enjoyment

Individual briefly pays attention to the same item or activity with another person

Individual appears to experience enjoyment with a skilled partner (e.g., smiles, glances, looks, laughs)

Priorities for Intervention: Reciprocity

- Orients body to communication partner
- Imitates sounds and actions
- Takes and gives objects
- Visible anticipation of partner's action
- Back and forth interaction

Sample skills to target:

Individual orients body to a communication partner

Individual imitates a sound or action

Individual takes an object offered

Individual gives an object in response to a gestural prompt

Individual looks with clear visible anticipation for communication partner's actions

Individual takes several turns in back and forth interaction

Priorities for Intervention: Develop expressive skills

- Direct requests to another person
- Initiate interaction/communication
- Persist in getting a message sent
- Express needs and wants in a way that others can understand and is appropriate to the setting
- Use communication to ask for help
- Protest in a way that is effective and appropriate to the setting

Sample Skills to Target

Individual uses gesture/picture/actions/word(s) to direct requests to another person

Given visual prompt (objects/pictures), individual initiates interaction with a communication partner

Individual communicates to protest/refuse in a way that others can understand and is appropriate to the setting

Priorities for Intervention: Skills for back-and-forth interaction

- Take and relinquish turns
- Respond to comments
- Choose a topic or activity
- Maintain a preferred (and maybe a non-preferred) topic or activity

Sample skills to target:

Individual intentionally directs a message to a communication partner

Individual makes a nonverbal or verbal response to an action or comment

Individual agrees on a topic or activity

Individual maintains an identified topic or activity for several turns

Priority for Intervention: Increase comprehension

- Nonverbal communication
- Listening
- Symbol to meaning
- Reading
- What about echolalia?

Audet, L. (2023) Understanding and Treating Echolalia: When You Means I. SpeechPathology.com Course 10298. Available at www.speechpathology.com

Always consider...

- Does the individual have:
 - A functional way to communicate in that moment?
 - Visual supports that they understand?
 - Access to sensory supports that help them be calm and alert?

In Closing...

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place”

George Bernard Shaw