

COMMUNICATION AT MEALTIMES

Communication Signals

Infants and children who are non-verbal can communicate their needs and wants at mealtime through many sounds and movements. A few words might also be used. Observe children carefully to discover how they let you know what they want or need. Look for some of the following signals that could be used for communication.

Sounds or Speech

- General crying
- Specific type of crying that carries a message
- Fussing or whining
- Laughing, giggling, squealing, squeaking.
- General non-crying sounds
- Lip smacking, tongue clicks, raspberries
- Specific type of non-crying sound that carries a message
- Specific sound that means “yes”
- Specific sound that means “no”
- Understandable words

Gestures or Body Movements

- More tension in the body
- Less tension in the body
- Reaches or points with the hands
- Pulls away from the spoon or food
- Pushes the food away
- Waves the arms
- Rubs the eyes
- Wiggles the body
- Moves the hands to the mouth or behind the head
- Sucks the hands
- Plays with the food
- Shakes the head for “yes” or “no”
- Hides the face or puts the head down on the tray or table
- Falls asleep
- Moves the head or body toward the food
- Turns the head or body away from the food or the feeder
- Uses hand signs or specific gestures
- Points to pictures of food or symbols
- Helps self to the food

Face and Mouth Movements

- Chokes, coughs, or gags
- Tongue protrudes or thrusts out of the mouth
- Mouth opens widely or the jaw thrusts open suddenly
- Keeps the mouth open
- Bites on the spoon or fork

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- Makes feeding movements such as sucking, biting, or chewing
 - Smacks the lips
 - Closes the mouth or refuses to open it
 - Drools more, or drools less
 - Makes a stronger suck or a faster swallow
 - Keeps more food in the mouth
 - Does not swallow. Holds food in the mouth
 - Lets food fall out of the mouth
 - Spits out the food
 - Smiles
 - Frowns
 - Makes a “yes face”... happy expression
 - Makes a “no face”... unhappy expression
- How does the child let you know he likes the food?
 - How does the child let you know she doesn't like the food?
 - How does the child let you know which food or liquid he would like to eat next? (Does he make choices? Do you give him choices?)
 - How does the child let you know she is still hungry and wants to keep eating?
 - How does the child let you know he is full, and has finished the meal?

Eye Signals

- Closes the eyes
- Uses expressions of the eyes that show feelings or emotions
- Searches for the food, feeder, or spoon/fork
- Looks in a general way at the feeder or the food
- Looks away from the feeder or the food
- Looks first at the feeder and then at the food, plate, or kitchen
- Looks at the specific food or liquid wanted
- Looks at or points with the eyes toward pictures of food

Mealtime Messages

Think about the kinds of messages that guide a meal. Children who are dependent upon another person need to regulate the presentation, content, and timing of the food. Observe those you feed for the following messages.

- How does the child let you know to feed faster?
- How does the child let you know to feed more slowly or give time for a pause?
- How does the child indicate readiness for the next spoonful of food?

Communication Observation Skills

When learning how to observe and interpret a child's mealtime communication, keep the following ideas in mind.

- Every child that I feed communicates.
- Communication at mealtime occurs through the way the child uses the body, the face and mouth, the eyes, and the voice.
- I know and remember the most common non-verbal ways that messages are communicated at mealtimes from my own experience as an infant.
- The intended message can be difficult to understand because of the child's problems with physical and sensory abilities.
- The message may look, sound, or feel different from the one I expect.
- When I make changes in the physical, sensory, and communicative environments, communication will be easier for the child.