

EXPANDING MEALTIME COMMUNICATION

Most children try to guide the feeder by communicating their needs and wants at mealtimes. They will use the movements and actions of the body that are easiest or most familiar. This may include the spitting of food, knocking food off a table, taking food from another child, pushing the head back, or coughing and choking. Many of these activities can occur as the child tries to communicate. Because they are not comfortable for the feeder, they are often described as negative behaviors, and the child is restrained or punished. When communication signals are ignored or misinterpreted repeatedly, some children give up and tune out as they move toward a pattern of learned helplessness. They may refuse to eat as a signal that they no longer care about nourishment, and they withdraw their personal involvement from the meal. Others may rebel or fight the feeder, or engage in the ultimate battle against adults. They refuse to eat, and challenge the feeder to the mealtime battle. When adults take time to observe, listen, and interpret what the child is saying, mealtimes become easier and more pleasant for everyone. Review the 10 mealtime messages described in the paper, *Communication at Mealtimes*. Explore the following ideas, to create a greater understanding of the child's communication, and establish a dialogue at each meal.

- The first step is to identify how the child is already communicating the message.

You have probably figured out many of these messages if you know the child and have fed him often. We always take in information that is helpful to us. We usually know when the child likes or doesn't like a particular food, or when the child is ready to stop eating.

Begin with one of the messages you know. For example, when you are pretty sure the child likes the food, notice what he is doing to let you know he likes it.

Observe all parts of the child's body. Messages can be carried by:

- the way the body, arms, and legs move.
- the way the mouth moves, and facial expression.
- **the way the eyes move, look or carry expression.**
- **the way the voice sounds.**

If you learn through writing things down, make some notes after you have finished feeding. These will remind you of what you have observed. When you observe another day, you can see whether the same sounds and movements occur.

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Revised: January 1998©

Observe for one or two messages each time you feed. You are learning another language. Take each step slowly and let children teach you how they communicate. Here are some messages children frequently give a feeder.

- I want to eat, and I can see or smell the food and know it is there.
- I want to eat, but it isn't a regular mealtime, or I can't tell if my food is there and ready.
- I like this food.

When you think you understand what the child is telling you, give her verbal feedback. "You are looking at the glass. That tells me you want a drink". "Your quiet mouth is telling me you are ready for another bite". "Your face says you really like the potatoes". When you give this kind of feedback often, you may see the same movements used more frequently for the message. It is easier for children to learn this way than through telling them what to do. For example, "I see you looking at the spoon. Now I know you are ready", will be easier for the child to repeat than "Look at the spoon when you are ready".

- Discover ways in which you can increase the child's opportunity to make choices and communicate with you in more advanced ways. Notice whether you offer choices during the meal. Notice whether the child can see the food dishes and look toward the food desired. Do you create other possibilities for the child to communicate?

- Changes in the physical or sensory environment of the mealtime may make communication easier for you and for the child. Here are some questions for you to explore:

- Does the child have to look up or put the head back to see your face or the spoon?

- Is the child sitting or lying so that the head and body are pulled to one side, are unsteady, or lack control?

- Does the child cry or use repetitive self-stimulating behaviors as a way of saying "This is too noisy and confusing", or "This is frustrating me"?

- Does the child complain about very warm or very cold food?

- Explore ways of changing the child's physical, sensory, or communicative abilities with other persons who feed or work with the child. Another way of looking at the problems you have identified can be very helpful.

- Become aware of feelings of stress and a sense of being rushed or hurried through the meal. Mealtimes may become something we move through quickly. A child may need to catch the school bus. One feeder may be responsible for several children. We perceive a limited amount of time and we reduce our communication with children because we are afraid that if we listen, it will take too much time. When we listen and offer choices, we often make it easier for the child to eat. It might take less time, if we check it out.