

Preface

I f my possessions were taken from me with one exception,
I would choose to keep the power of communication, for
by it, I would soon regain all the rest.

—Daniel Webster

The gift of communication is one that is often taken for granted. Each day we communicate in a variety of ways for personal, social, and work-related matters. We communicate through touch, signals, gestures, and actions, as well as spoken and written words. Through communication, we gain information, weigh possibilities, and make decisions about all of our life activities. As we communicate, we display our values, our cognitive abilities, and our temperaments. Communication allows others not only to know about us but to actually know us.

When we seek to know someone better, we spend time listening and speaking with him to understand his thinking process and his perspective on the world. Through the individual's choice of words, topics, timing, and the balance between speaking and listening, we understand his life views and can gauge his interest in our views.

It is only when the gift is altered, taken away, or not given as part of the package that we begin to recognize the impact. Sensing the void in knowing the voiceless individual and his wishes leads us to the field of augmentative communication.

The world of augmentative communication is a relatively new field. Most speech-language pathologists (SLPs) practicing now have never had a course of study in augmentative communication, yet we are expected to be leaders of teams in this field as our professional responsibilities and diverse caseloads expand. For teachers and parents, there is an awareness that systems are "out there" and work for others, but the vastness of the technological field in which they operate and the number of choices and features available can be daunting. To begin this journey may feel like stepping off a cliff into a bottomless pit.

This book is meant to provide a stepping stone to the beginning of your knowledge of augmentative communication. As you begin down the path, it will feel like a cobblestone street, uneven and unsure, fraught with promise for movement and the possibility of tripping on the unsteady path at any time.

Perhaps rather than a journey on a cobblestone street, a path that has already been established, the journey for augmentative communication is instead more like an exploration. Each individual who is fitted with an augmentative communication device becomes part of the stored knowledge that is used in the next case you address. Building on confidence gained and learning from less effective measures, each subsequent augmentative communication matching experience becomes more art and less science. The intangibles you learn along the way combined with factual knowledge allow you to more effectively research feature matches for each successive client.

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In this relatively new field of speech-language pathology, research is only beginning. Research is ongoing to determine the best combination of phrase-based and word-based utterances to meet the needs of communicators. Other areas of research include access modes and more efficient technology in smaller, lighter units to improve portability. As technology continues to advance with unprecedented speed, staying current may appear to be an impossible task.

Once you become involved in augmentative communication and experience the joy new communicators experience in their newfound ability to control their environment, keeping abreast of the technology and innovations in the field become challenges you are willing to accept. Confidence increases each time the team conducts an assessment and implements a device.

Writing a book about augmentative communication is risky business. We must address the methods and techniques used in assessment and implementation, but if we write about specific technologies, the book is outdated before the print is dry on the page. But, if you extract from this book principles to apply as you keep current with technology to match to a user, you have gained the basics that will guide you through whatever technology may follow.

As experience builds, you begin to have a “feel” for technologies that will work for particular individuals. For example, you see new features in technologies and immediately a particular user or situation comes to mind. When these kinds of connections become reality for you, both you and your clients benefit.

As technology changes to make access and vocabulary easier for the user, our job as the support team must be to continue to foster independence and encourage the user to achieve his potential in all arenas. It is not until we expect the best of others that they can demonstrate to us what and who they are, and who they can truly become.

In this field of practice, as in all others, some days will be better than others. Some days all of the pieces fit, all of the batteries stay charged, and no device simply fails to work. On other days, it appears that problems are raining down around us in buckets. Regardless of the kind of day it is, we encourage you to keep your chin up, correct what you can, and move on. Dedicating yourself to helping others communicate who they are and who they want to become is a noble venture. Enjoy each day.

Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities, no doubt, crept in. Forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You will begin it well and serenely.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson