

## **RECORDING INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION USING THE *COMMUNICATION DICTIONARY***

Large amounts of paperwork follow people with disabilities throughout their lifetimes. Most often a very critical area of information is NOT recorded: individual communicative signals, what they mean and how the individual expects others to respond. We need to change this!

Many individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (such as autism and pervasive developmental disorders) are unable to speak and use their behavior to communicate messages to people around them. Some people with ASD who are able to talk, may say one thing and mean something else that is not obvious to the uninformed listener. For these reasons, staff and families can work together and create a Communication Dictionary.

A Communication Dictionary is a method of writing down and sharing information that has been learned about what the individual says or does, what it usually means and how the individual expects others to respond. A Communication Dictionary can be developed for anyone with any diagnosis at any age or stage of life.

When an individual with ASD experiences staff or family changes (such as a favorite staff leaving the workplace or the individual leaving the family home to live in a residential setting), the individual often becomes very upset by these changes, losing skills and exhibiting more problematic behaviors. Part of the reason for this could be that the individual has lost an “interpreter”, a close family member or staff who understood the unique way the individual communicated and was able to provide consistent responses. The individual with ASD has to begin again, “training” new people to understand and respond to previously understood messages. How frustrating that must be! The Communication Dictionary is one way to avoid this loss of staff/family information and reduce frustration for the individual.

Each individual should have a personal Communication Dictionary. Everyone who now knows the individual or knew the individual in the past should be invited to contribute information. Don't worry if the contributed information is “right” or not. Sometimes one communicative signal can have more than one message. This information serves as a guide and provides ideas that help everyone respond more consistently and respectfully to the individual.

Be sure to pass the Communication Dictionary on to everyone who works with the individual in the future. It should follow the individual and be updated continuously as the individual grows and learns and as others discover more about how the individual communicates.

## **HOW TO CREATE THE COMMUNICATION DICTIONARY**

Get a three-ring binder for each individual. Put the person's name on the cover and title it "Communication Dictionary for (person's name) ". Fill the binder with three-ring paper and divide each page into three columns, each with a heading as described below. Give divided pages to everyone who knows the individual and ask them to record what they have learned about how the individual communicates.

After everyone has completed pages with everything that they know about the unique communicative messages of the individual, collect all the filled in pages and make a copy of all of them for everyone who works with the individual. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all of the individuals with disabilities came to us with these guidelines for communicating? Let's make it happen!

### MICHAEL'S COMMUNICATION DICTIONARY

<u>What Michael Does</u>	<u>What it usually means</u>	<u>How we usually respond</u>
Pulls his hair	Means the room is too loud	Turn off radio or TV
Pulls you by the hand	He wants something	See what he wants and 1) If he can have it, give it to him 2) If he can't have it, offer something else
Spits out food	He doesn't like it	Give him something else to eat
Rocks back and forth in his chair	He needs to be taken to the bathroom	Take him. He can complete the bathroom sequence himself, but needs help drying his hands
Says, "Oh my God!"	Thinks something bad is about to happen	Let him know everything is ok and show him the picture of the next activity.