**LISTEN TO ME!** Gaining Attention

Ideas from ***First Things First: Early Communication for the Pre-Symbolic Child with Severe Disabilities,*** 2004 by Charity Rowland and Philip Schweigert

Gaining attention is one of the earliest and most important messages an individual can communicate.

Questions to consider:

* + Does the individual have a natural behavior, like vocalizations, that can be used to gain attention?
  + Does the environment allow for opportunities to request attention and are people responsive, so that any attempts to gain attention can be acknowledged?

When there is a natural behavior to gain attention:

* Create situations where the child has to demonstrate the behavior to get attention. The learner has to know the partner is present, but not interacting. The partner must be immediately offer “elaborative attention”
* Make sure EVERYONE understands exactly what the individual’s response is (touch adult for 2 seconds, vocalize, etc) so they consistently respond.
* An example: For a student who COULD vocalize but didn’t very often, the team decided to target vocalization as a way to gain attention. They collected baseline data on how often the student vocalized in a 20-minute sample. To encourage vocalization, they began responding to every vocalization by going to her, stroking her hair and talking to her. The result was a significant increase of her vocalizations across the day.

Using switches to gain attention:

* When orthopedic impairment prevents the individual from using a natural behavior to get attention, a switch connected to a calling device may be used.
* This requires monitoring whether or not the switch is being used intentionally by collecting data to measure response when the adult is responsive vs non-responsive. During non-responsive times, switch use should go down, and during responsive times it should go up.
* Once it is determined that the switch use is intentional, the switch should be generalized to more locations and partners.
* Individuals may make huge demands at first when they learn they have this power and adults should try to respond to each attempt, even if to acknowledge and say they can’t come now.

What if the learner doesn’t want attention?

* Identify a highly desired object and make access to that object contingent upon contacting the adult
* Example 1: A student who used a switch to activate a favorite toy but didn’t seem to enjoy adult attention: when he activated the switch, an adult came over and engaged with him and toy. Later, when he activated the toy the adult came over and gave access to the toy and continued the social interaction. Eventually, the switch was programmed to say “come see me”
* Example 2: For a student who could reach for what he wanted but did not seek attention from adults, the partner began holding the desired toy so that when he reached for it he would have to touch the adult. The adult would then offer a choice of objects. Later, the adult didn’t hold the toy, but put her hand in front of it so the student began touching her hand to get the toy.

Key variables of instruction to consider when progress is not being made:

* Are the materials highly motivating?
* Is reinforcement delayed too long? Does the student need a warm up to physically make the response?
* Are your cues clear and paced so the student can receive and respond to them?
* Is the targeted response too difficult? Do you need to adjust positioning of the student or the switch?