Communication Considerations A-Z™

Communication Choices and Decision Making

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1. What do we mean by Communication Choices and Decision Making?

Decision making is a process of problem solving that leads us to a plan of action after considering our alternatives. Communication choices (described in other parts of this series) are the alternatives – the various approaches used to educate and converse with deaf and hard-of-hearing children. The decision making process around communication choices is a unique journey each family takes with their child to make connections, communicate and share the wonders of the world.

As parents, we make decisions for our children each day. The decision about how the family will communicate with a child is personal and precious...it has ramifications for all involved. So, it can seem especially weighty. I am not the parent of a D/HH child, so I cannot fully appreciate how overwhelming such decisions can be. However, as a parent, I can identify with the fear that accompanies complex decisions. Remember that the process is to choose from among alternatives – not to make a choice between right and wrong. The initial decisions are less of a burden if we recognize that they can be modified over time as we get more information. Many families revise their decisions at various times during the child's life. Others combine approaches in unique and creative ways, depending on the child's needs.

Families approach decision making in ways that reflect their unique styles, culture, values and concerns. There is no one "right" way. Some

may gather all the information and rationally consider the pros and cons. Others may trust their gut instincts and respond to how they feel about the situation. Still others may seek creative solutions to build support systems. It can be useful to blend all of these approaches (rational, emotional and creative) when problem solving.

If you were to "pack a bag" for this decision-making journey, it might include three things: 1) encouragement to take the time you need to explore the issues and to understand your child's unique needs, 2) support from good listeners and others who have made the journey before you (parents), and 3) a bias detector – allowing you to recognize that few opinions are without some bias. Recognizing this gives perspective as you consider the input.

2. What issues are at the forefront of decision making around communication choices?

Time is currently an issue at the forefront. Infants are being identified early, and parents may feel pressured to make decisions as quickly as possible so as not to lose precious time. Yet consider the time after a birth of a baby, or after a diagnosis, or during a transition from childhood to adolescence....these are challenging for all families. Parents do well to resist the pressure to make quick decisions. Instead, families can focus gaining perspective and on accessing the kinds of supports (e.g., caring people, parent groups, information, role models, sounding boards, local resources) that will help to clarify options. Partnerships can develop with professionals and others; values can be brought into focus. With time, confidence in decision making grows. As you take the time to reflect on your child's progress, you will confirm your decisions, or you will be led to adjust them. I call this the "safety net." It is the willingness to evaluate how we are doing, and to adjust the course if needed.

3. What should every parent or professional know about communication choices and decision making?

It is not uncommon for parents to encounter strong and contradictory opinions about the choices that "should" be made. You know your child and family best. This knowledge is at the foundation of decision making. Whatever you choose should be a comfortable "fit" for your family. So, it is important to consider what the approach will require of your family, whether or not you have access to needed resources in your community, and if your goals are able to be met with the selected approach. It is a flexible discovery process that leads to a "good fit" to the needs of the child and family. Your ongoing efforts will pay off. A common denominator among successful deaf and hard-of-hearing children is the love, communication and support received from their families.

4. Where can I find information about communication choices and decision making?

Several resources are helpful to families and professionals who are in the process of decision making. Those listed below offer balanced perspectives and liberally include the perspectives of parents. The first

reference listed offers many practical ideas to families for building effective support systems. The Hanen Centre resource is not about decision making, but it offers a parent-friendly manual for communicating with a little one, regardless of communication approach.

REFERENCES USED IN THIS ESSAY

DesGeorges, J. & Kennedy, S. (2004). First visits and family support. In S. Watkins (Ed.) *SKI-HI Curriculum: Family-centered programming for infants and young children with hearing loss.* SKI-Hi Institute. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Pepper, J. & Weitzman, E. (2004). It takes two to talk: A practical guide for parents of children with language delays. Ontario, CA: The Hanen Centre. www.hanen.org.

Schwartz, S. (Ed.), (1996). Choices in deafness: A parents' guide to communication options (Second Edition). Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. Note: Third edition expected in June, 2007.

Website: http://www.ncbegin.com/communication-options-comm-options.html

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Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that's designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We've recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!