

Colby's Daily Journal: A School-Home Effort to Promote Communication Development

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Abstract

Daily communication journals are a powerful tool to promote communication development in children with severe disabilities. Each page of the daily journal features three parts: a print or braille label, a recording device, and a tangible symbol. Children should participate in both the preparation of the daily journal and its review, thus gaining opportunities to develop associations between important school events and the symbols that represent those events. The review of the daily journal in the home creates opportunities for children to recall school events and to share those events with family members.

Thank you

The authors wish to thank Amy Randall for sharing her family with others so that we might learn from her. She is a truly remarkable individual.

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While collecting data for a study on the communication development of children with severe disabilities, I was welcomed into Colby's home and allowed to film the after school interactions he shared with his mother, Amy Randall. Colby, 4 years old at the time of filming, is a surviving twin, born at 24 weeks gestation. He has light perception only, due to Retinopathy of Prematurity (stage 5). Colby also has a sloping, moderate to profound hearing loss. He wears glasses (for protection) and hearing aids that make speech accessible. Colby is an inquisitive child who is charged with energy. While filming in the home, I was able to capture Colby and his mother reviewing his daily communication journal. This article describes the components of his daily journal and how the daily preparation and review of the journal supports Colby's communication development.

The Components of Each Page

Colby's journal was developed by his teacher, Kim Conlon, at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, MA. Colby's journal includes pages that correspond to each of his daily classes. A braille and print label appear in the top third of each page. The label states the name of the class, such as Gross Motor or Speech. While Colby is not yet a braille reader, reviewing braille labels is one way to increase his familiarity with braille. When reviewing the journal at home, Colby's mom carefully guides Colby to move his hands across the braille while voicing the braille word(s). Reviewing the braille labels with his mother allows him to practice appropriate hand and finger orientation to the braille. Such experiences with braille materials are essential to the literacy development of the pre-reading child who is blind just as exposure and experiences with print are important to the child who is sighted (American

Printing House for the Blind, 1995; Koenig & Holbrook, 2002).

A small recording device appears on the second third of each page. The device used in Colby's journal is from the *American Printing House for the Blind*, although similar products can be found in catalogues of adaptive equipment. This voice output device is used to record a single message that was shared during the class labeled at the top of the page. For example, on the speech page, the speech therapist recorded, "papapapa," a sound that she emphasized during the lesson that day. The recording device is attached with velcro, thus allowing Colby to remove it and hold it up to his ear. This allows him to hear about a memorable event that occurred at school while also motivating him to practice the sounds he learned in speech. Another page features the recording of a chant that was part of a ritualized activity performed in the gross motor class. Most early gestures and first words appear in the context of ritualized games and chants. Sharing such ritualized games across environments increases opportunities for the child to experience the repetition of specific words and gestures, thus supporting early vocabulary development. It is through such repetitions that children learn to link words with specific events (Bloom, L., 1993; Wetherby, Reichle, & Pierce, 1998).

The bottom third of each page features the tangible symbol that represents the class (such as speech or gross motor). Tangible symbols are objects that can be handled and that share a perceptual relationship with what they represent. They make fewer demands on the child's memory than more abstract symbols (Rowland & Schweigert, 2000b). Such objects can provide a transition between pre-symbolic and symbolic communication (Park, 1997). The use of tangible symbols in the daily journal is highly appropriate for Colby because he is already using these same representations in his daily schedule. The presence

of these symbols along with the braille label on each page, creates opportunities for adults to support him to make connections between the more concrete tangible symbols that he already knows and the more abstract symbols of braille. This same approach is meaningful for the sighted child whose book can feature tangible symbols paired with print labels. The tangible symbols are attached in velcro so that Colby can remove them and touch all sides of the object. This is important to his identification of the perceptual features of the object symbol and its relationship to the referent (the thing it represents). At times, Kim includes additional representations. For example, in addition to the spoon that represents cooking class, she might add a boxtop that Colby tore off a Brownie mix or some other object or partial object to represent steps within the lesson. The representations she selects are meaningful to Colby because they are based on his individual experiences.

The Process of Preparation and Review

While the creation of the daily journal is a relatively simple process, it may have a remarkable impact on the child's ability to make connections between school and home events. It is both the process of preparing the daily journal that takes place during the school day, and the review of the journal in the home that is so valuable to the child. In the school setting, each professional records his/her message and attaches the corresponding tangible symbol while the child is present. The child hears the message being recorded and touches the tangible symbol(s) and label with the professional. The same page is then reviewed in the home by the parent and child, supporting the child to create distance in time and space between important school experiences and representations of those experiences. The representations (print, braille, line drawings, photographs, tangible objects, and recorded speech) activate the child's memory.

The process of daily journal review teaches the child that conversations can be about events that occurred outside of the current environment. This separation in time and space is part of the process of distancing which is essential to the development of symbolic understanding. Only when the child can use a representation separated temporally and spatially from the referent (the thing it represents) has the child achieved symbolic expression (Nelson & Shaw, 2002; Rowland & Schweigert, 2000b). Daily journals support the development of distancing, while informing the parent of specific activities that can be reinforced in the home. Daily journals also allow the child to re-enact events from the school day, giving the parent(s) a glimpse into the child's emotional responses to school events. Parents also may create pages about home events that can be shared at school. The following film vividly displays Colby's enthusiasm for his daily journal, while giving the viewer a glimpse into the benefits of the journal to his communication development.

Click on image below to view movie:

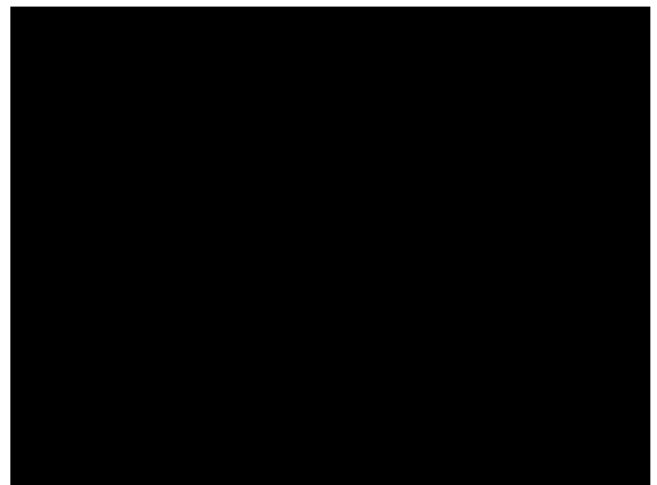


Figure #1

Tips on developing communication books

- Select representations for activities/events that are interesting and enjoyable for the child because these are more likely to be learned.
- Select object representations that are salient to the child. This means that the representation should be based on what the child is most attentive to or engaged with during the activity or class.
- Create a name for each representation that is consistently used across the school and home settings so that the child can more easily learn the meaning of object, print, or braille symbols.
- Do not use miniatures as representations for children with vision loss. The visual details of the miniature cannot be accessed tactually and the association between a miniature and a larger referent is only apparent if you can see both (Silberman, Bruce, & Nelson, 2004).
- Photographs and line drawings can be used instead of objects for children with sufficient functional vision. Photographs are more concrete, thus less demanding cognitively, but they may have more background detail and the glossy coatings can interfere with visual perception. Line drawings are more abstract, thus somewhat more cognitively demanding than photographs, but they are often less cluttered and their visual features can be enhanced through the use of color.
- Be sure that the child has the motor skills to activate the recording device or switch that you select.
- Auditory recordings share a key verbal message or sound that was experienced by the child during the class.
- Use velcro to attach object symbols and recording devices so that the child can detach them for complete exploration.
- For information on how to use tangible symbols (including pictures and line drawings) in daily schedules and conversation, see Rowland and Schweigert's, *Tangible Symbol Systems* (2000a), a booklet and video set.

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