



# Communicative Functions or Purposes of Communication

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There are many different classification systems available for looking at the purposeful uses of communication. Models are primarily of interest to researchers and professionals within the field of speech language pathology. This article, however, is a hybrid listing of aspects of communication that are especially important to assess and track with children/students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The article is designed to give a basic orientation to people outside of the speech pathology profession because these are the people who will spend more time with the child than the speech pathologist. Awareness of what to observe can contribute volumes to the development and implementation of a program for a child with ASD. No one person has to feel that he or she must master all the information and become an expert observer or data taker. Everyone is part of a team and the objective is to have a variety of observations that will help develop a more comprehensive picture of a child's skills.

## Intentionality

Before looking at types or purposes of messages from the child, it will be important to observe and understand about how intentional the child's daily communication is. By intentional is meant:

- Does the child EVER deliberately signal a message to others? It is easier to answer this question if the child engages in very direct, observable behavior. For example, does he look toward people, even briefly, before signing, pointing, gesturing or saying something? He could also take someone to the location of the item that he wants. If he seems vaguely aware of the other person who needs the message, however, he may still be intentional. Even if he is not looking directly at the person, he may have used peripheral vision to check if someone is around. More observations might be needed in case of the latter.
- Do the adults and other children in the child's life predominately need to observe what he is doing and make a guess at what he may or may not want? This means the communication partner does all the work and has to learn to "read" the situation. This is not intentional communication since it is not deliberately signaled to someone.
- What percentage of the child's messages each day are intentional?
- Is there any pattern to the types of messages that are intentional vs. non-intentional?
- Is the child more or less intentional with specific people, in specific locations, within specific activities, or at specific times of the day?

## Examples of Intentional (I) vs. Non-intentional (N) Communication:

- (I) Jake sees that the teacher has a new toy on the table. He goes to the table, looks briefly at her, she says "try it" and he grabs it.
- (N) Tim sees the new toy on the table and goes and grabs it.
- (I) Jake takes his teacher by the hand, walks to the cupboard, and points upward. (the teacher knows his favorite toy is kept in that cupboard).
- (N) Tim wanders around the room and goes over to tug at the handles of the cabinet; he does nothing to indicate he needs help; he is determined to meet his own need of getting a specific toy.

- (I) Jake gives a “break” card to his teacher to request some down time.
- (N) Tim screams and throws things after an intense morning; his teacher thinks he needs a break and directs him to a quiet corner of the room.

## Means of Communication

The child will have to use some way of sending others a message. It does not mean the messages are always clear or there is no guessing. The intentional messages are deliberately targeted for someone whereas non-intentional are not. Things to observe and share include the following:

- How does the child communicate intentionally? (see list that follows)
- What form or means of communication is used when the message is non-intentional (e.g., a teacher, aide or parent notices a behavior pattern, attaches meaning to it, and goes to intervene or take action)?
- Does he or she use one intentional/non-intentional means more than others? What else is used? (It is good to have a variety of ways of communicating).
- Are any intentional/non-intentional means more effective than others?
- What are the least effective intentional/non-intentional means used?
- Does he vary the intentional/non-intentional means by person, situation, or location?

## Various Means of Communication and Examples

- Vocalizations—sounds, grunts, unintelligible speech, shouts
- Understandable appropriate speech or echolalia (repetition of the words of others)
- Behavioral—pacing, self injurious behavior, picking at sores, stripping off clothes, aggression
- Body language—facial expression, going limp or rigid
- Gestures such as a yes/no headshake, point, push away, or made-up gestures
- Sign language—whether correctly signed or not
- Communication display or single picture/words—a point to, or exchange of picture, or word card
- Communication device—electronic display that produces voice output or not
- Handwriting or computer typed messages

## Examples of Intentional (I) and Non-Intentional (N) + Means of Communication

- (I) Signs “help” as he looks toward aide.
- (N) Signs “help” when no one is in the room; does not look around for a person.
- (I) Gives picture card to teacher in order to get popcorn.
- (N) Flips picture card in repetitive manner, discards it, and reaches for popcorn.
- (I) Presses button of electronic communication device with voice output to request puzzle. Looks toward teacher and walks to help self since no indication that this was not OK.
- (N) Presses button repeatedly on an electronic communication device and fixates on the action. After playing with it, he tires, and gets up to go get something else.

## Purposes of Communication.

The topic of purpose can be looked at in two ways. First, what does the child accomplish by communicating a message TO others through some form of communication and secondly, how does he respond to the same purposeful message when provided to him FROM others? So, for example, can a child request an object? What happens if a person requests an object from him? While the second question is important, this article will only focus

on the first question (i.e., the impact of the child's messages TO others).

It may be easier for the non-speech pathology person to have noted the characteristics of intentionality and means of communication before addressing the element of purpose. Sometimes the purposes are very obvious and other times, it may take trial and error and/or consultation with others, to figure out the exact message.

The following two categories are not inclusive of every purpose for communication. They basically reflect the common types of communication that are part of a repertoire of a young child under the age of five. A few other references at the end can be used to add more detail. It is important to know what communicative purposes a child with ASD is using so new purposes can be taught. While requesting objects is the frequent goal of early intervention programs, requesting is not the primary function expressed during conversations. Expansion of the child's repertoire of purposes can occur while teaching use of some of the means of communication outlined in the previous section.

## Group # 1: Overall Purpose—Regulation

When communication is used for regulation, there are two elements: 1) the child is interested in meeting his needs, and 2) he will attempt to regulate the actions of others to help him meet his needs or to help keep himself in his personal comfort zone. In the latter instance, he may protest violations of his routines, lack of information about pending changes of activities, refusing tasks that he considers difficult or boring, and so forth.

The teacher/parent/or whomever will want to observe things such as: 1) What outcome is the child trying to achieve? 2) Did he initiate the action or did someone cue or prompt him; if so, how much prompting was needed, and 3) Did he achieve his desired outcome? Examples of often desired outcome include:

<b>Purpose or Desired Outcome— Regulation of Others</b>	<b>Example of Regulation</b>
Wants tangible object.	Desires cheese. Stands by refrigerator and unconsciously assumes Mom will know his desire.
Wants action, event, or activity.	Wants push on swing. Signs "more."
Wants attention.	Wants help. Turns person's face to him.
Wants permission.	Wants approval to go watch TV; holds up the remote for 1 second.
Wants information.	Wants to know if time to go home. Gets jacket ready.
Wants reason/clarification.	"Why no grandma?" Bites self; screams.
Wants stop/avoid/refuse.	"No blue shirt." Hits, screams.
Commands, directs, demands any of the above.	"Jon-Jon go." (away from me). Pushes child away.

## Group # 2 Social Interaction—shared attention with others

In this second category, the child is not acting solely to meet his own needs. There is a social aspect and an interactive component rather than a controlling component. The interaction can be initiated by the child with ASD or by another adult or peer.

<b>Purpose or Desired Outcome-Social</b>	<b>Example of Social Interaction/ Shared Attention</b>
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Calling	Says, "Mom" to get her attention.
Greeting	Says "Hi" or waves to neighbor.
Requests interaction/interactive activity	Hits peer so he might chase the child with ASD (i.e., bid for chase game).
Comment/statement	Says "hot" to Mom as he touches his car-seat.
Naming (if not for personal enjoyment)	Says "Mario" to parent when he sees familiar Wii game in store.
Provides information/report	Tells teacher "Sara hurt" so teacher can provide assistance to the child who is crying.
Agree	Gives positive head shake when asked if he likes cheese.
Express feelings	Says "Sad. No more Grandma" as Dad helps him get into his car-seat after her funeral.
Social routines	Says "Thank you" when given an apple to eat.
Answers question	Points in a direction when Mom asks "Where's your brother?"
Assertiveness	Says "Mine" when peer attempts to grab his toy.
Exclamation	Says "Uh-oh." or "Oh, no!" to his teacher when he drops his pencil for the 10th time.

## Pulling it all together—Intention + Means + Function

The following examples show how situations will involve all three categories of intent, means used for communication, and the function of the message.

Observation	Intentional	Means	Function of Message
Holds crotch and says "Teacher" until told OK to proceed to the bathroom.	yes	speech + gesture	Wants permission.
Begins to throw things when told Mom will be late for pickup today.	no	behavioral	Protests change; needs information.
Announces "trick or treat" as he wanders over to the candy dish.	yes	echolalia	Wants Candy.
Jumps up and down with excitement	no	behavioral	Expresses emotion.
Gives his aide a picture of a book using Picture Exchange (PECS).	yes	communication book	Wants activity-reading.
Says, "What's your name?" and other questions of stranger; this routine occurs frequently.	yes	speech routine	Wants interaction, not information.

## Summary

This article is an introduction to understanding the notion of purposes of communication. As described in detail, there are three main aspects to consider: Is the message directed to someone or not? What means of communication is used? What might be the function of the message? The functions listed above do not follow a particular model but represent borrowing from several sources. The functions reflect types of communication found

in children under five years of age. More sophisticated categories and descriptors can be used to describe the functions of the communication of children older than five. It will be important to consider if the child initiates the functions listed. The listing is not meant to be a comprehensive checklist for readers of this article. Instead it can provide the framework from which to work with others who are looking at expressive communication skills and provide guidance for observations by a variety of team and family members.

## Suggested Resources

Paul, R. (2007). *Language disorders from infancy through adolescence: Assessment and intervention*. (3rd. ed.) St. Louis, MO: Mosby/Elsevier. (See page 489. Cognitive uses of language of young school-age children. Based on chart developed by J. Tough.)

Prizant, B., Wetherby, A. M., Rubin, A. C. & Rydell, P. J. (2006). *The SCERTS model: A comprehensive functional approach for children with autism spectrum disorders. Vol. 1 Assessment*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing. (See pgs. 251-310. SCERTS assessment forms.)

Quill, K. A. (2000). *Do-watch-listen-say: Social and communication intervention for children with autism*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing. (See pgs. 54-69. Assessment of social and communication skills for children with autism.)

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