

# Enhancing Participation with Technology

Just being physically present in the classroom is not enough for true inclusion. ALL students, including those don't communicate verbally or have other extensive support needs, need meaningful ways to contribute to academic and routine activities. Authentic engagement leads to learning and relationships. With a little creativity and some simple adaptive devices, teachers can create numerous opportunities throughout the day for the student to have an active role in class activities.



## Single-Message Communication Device (e.g., Big Mac)

- Greet people
- Say the pledge of allegiance, mission statement, etc.
- Read a sentence or passage (esp. good for repetitive texts)
- Give directions, transition warning, announcement, etc. to the class
- Tell a peer to "turn the page" during partner or group reading



## Multiple-Message Device (e.g., Go Talk 9, Four Button Communicator, etc.)

- Choose materials or activities (e.g., tell a partner what color to use for a picture, tell a lab group which substance to test next)
- Choose a peer to work with or to have a turn
- Read a poem or longer selection (by pressing number buttons in order)



## Single switch with connection to computer or power adapter

- Advance slides in a presentation on request
- "Click" as directed to operate computer program (peer partner moves mouse and/or types)
- Turn music on and off
- Turn on and off light, camera, or any appliance (for science experiment, cooking project, etc.)



## Low-tech/ "no-tech" options

- Have pictures of the characters of a story or topic being discussed and hold them up as they are mentioned in discussion or to answer a question
- Draw cards, popsicle sticks, etc. to "call on" peers (a peer can read the name aloud)
- Assist the teacher by holding up visuals, turning pages in a big book, etc.

\* These types of simple adaptations for participation only supplement and do not take the place of comprehensive and flexible communication supports.

## Enhancing Participation

- **Be creative.** These ideas are only a few examples. There is no limit to the ways that simple devices can be used to enhance participation and learning for students with intensive support needs. Never be afraid to try something new.
- **Use peers as a resource.** Classmates are one of the best sources for ideas about how the student can participate, what vocabulary should be included on the device, etc. Keep the messages age-appropriate (e.g., don't program in "Good morning. How are you feeling today?" if your students usually greet each other by saying "Hey. What's up?"). Ask a same-sex peer to record the message, so the voice matches the student.
- **Focus on involvement, not assessment.** Single-message devices and other simple communication strategies can be used to allow the student to demonstrate what he or she knows (e.g., identify vocabulary words or answer yes-no questions). However, this is not the only or more important use of these strategies. Giving the student a means to participate in lessons and group activities is equally critical.

When the goal is to teach content and/or promote involvement, set the student up for success by providing only correct/appropriate responses on the device. For example, for a show-and-tell activity, program the device with four appropriate questions or comments ("Where did you get that?" "I like it!" "That's cool!" "Is it your favorite?") so whatever button the student presses, the response will be correct.

- **Teach choice making.** Students who have not had many opportunities to make choices may not initially understand the connection between their actions (pushing a button or pointing to an object) and the outcome (receiving a particular item or activity). Over time and with practice, however, virtually all students can learn to make purposeful choices.

The most effective way to teach this skill is to treat choices as if they are purposeful, even if you are not sure that they are. Asking the student to use a reinforcer/break time activity offers an opportunity to teach this skill:

- 1) Present pictures of the two options and say, "Do you want to listen to music or look at the magazine?"
- 2) If the student reaches for or looks at one, say "Ok, you chose the magazine, Here's your magazine" and give her the object.
- 3) If she protests or bats it away, say something like "Oh, you don't want the magazine? You want to choose the music," while presenting the symbol for the music.

(If she protests again, maybe she wasn't interested in either choice you offered!)

Repeating this process frequently with a variety of choices will help her understand the power of choices. You can accelerate this learning process by sometimes offering a choice between an item you know the student likes (e.g., the magazine) and something neutral and uninteresting (e.g., a blank piece of paper). Experiencing the "consequence" of a non-desirable choice a few times encourages the student to focus on what she is selecting.