

Research Specific to: Attributing Meaning to Communication

Attributing meaning to communication acts is an important part of all early communication development. It happens whenever an adult assigns meaning to behaviors they observe. These behaviors include facial expressions, vocalizations, body movements, and gestures. The child or older student with significant disabilities may or may not be using the behaviors with the intent to communicate. However, they learn that they can communicate and control their environment when adults attribute meaning and respond meaningfully to the communication acts.

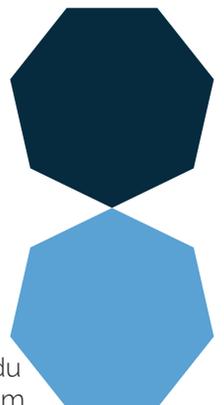
Research

1. Yoder, P., McCathren, R.B., Warren, S.F. & Watson, A. (2001). Important distinction in measuring maternal responses to communication in prelinguistic children with disabilities. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 22(3), 135-147. doi: [10.1177/152574010102200303](https://doi.org/10.1177/152574010102200303)

Summary: This study supports the need to attribute meaning to child communication acts, and provides guidance for focusing the response based on the child's communication intent. When children's communication behaviors are not intentional, the best outcomes were achieved when parents first attributed meaning and complied with the children's communication (i.e., giving them to the toy they were looking at) and then responding verbally (i.e., "I see you looking at the toy."). When children used behaviors to communicate intentionally parents' use of both verbal (i.e., stating what the child is communicating) and nonverbal responses (i.e., complying with the presumed meaning of the child's nonverbal message) were positively correlated later expressive and receptive language outcomes.

2. Cress, C.J., Arens, K.B., & Zajicek, A.K. (2007). Comparison of engagement patterns of young children with developmental disabilities between structured and free play. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 42(2), 152-164.

Summary: This study used guided strategies to help adults elicit child communication behaviors during play. When adults successfully elicited, responded to, and repeatedly encouraged the child's preintentional communication, the young children with complex communication needs learned to actively engage in their environment. These extended periods of more complex engagement increased the



number of opportunities adults had to promote communication development.

3. Yoder, P.J., Warren, S.F., Kim, K., & Gazdag, G.E. (1994). Facilitating prelinguistic communication skills in young children with developmental delays II: Systematic replication and extension. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 37, 841-851. doi: [10.1044/jshr.3704.841](https://doi.org/10.1044/jshr.3704.841)

Summary: This goal of this study was to examine the relationship between increasing children's intentional communication acts (e.g., reaching for a cup) and adults' attributing meaning and verbally labeling the act (e.g., "You want the cup."). Arranging the environment to encourage communication (e.g., putting things out of reach), following the children's attentional lead, and encouraging the child to communicate all led to an increase in child communication acts. Over time, spontaneous, intentional communication increased in frequency and generalized to interactions with parents, who were naïve to the intervention.

4. Dennis, R. (2002). Nonverbal narratives: Listening to people with severe intellectual disability. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 27 (4), 239-249. doi: [10.2511/rpsd.27.4.239](https://doi.org/10.2511/rpsd.27.4.239)

Summary: The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of practitioners who successfully listen to and interpret the communication acts of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. Focus group results indicate personal values had a strong influence on the listening practices. Focus group members also expressed issues including physical traits, and examples of personal experiences of the individual with severe disabilities that impact their ability to communicate successfully. This study highlights the need for practitioners to be aware of environmental, personal, or behavioral factors impacting successful AAC intervention with individuals who are communicating via preintentional and intentional behaviors.

5. Cress, C. J., Grabast, J., Jerke, K. B. (2011). Contingent interactions between parents and young children with severe expressive communication impairments. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 34 (2), 81-96. doi: [10.1177/1525740111416644](https://doi.org/10.1177/1525740111416644)

Summary: The objective of this study was to examine successful contingent response patterns of parents and their children with severe expressive communication during play interactions. Although parents were observed to respond to non-adult-directed communication acts, parents responded more often to child behaviors that were adult-directed and comprised of a broad range of communication signals including vocalizations combined with gestures, body movements, eye gaze, and facial expressions. The children with severe expressive communication impairments used more communication signals within communication goal-directed activities such as, requests, social routines, and functional action routines.

6. Yoder, P. J. & Warren, S.F. (1999). Maternal responsivity mediates the relationship between prelinguistic intentional communication and later language. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 22(2), 126-136. doi: [10.1177/105381519902200205](https://doi.org/10.1177/105381519902200205)

Summary: The findings of this study demonstrate that maternal responsiveness impacts children's use of intentional prelinguistic communication and is related to later language levels. Maternal responses were characterized as complying and verbally labeling the children's communicative intent, which resulted in increased intentional acts by the children with developmental delays. Maternal responsiveness was related to both later language and earlier intentional communication.

Further References:

The following articles demonstrate that use of attributing meaning facilitates meaningful communication outcomes.

McCathren, R.B. (2000). Teacher implemented prelinguistic communication intervention. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 15, 21-29. doi: [10.1177/108835760001500103](https://doi.org/10.1177/108835760001500103)

Warren, S. F., Yoder, P. J., Gazdag, G., Kim, K. & Jones, H. (1993). Facilitating prelinguistic communication skills in young children with developmental delay. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 36, 83-97. doi: [10.1044/jshr.3601.83](https://doi.org/10.1044/jshr.3601.83)

Yoder, P. & Warren, S.F. (1998) Maternal responsivity predicts the prelinguistic communication intervention that facilitates generalized intentional communication. *Journal of Speech Language Hearing Research*, 41, 1207-1219. doi: [10.1044/jslhr.4105.1207](https://doi.org/10.1044/jslhr.4105.1207)

Yoder, P., & Stone, W. L. (2006). A randomized comparison of the effect of two prelinguistic communication interventions on the acquisition of spoken communication in preschoolers with ASD. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 49(4), 698-711. doi: [10.1044/1092-4388\(2006/051\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2006/051))

The following articles demonstrate that individuals with severe and profound cognitive disabilities use communication repair strategies and nonsymbolic communication for a variety of communicative intent.

Brady, N.C., McLean, J.E., Mclean, L. K & Johnston, S. (1995). Initiation and repair of intentional communication acts by adults with severe to profound cognitive disabilities. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 38, 1334-1348. doi: [10.1044/jshr.3806.1334](https://doi.org/10.1044/jshr.3806.1334)