



Exploring Communication Opportunities: Combined Communication Strategies

Families who have just found out that their child has a difference in hearing levels, which some people call *hearing loss, deaf, or hard of hearing*, often have many questions about how their child will learn to communicate. Becoming a successful communicator and learner is a journey for each child with a hearing difference and their family. Each family will have communication *choices, or opportunities*, to consider as *roads* to explore on this language journey. Each road on your journey of language and communication represents a different way you can share thoughts, ideas, experiences, and feelings with your child. Each provides unique ways to communicate with your child and nourish your child's brain with language.

One of the roads, or ways to communicate, that you can explore is using *Combined Communication Strategies*.

What are Combined Communication Strategies?

The main goal of combining communication strategies is to try to provide both auditory and visual forms of language at the same time. You might learn about Total Communication (TC), or you might hear about Simultaneous Communication and wonder how they are different.

- **Total Communication (TC)** "is a philosophy of educating children with hearing loss that incorporates all means of communication: formal signs, natural gestures, fingerspelling, body language, listening, lipreading, and speech. Children in TC programs typically wear hearing aids or cochlear implants. The goal is to optimize language development in whatever way is most effective for the individual child. Total Communication is truly an *educational philosophy* rather than a *communication methodology*. As a result, the implementation of the TC philosophy with one child may look entirely different than its implementation with another child."¹
- **Simultaneous Communication** is speaking and signing at the same time. It is a methodology (a set of procedures) and not an educational philosophy. Sometimes people call this *sign-supported speech*.
- Communication strategies may be combined for different purposes or activities. This occurs when signing is used sometimes, speech at other times for some activities, and gestures at other times. Not all of the different strategies need to be used at the same time. However, the clarity of a message depends greatly on the skills of the signer.
- Neither Total Communication nor Simultaneous Communication are complete languages. They should be viewed as possible bridges to understanding for the child rather than providing the child with complete access to language.

¹ *Communication Considerations; Total Communication*, Hands & Voices
<https://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/totalcom.htm>

Using Combined Communication Strategies

- Parents and professionals try to make the most use of a variety of ways that children with hearing differences can communicate. Children who are learning to access communication by using both hearing/listening and vision/watching typically wear hearing aids or cochlear implants so that they can access sounds and speech as much as possible and develop listening skills. In addition, they use a variety of visual language supports to help them understand others' communication.
 - Visual communication supports may include signs that are borrowed from American Sign Language (ASL) but used in English word order along with speech.
 - Combined strategies may include signs for each word or concept that is spoken. Word endings, like '-ed', or '-ing' in English, can be very difficult for some children to hear. Word endings may be signed, but typically they are not signed.
- Children may hear and understand a lot of speech when using their hearing aids or cochlear implants in quiet settings, when people are close to them, and when they know the topic of a conversation. However, there are times when children may be very challenged to understand others' communication through listening alone. During those times, children can benefit from having access to additional visual language supports.
 - Challenging listening situations include noisy environments in school, in the community, and at home. For example, it may be difficult for the child to hear well and understand at home when the tv is on, when kitchen appliances are being used, or when there are several people talking at once both near and far away. There will also be times when children are not wearing their hearing technology, such as when swimming or bathing.
 - Some children may need visual language supports especially when there is new information being shared. Including signs and/or extra gestures for the child when in challenging listening situations may help for basic understanding.
- People who use *Simultaneous Communication* typically talk and sign words or concepts at the same time. Some families who learn sign language and speak a language other than English at home, may use signs borrowed from American Sign Language (ASL) to use when they speak their home language, too. Signs are not English, just like speech is not always English.
 - For some children, watching and listening to two different forms of language at the same time may be confusing. Other children may be able to listen through their hearing aids or cochlear implants and then watch the signs to fill in the gaps of what they do not hear clearly.
- Families need to be aware of what the barriers are to their child's understanding and provide whatever visual communication support is needed at the time so the child can understand and be fully included in family life. This may mean that everyone around the child will learn to use signs for each word or concept at the same time they are speaking. If family members and playmates sign what they are saying, then the child may be exposed to signs and speech. However, the child's understanding of what is being said and signed depends on what they are able to hear and the signer's skills.

Babies will learn any language that is used around them in meaningful ways, all the time, every day. Babies who live with family members who talk and sign may learn their family's spoken language through listening paired with signs.

How Do Combined Communication Strategies Help Children Learn Early Literacy Skills for Reading?

Combining communication strategies is not considered a formal evidence-based practice in education for teaching literacy skills. Signing and speaking at the same time may be used to provide some children with extra visual information to help them understand the idea of what is being spoken. Combining communication strategies can help bridge understanding of a spoken message, but it does not give the child full access to either spoken language or American Sign Language.

How Can You Learn More About Combining Communication Strategies?

As you start to explore Combining Communication Strategies as a communication opportunity for you and your child, there are many supportive Minnesota programs and people who can share more information and resources with you.

1. Many families find it helpful to connect with other parents and families of young children who have hearing differences to learn about different communication journeys.
 - [Parent Guides from MN Hands & Voices](#) share information and support with fellow Minnesota families of children with hearing differences. They can also help you connect with other families individually or through fun family activities provided virtually and/or in person in communities around Minnesota.
 - With your permission, your child's IFSP/IEP team members, including early intervention providers, Teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and/or your child's audiologist may also be able to help connect you with other families of young children with hearing differences in your community.
2. You may find it helpful to connect with Deaf or Hard of Hearing adults who use a combination of different communication strategies and learn about their lived experiences. [Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guides from MN Hands & Voices](#) and [Deaf Mentors from the MN Deaf Mentor Family Services](#) can help with connections, talk about their own life experiences, and share resources, too.
3. Your child's IFSP/IEP team members, early intervention providers, Teachers of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Speech Language Pathologists, and audiologists can also share information with you about Combined Communication Strategies and help support your child's communication development. (See the Special Note below.)
 - One very helpful resource person would be an IFSP/IEP team member or service provider who has specialized training and expertise in facilitating listening and spoken language development together with understanding and use of sign language in young children with hearing differences.
4. Simultaneous Communication typically uses signs for words and concepts that are borrowed from American Sign Language and uses them with speech in the word order

of the spoken language that is used. The [Minnesota Deaf Mentor Family Services](#) has a number of ways to help families of young children with hearing differences learn American Sign Language (ASL).

5. There are online information resources about Combined Communication Strategies for young children with hearing differences. A list of several selected websites you might explore has been included at the end of this document beginning on page 7.

A Special Note:

If you are not yet connected with Minnesota Infant and Toddler Intervention Services or Preschool Special Education Services for young children and their families, you can learn more about how to [Get Help for Your Child](#) on the [Help Me Grow MN](#) website. In addition, education leaders from the MN Department of Education and the MN Low Incidence Projects have shared an introduction [Letter for Families of Young Children with Hearing Differences](#). The letter provides more information about Help Me Grow MN and services that are offered free of charge to all eligible children and families through local public school districts across Minnesota, regardless of family income or immigration status.

Questions to Think About as You Consider Your Communication Journey Using Combined Communication Strategies

As you learn more about Combining Communication Strategies as a possible way to support communication with your child, it may be helpful for your family to consider what that might look like for you and your child. Below are a few questions you could think about—and talk about with supportive professionals and family members—as you begin to explore a communication journey using a combination of auditory and visual strategies.

1. The purpose of using Combined Communication Strategies is to try to help children learn to communicate using both auditory and visual forms of language at the same time. It is important to remember that signing and speaking at the same time is a way to communicate to get the general message across. However, it is not a way to fully learn either the spoken language used in the home (such as English), or American Sign Language.
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about learning to communicate with your child using spoken language combined with sign language?
 - Does signing and speaking at the same time seem to support your own current communication goals for your child and family?
2. Do you have extended family members and/or friends in your community who can help you as you help your child learn to understand and use spoken language combined with sign language? What kinds of assistance would you like to have right now?
3. To support a child's listening skills and auditory understanding of spoken language, it is important that they have as much auditory access to voices and speech sounds as possible. Early and consistent use of high-quality hearing technology is critical for providing that important auditory access to spoken language. Has your child been fitted with high-quality hearing technology that enables them to hear different voices and speech sounds as much as possible?

- If not yet, what additional information do you need that could help you understand more about your child's hearing levels and possible hearing technology options?
 - If yes, is your child wearing their hearing technology during all waking hours?
 - Does your child receive regular audiological care and monitoring to make sure their hearing technology is working well for them?
4. To support a child's understanding of language with visual supports, including sign language, it is important for the child to have consistent access to meaningful sign language being used around them. Do members of your family already know sign language? If not yet, what supports would be helpful to you in learning sign language?
 5. Every child and family are unique. Families, medical and audiological care providers, education professionals, and family-to-family program staff can work together in different ways to help children. What kinds of information and support would be most helpful to you as you explore using Combined Communication Strategies?
 6. As families support their children's language development and communication, they learn helpful strategies from professionals and other parents on how to make their home a good language learning environment for young children. Families try to use those strategies with their child during all their daily family routines and activities.
 - What are your thoughts about learning new strategies that might change how you typically do some things in your home?
 - How do you and other family members prefer to learn new things?
 - Who might be the primary caregiver(s) who will learn and use these strategies with your child first?
 - How might other family members or childcare providers help?
 7. Children who are learning to communicate through listening and spoken language combined with sign language may attend school in a variety of educational settings based on their unique communication and learning needs. They may attend a school program specifically for children with hearing differences who are also learning to communicate through a combination of signing and speaking. Some children may attend classes in a neighborhood school with support from a Teacher of Deaf/Hard of Hearing and a sign language interpreter. Some children may have developmental and learning challenges in addition to a hearing difference that will impact decisions about the most appropriate learning environment(s) to meet the child's needs.
 - What are your educational goals for your child?
 - What additional information about educational services would be helpful to you?

Remember:

Babies' brains need lots of *language nutrition*.

Your child's brain is ready and eager for you to share your love and the gift of language with them. You have started on a journey of learning and communication with your child. The journey may be familiar to you, or it may be unexpected. But, just by starting out and learning more, you are doing great things for your child and family!

There is help available for you and your family.

There are information resources that can help you learn about different ways to communicate with your child, and there are many caring people who can help you and your child on your journey.

Each family is unique.

There is no one "right" communication choice that is "the best" for all children and families. Each child is unique and needs different things. Parents and families are also different and have their own hopes and dreams for their child. They have their own family cultures, ideas, and preferences for how to communicate with their child. Some families choose one main way of communicating while other families make other choices. Your communication decisions for your child and family are respected and valued.

Be flexible.

As you learn more about hearing, hearing differences, hearing technology, your child's development, and different opportunities to support your child's language development and learning, your communication choices may change over time. Start your journey with what feels right for your child and family and be open to learning more over time. Together with fellow family members and supportive professionals, follow your child's lead and watch how they grow and develop.

Selected Online Information Resources about Combined Communication Strategies

[Beginnings For Parents of Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)

- [For Parents/Families](#)
 - [Video Samples \(including Total Communication \(TC\)\)](#)
- [Resource: Language and Communication Chart](#)

[Hands & Voices: Communication Considerations A-Z](#)

- [Total Communication](#)

[My Baby's Hearing, Boys Town National Research Hospital](#)

- [Language and Learning](#)

[Using Sign Language and Voice for Total Communication](#), by Jaime Berke

The Communication Opportunities resource series was written in collaboration with representatives of the MN Low Incidence Projects, the MN Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing, MN Hands & Voices, and the MN Deaf Mentor Family Program. All the articles in the series can be found on the MN Low Incidence Projects-EHDI webpage [Communication Opportunities](#). Unless otherwise specified, information in this resource is not reflective of official policies or recommendations of the MN Low Incidence Projects, the BrightWorks, the MN Department of Education, or local education agencies. The Minnesota Low Incidence Projects is made possible with a grant from the MN Department of Education. The source of the funds is federal award Special Education-Programs to States, CDFA 84.027A.

Resource links for printing purposes

A list of full website addresses used throughout this document for printed copy version of handouts:

- **Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guides from MN Hands & Voices:**
<https://www.lssmn.org/mnhandsandvoices/about-us/deaf-and-hard-hearing-guide-program>
- **Deaf Mentors from the MN Deaf Mentor Family Services**
<https://www.lssmn.org/services/families/deaf-hard-of-hearing/mentor-services>
- **Minnesota Deaf Mentor Family Services:** <https://www.lssmn.org/services/families/deaf-hard-of-hearing/mentor-services>
- **Get Help for Your Child:** <https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/GetHelpChild/index.html>
- **Help Me Grow MN:** <https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/index.htm>
- **Letter for Families of Young Children with Hearing Differences:**
http://www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/documents/ehdi/communicationOpp/EI_Family_letter_MDE_LIProjects_Aug2019.pdf
- **Beginnings For Parents of Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing:** <https://ncbegin.org/>
- **For Parents/Families:** <https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parentsfamilies/>
- **Video Samples (including Total Communication (TC):** <https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parentsfamilies/helpful-videos-for-parents.html>
- **Resource: Language and Communication Chart:** <https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parentsfamilies/communicating-with-your-child/language-and-communication-chart.html>
- **Hands & Voices: Communication Considerations A-Z:**
<https://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/index.html>
- **Total Communication:** <https://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/totalcom.htm>
- **My Baby's Hearing, Boys Town National Research Hospital:**
<https://www.babyhearing.org/>
- **Language and Learning:** <https://www.babyhearing.org/language-learning>
- **Using Sign Language and Voice for Total Communication:**
<https://www.verywellhealth.com/using-sign-language-and-voice-for-total-communication-1046220>
- **Parent Guides from MN Hands & Voices:**
<https://www.lssmn.org/mnhandsandvoices/about-us/our-services>
- **Communication Considerations; Total Communication, Hands & Voices:**
<https://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/totalcom.htm>
- **Communication Opportunities:**
<http://www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/Projects/ehdi/ehdiCommunicationOpp.html>