

What's in a Face? Adaptations of the CPI Classroom Model for Teaching Hearing Impaired Participants

An integral part of the CPI program is an awareness of the paraverbal and verbal aspects of communication in working to deescalate and resolve a crisis situation. These aspects of communication are readily apparent to the hearing individual who uses them unconsciously. What about a deaf person who has never heard his/her own speech? Or the deaf person whose first language is NOT a spoken language, but a signed one? Are the paraverbal and verbal aspects of communication important to them?

In 1986 the CPI program was introduced at the American School for the Deaf (ASD). ASD is the oldest school for the deaf in the United States. It presently educates approximately 230 children, aged 2 to 21 years, in a regular academic, multiple handicapped hearing impaired and behaviorally focused program. Across these settings the students have a wide variety of natural communication styles ranging from American Sign Language (ASL) to straight English. Staff, who are also from a wide range of backgrounds, utilize a Total Communication approach which pairs spoken and signed languages. Nearly one-half of the school's enrollment is from cultural and racial minorities.

The Problem

While teaching the CPI concepts to deaf participants, several problems rapidly surfaced. What exactly did we mean by *tone*, *volume* and *cadence*? To our first class of deaf participants, these concepts meant nothing - nor did some of the aspects of the verbal continuum. A typical deaf child's response is to close the eyes and refuse to look. Remembering that the child cannot hear, what now, the participants asked? What does CPI recommend?

What Now?

With the help of our first class of deaf participants we addressed these issues head-on. We now include the following information in our teaching of the following information in our teaching of the Paraverbal and Verbal portions of the CPI classroom model. The response has been affirming and gratifying. Recognition of these communication differences has been instrumental in bringing some of ASD's oldest and most respected staff to the training program.

The Solution

We examined the concepts of tone, volume and cadence with the participants of our first class and generated the following corresponding elements in signed language:

Tone = *facial expression*;

Volume = *size of sign language + facial expression*;

Cadence/Rate = *same, but with a different meaning*.

Tone - When individuals cannot hear they must depend on the facial expression of the speaker to give them a clue as to the affect of the message. For example: A smiling teacher signing "stop" to a room full of deaf children is likely to be ignored. A stern expression paired with the same sign will command attention. For non-native speakers of sign this can be difficult to monitor. Appropriate tone matches the words signed with the facial expression.

Volume - One might assume that if the child cannot hear the staff member they will NOT understand the force behind the message. Provided it is NOT an everyday experience, raising one's voice to a hearing child will lead to increased attention. On the other hand, regular exposure to yelling leads hearing children to ignore both the message and the messenger. Deaf participants assured us the same is true for hearing impaired children. Stern faced staff who sign with a great deal of flourish tend to be ignored. Think of it this way: People, both hearing and deaf, sign in the area around the head and shoulders which approximates a window. In a way similar to raising one's voice, staff in a crisis tend to raise the volume signing much larger than this window area. The result is the same, the child ignores the communication. Appropriate volume stays in the window and demonstrates a match between facial expression and the message.

Cadence/Rate - When hearing people are just learning to sign, their communication is similar to an individual who is speaking broken English. The non-native English speaker sometimes lapses into their native tongue when upset and the new signer finds him/herself unable to think of the correct sign for a word. The result is either a very rapid-fire signed message or a slow, almost disrespectful cadence. Either may result in a student who escalates simply because he or she thinks the staff member does NOT care. The student may feel insulted by the slow, laborious message, or frightened by the rapid-fire on he/she did NOT understand. To new signers we offer the following advice: Tell students you are "learning sign language" and to please be "patient." Surprisingly, even the most out-of-control students have been willing to make allowances for staff who are genuinely trying to make an effort to communicate with them in their language. Ideal cadence is as close to a "normal" rate of signing as possible.

Now what about the message? The concepts presented in the Verbal Continuum have validity with deaf participants with one important addition: *The deaf yell*. When deaf children do NOT want to listen to you, they close their eyes. Keeping in mind that they cannot hear, this effectively cuts off communication. Now what? First, this can be treated like a hearing person in the Release phase of verbal acting-out - the staff member can wait. Secondly, we've found that deaf children do NOT completely cut themselves off for very long. Therefore, three different things may work:

1. Talk to another staff member, telling him/her what you want the child to know.
2. If you are alone with the child, talk to the air. You may look a little silly, but the student will look, trying to figure out who you are talking to.
3. Say something untrue or ridiculous about the child or the situation. Use this suggestion ONLY if you know the child well and are sure you will NOT escalate the situation by doing this.

All of these situations do work as long as you keep in mind your goal of developing Therapeutic Rapport.

In conjunction with "the deaf yell" is an understanding of varying language levels. For many deaf children, English is a second language. American Sign Language (ASL), with its own syntax, grammar and beauty, is often their first and most comfortable mode of communication. In a crisis, keeping your message simple and your communication at the level of the student's can greatly facilitate the process of resolution. Use gestures, role plays, pantomime, whatever you need to be sure you are understood. And especially, for hearing staff with beginning signing skills, a team approach is imperative. Sign language is a second language and it's easy to forget in the throes of a crisis. A team member more fluent than oneself can act as an interpreter for new staff, insuring that everyone understands what's happening.

All of these ideas and tips have proven effective for staff at ASD. We hope they prove helpful to other staff working with hearing impaired students.

Tips

1. Personal space is very different. Deaf people are used to touching and close proximity to gain attention. Be particularly aware of your personal needs in this area.
2. Always keep your communication at the conversational level of the student. Match ASL with ASL and English with English.
3. Do NOT assume a deaf student who grabs your arms while you are signing is physically acting-out. They may just be telling you to "shut-up"!