

The Importance of “Yes” and “No” for Students with Visual Impairment and Additional Disabilities

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Introduction

Children with visual impairment and additional disabilities are part of a heterogeneous group where visual impairment is the common feature. Additional disabilities can range from intellectual disability, physical disability, cerebral palsy, pervasive developmental disorders, learning disabilities, medically fragile conditions to complex communication needs (Chen, 1995).

Complex communication needs prevent the use of communication skills to satisfactorily meet all of the child's needs. In some cases, this is temporary and in others it is permanent.

Goldbart and Caton (2010) mention that the communication of these children is described as pre-verbal, as they express themselves through elementary modalities used before words and formal language, in an idiosyncratic way. Complex communication needs are experienced differently by each child. Some cannot speak, but use gestures to communicate, others can speak single words in specific contexts, but still do not form simple sentences. And there are those who have very confused speech.

Communication is an essential basic right of all human beings. Through communication it is possible to express needs, interests and feelings, likes and dislikes, interact with other people, participate in the community and make decisions (Goldbart & Caton, 2010). Therefore, encouraging children to answer basic questions about daily situations reliably through verbalizations, vocalizations, natural gestures or with tactile resources of alternative communication, represents an important goal to be achieved in the lives of children with visual impairment and additional disabilities (Lancione et al., 2006).

According to Moreira (2021), the tactile resources of communication include reference objects, tangible symbols, tactile symbols, and textured symbols. This work highlights the value of reference objects in favouring communication and understanding of simple everyday requests.

Reference objects are those that receive special meanings associated with them (Ockelford, 1993). They can represent different concepts for the same purposes as a symbol, in the same way as the

spoken, written or signed (Ockelford, 2002). A partially literate child can appropriate the linguistic code “ball pit”. While a child having vision loss can appropriate this term in the Braille version. A child who cannot read or write may pick up a plastic ball from the ball pit to express interest (Ockelford, 1993; 2002).

Ockelford (1993) grouped reference objects into five categories. The 1st category refers to activities where a certain item is used in a certain activity. For example, the action of drinking can be represented by a small glass. The 2nd category involves time which is a very abstract concept as far as children's understanding is concerned. A wristwatch or wall clock can represent this concept. The 3rd category includes the qualifiers that are represented by the concepts of “Yes” and “No”, beginning and ending. The 4th category corresponds to places that can be represented by objects that allude to the place they represent. The 5th category refers to

the people. The used objects must relate to specific people.

Considering the aspects highlighted above, this work aims to present a key chain with objects of reference and the concrete symbols of “Yes” and “No” to favor the expression of the opinion of young people and children with visual impairment and additional disabilities regarding situations of their daily lives. In addition, it is expected to encourage choices between activities of interest and understanding the meaning of objects associated with daily actions.

The keyring was made with low cost materials. The cards in this reference object key-chain can represent part of a child's or young person's routine. The concrete symbols of “Yes” and “No” serve to value the opinion of the young person or child in relation to what they like and don't like or what they want or don't want. Images of these materials can be found below.

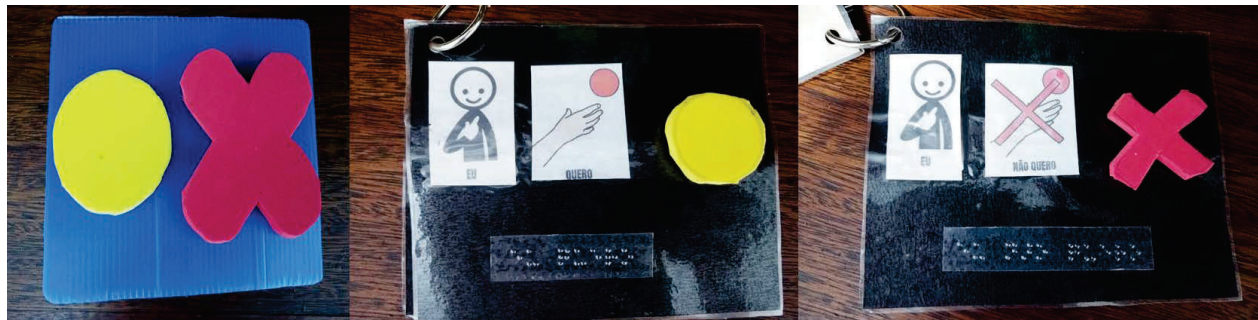
Figure 1. Communication and routine keyring. Source: Prepared by the author



Figure 2. Communication cards forming a sequence of routine activities.
Source: Prepared by the author



Figure 3. Concrete symbols of “Yes” and “No”. Source: Prepared by the author



To properly understand the information offered by the cards shown in the previous images, active touching plays a significant part in coding and recognizing reference objects and associating them with their meanings. In this case and in many others, touching plays an essential role in structuring the mental representations of the body and the disposition of our limbs in relation to ourselves and the surrounding environment (Bremner & Spence, 2017). The way in which the brain attributes self-ownership to the space that the body occupies favours the special tactile representation building the perception of the sense of self.

Considering the importance of touch, children and young individuals having visual

impairment and additional disabilities and complex communication needs require opportunities to use, in a contextualized way, “Yes” and “No” responses in relation to preferred and non-preferred events and stimuli (Lancione et al., 2006).

This work has great relevance, so disseminating it among teachers, professionals and family members is of paramount importance to enhance communication and strengths of children and young individuals who communicate through informal and idiosyncratic modalities. When they fail to understand and properly use “Yes” and “No” answers, direct questions and choices become very limited.

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