

Dimensions of Communication

A manual to assess the communication skills and
behaviors of individuals with disabilities

*Developing a Communication Profile &
Designing an Intervention Plan*



Nancy Sall, Ed.D. &
Cathy H. Rikhye, Ed.D.
Second Edition

Originally developed in 1999
by Harvey H. Mar, Ph.D. & Nancy Sall, Ed.D.

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Council for Exceptional Children
3100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 600
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www.exceptionalchildren.org

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About the Authors

Nancy Sall, Ed.D.

Nancy Sall, Ed.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Special Education at Hunter College, City University of New York. She has been working in higher education for over 20 years. Previously she was a faculty lecturer in the Early Childhood Education/Special Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Prior to her work in higher education, Dr. Sall was the project coordinator for numerous federally-funded research grants, focusing on communication and the development of social relationships of children with significant disabilities. She began her career in education as a pre-school special education teacher and later was an elementary school special educator and inclusion coordinator. Current interests include mentoring and teacher induction.

ns4607@hunter.cuny.edu

Cathy H. Rikhye, Ed.D.

Cathy H. Rikhye, Ed.D., is a faculty lecturer in the Early Childhood Education/Special Education Program within the Department of Curriculum & Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has also been an Associate Professor of Special Education at Hunter College of the City University of New York and at Dominican College, NY.

Before joining Teachers College, Dr. Rikhye created and directed the Office of Inclusive Education at the New York City Department of Education District 75, the district that supports students with moderate to severe and low incidence disabilities across the city. She started her career as an elementary school teacher and then became an educational evaluator of children with visual, hearing and multiple disabilities.

cr2327@tc.columbia.edu

This work is a revision of the *Dimensions of Communication* originally written by Mar & Sall (1999). We wish to express our sincere gratitude and special posthumous acknowledgement and debt to Dr. Harvey Mar for his pioneering and complex thinking and insight on individuals with communicative impairment and their assessment.

Table of Contents

Purpose of this Manual.....	1
Introduction to The Dimensions of Communication.....	2
Overview of this Manual.....	3
Assessment-to-Intervention Sequence.....	4
Overview Part I – Administration: Develop a Communication Profile.....	5
Directions for Step 1: Gather and Record Information.....	6
Directions for Step 2: Score the Dimensions.....	9
Directions for Step 3: Generate a Communication Profile.....	10
Dimensions of Communication Charts.....	11
Symbol Use.....	12
Intent.....	14
Complexity.....	16
Social Action.....	18
Vocabulary Use.....	20
Comprehension.....	22
Overview Part II – Administration: Design an Intervention Plan.....	25
Directions for Step 4: Identify the Range of Intervention Goals.....	26
Directions for Step 5:	
Design and Individualize Intervention Goals and Activities.....	27
Intervention Goals and Examples of Activities – Level I.....	28
Intervention Goals and Examples of Activities – Level II.....	31
Intervention Goals and Examples of Activities – Level III.....	35
Intervention Goals and Examples of Activities – Level IV.....	39
Intervention Goals and Examples of Activities – Level V.....	43
Case Illustration.....	46
Recording Booklet (Case Illustration).....	47
Recording Booklet.....	61

Purpose of this Manual

The *Dimensions of Communication* manual is an assessment instrument designed to help teachers, parents, educational specialists, speech-language therapists, psychologists, and other service providers evaluate the communication skills of individuals who have multiple disabilities, including significant cognitive impairment and deaf-blindness.

This instrument may be especially useful when standard language tests are not applicable. Many standard tests presume that the individual to be assessed has developed the use of speech and, consequently, has acquired basic linguistic skills and knowledge. Such tests, however, may not measure the communicative competence of individuals, who may use alternative means of expression, such as gestures or vocalizations. The benefits of the *Dimensions of Communication* are twofold:

- 1) It offers a qualitative approach to characterize the forms, breadth, and attributes of an individual's communication behaviors when speech may or may not be present.
- 2) It provides a process that links assessment results to intervention planning, as well as Individual Education Program (IEP) design and implementation.

The original manual (Mar & Sall, 1999) was based on the findings of an observational research study of the communication behaviors of 103 children and adolescents with significant disabilities, ranging in age from 3 to 15 years (Mar & Sall, 1999). It was developed to be applied to individuals who have a range of communicative abilities, including those whose communication behaviors are basic, nonconventional, and/or nonsymbolic.

This revision is intended to simplify the implementation of the assessment. It also addresses the significance of generalization across contexts, meaning the ability of a person to use a newly learned skill in multiple places and with different communication partners.

There are two parts to this manual. *Part I: Develop a Communication Profile* provides a scale that may be used to rate six specific qualities, or dimensions, of expressive and receptive communication behaviors. Part I allows us to generate a broad profile of an individual's communication skills and behaviors.

Part II: Design an Intervention Plan may be used to develop appropriate communication goals for the individual, based upon the ratings obtained in Part I. It includes examples as well as descriptions of goals and interventions that can be applied across settings in the school, community, and home.

Note: while the word "student" is used in the examples, it is meant to include consideration of the individual at home as well as in the community.

Introduction to The Dimensions of Communication

Communication refers to how people convey and understand messages. We can describe a person's communication skills in several ways. Often, we think of the forms of communication, such as speech or sign language. Or we might consider the functions of communication, such as making a request or indicating a need. But there are other natural characteristics, or "dimensions," of communication, as well. For example, an act of communication might be simple, consisting of a single word, or it may be complex, such as lengthy dialogue. Communication can be intentional, as when one greets another person, or nonintentional, as when one reacts to a painful sensation. It can involve the use of symbols, such as words, or behaviors that are not symbolic, like gestures and facial expressions.

It is possible to analyze various dimensions of communication in order to achieve a broad picture of a person's communicative competence. For the purposes of this manual we have selected and defined six dimensions that capture essential components of receptive and expressive communication. These are:

- Symbol Use
- Intent
- Complexity
- Social Action
- Vocabulary Use
- Comprehension

Each of these dimensions places emphasis on a particular social or cognitive aspect of communication. However, you will note similarities and overlap among some of the dimensions as well as the behaviors that exemplify them. This is because communication is the result of many processes that are not truly independent of each other.

Each of the six dimensions in *Part I: Develop a Communication Profile* can be described along a continuum of 1 to 5, which ranges from (1) physical reactions to (5) sophisticated communication skills. We believe that, within this range of communicative competence, even the most basic behaviors have communicative value.

Overview of this Manual

This manual guides you through a five-step process that begins with the assessment of an individual and culminates in the development of an intervention plan uniquely suited to them. This assessment-to-intervention sequence is shown in the figure on page 4. Before you begin the assessment, it is expected that you will have some familiarity with the individual's communication behaviors. To gain a sense of specific skills and abilities, you might first review educational records or speak with members of the collaborative team including parents and teachers.

Part I: Develop a Communication Profile involves the first three steps. Step 1 (page 6) entails the gathering and recording of information about the individual's communication behaviors through observations, interviews, and structured interactions (use data collection forms in the *Recording Booklet*). Communication behaviors should be "sampled" across a variety of environments and activities, since it is important to have multiple sources of data. In Step 2 (page 9), you will use this information to rate the individual's behaviors for each of the six dimensions using the Charts (in Part I) and a Score Sheet from the *Recording Booklet*. In Step 3 (page 10), you will generate a descriptive communication profile of the individual.

Part II: Design an Intervention Plan consists of two additional steps to link the individual's communication profile and ratings to interventions. In Step 4 (page 26), you will identify a range of interventions. In Step 5 (page 27), you may review the sets to identify and modify relevant communication goals and activities that will meet the individual's interests and needs.

In the *Case Illustration* (page 46) you will find a complete example of all five steps. The example includes actual data on a student with deaf-blindness and multiple impairments.

The *Dimensions of Communication Recording Booklet* (at the back of this manual) may be used with Parts I and II. This booklet contains forms and guidelines for recording information obtained during observations, interviews, and structured interactions. The booklet is used to record the ratings for each dimension, identify a score, and develop the individual's communication profile.

You may use this instrument working singly or as a member of a team. Team members may organize the evaluation in a variety of ways. For example, two evaluators working together during a structured interaction might divide their responsibilities so that while one practitioner elicits behaviors from the student, the other practitioner records the behavior. In another option, one practitioner may conduct an interview while the other observes the student. It is important that members of the team clearly understand their responsibilities during each step. When using a team approach, the process must go beyond data collection to also include scoring the dimensions, generating a profile, and developing interventions in a team approach.

Assessment-to-Intervention Sequence

Part I: Develop a Communication Profile

Step 1: Gather and Record Data

- Observation
- Direct Interactions
- Interviews

Step 2: Score the Dimensions

Step 3: Generate a Communication Profile

Part II: Design an Intervention Plan

Step 4: Identify a Range of Interventions

Step 5: Consider Appropriate Intervention Goals and Activities

Overview of Part I – Administration

Develop a Communication Profile

Step 1: Gather and Record Information

What you will need: Observation Form, Structured Interaction Form, and Interview Form from Recording Booklet.

What you will do: Observe and interact with the individual. Conduct an interview to obtain information regarding communication skills and behaviors.

How long it will take: Approximately 1½–2 hours (this amount of time assumes you have not met the student before).

Step 2: Score the Dimensions

What you will need: Dimensions of Communication Charts from the manual; Score Sheet from the Recording Booklet.

What you will do: Identify examples of individual communication behaviors as they relate to each of the six dimensions. Rate the student's communication behaviors on each of the six.

How long it will take: Approximately 20–30 minutes.

Step 3: Generate a Communication Profile

What you will need: Completed data sheets from the Recording Booklet; examples of individual behaviors from the Score Sheet; additional raw data from observations, interactions, and interviews; blank Descriptive Profile Form from Recording Booklet.

What you will do: Write a synopsis of the individual's communication skills and behaviors using all of the information collected during observations, interactions, and interviews.

How long it will take: Approximately 30–40 minutes.

Directions for Step 1: Gather and Record Information

A. Gather Information

Step 1 is focused on developing a profile of the individual's communication skills and behaviors. For this assessment, data may be gathered from a variety of methods. These include:

1. *Observations* conducted of the individual during typical daily routines and activities.
2. *Interviews* conducted with people who are familiar with the individual.
3. *Structured* interactions, during which you will engage directly with the individual.

Using a mix of these methods will help you gain a strong sense of the individual's communication abilities. All of these methods are useful ways of collecting information. Observations, interviews, and structured interactions may be sequenced in any order that makes the best use of available opportunities.

1. Guidelines for Conducting Observations

Observe the student in settings where there are natural opportunities for communication and social interaction. Informal activities often allow for more interaction and communication than many formal instructional activities. Recess, small group classroom activities, walking in the hallways, or shared activities may provide more information than independent study or traditional classroom instruction.

If the student shows little or no engagement or interaction, you may need to plan another observation or extend the observation period.

Observe a broad range of activities and environments that are typical of the student's daily routine, including transitions between activities. Also observe the individual interacting with several different communication partners. This is important as it will give you information on generalization across settings and partners.

Depending upon the opportunities available for conducting observations and the settings in which you observe the student, you may decide to conduct a series of shorter (e.g., 10-minute) or longer (e.g., 30-minute) observations on one or more days. You may also observe the individual participating in more than one activity during your observation time (e.g., in the classroom, hallway, and lunchroom).

2. Guidelines for Conducting Interviews

First, determine which persons are most appropriate to interview (e.g., parent, teacher, paraprofessional, or therapist who is familiar