

Companionship & Socialization

- Carol misses talking with her family and friends, but doesn't like to make phone calls because she gets numbers in the wrong order and is embarrassed when she gets connected to the wrong party again and again.
- Michael doesn't have any real friendships and instead plays the computer alone when the other children are playing together.
- Sara has difficulty interacting socially with other children, particularly in face to face situations.
- Mr. A. finds it difficult to leave his home and to talk to people...to buy groceries or go to the doctor.

Assistive technology solutions are available which can enhance relationships and increase a person's sense of connection to others. These devices apply to such areas as: phone use, comforting, reinforcement, and interaction.

Phones & Pagers

A variety of low tech solutions can increase a person's sense of connection to others, as well as increase safety. Simplifying the use of a phone through pre-programmed speed dial numbers or picture pads can increase a person's ease in establishing contact with others, reducing the sense of isolation.

Inexpensive, portable in-house intercoms to maintain contact can be purchased inexpensively at discount and retail stores. The **Cobra Microtalk™** is a two-way, portable radio that allows communication within a 2-mile range. This set of two walkie-talkies has a call button, 2 channel receiving and requires no license or service fee to operate. Depending upon the model selected, the **Talk About** walkie-talkies allow clear and toll-free communication from two to five miles away. These pocket-sized devices work effectively to keep a person in touch with one or more group members in shopping malls, stadiums, or amusement parks.

To connect people separated by greater distances, cellular phones and paging services are available for monthly fees through private providers. Cellular phones provide immediate contact while paging systems relay messages using a transmitter and a paging device.

Comforting Aids

Sometimes a desire for companionship can be met by providing an individual with "something" to hold onto, such as a pillow, a doll, a favorite blanket, or a personal item. The role pets can play in social well-being can be significant. They entertain, encourage, soothe, and comfort and are being recognized as therapeutic tools in a wide range of facilities from medical and

rehabilitation centers to nursing homes and employment settings.

When an actual animal is not an option, a doll or stuffed toy may provide a satisfactory substitute for some people. Special features may make the alternative even more effective. The **Spinoza Bear**, for example, is a cuddly stuffed animal that contains a cassette recorder to play pre-recorded tapes encouraging speech and interaction. This device can be ordered with tapes specifically designed for young children or for people in long-term care.

Reinforcing Aids

A person who needs frequent words of encouragement to accomplish activities could carry a portable tape recorder having a programmed message of affirmation such as, "You're doing fine", which could be activated as often as needed to feel reassured. Another option would be to carry a walkie-talkie and maintain contact with a person at home having the other walkie-talkie unit and who can provide encouragement, talk through anxious situations, or assist in problem solving.

Aids to Encourage Interaction

To be included in social activities or job training opportunities, an employee might need assistance. This may be in the form of transportation to and from the activity or even specific advice from a supervisor regarding ways in which to communicate, interact, and work together with peers to encourage successful work experiences and natural social relationships.

The use of computers and carefully selected software can be successful in increasing interaction between individuals who find it difficult to engage interpersonally by infusing communication and turn-taking into computer activities. Selecting software applications that are motivating and which can support interactions is critical for a positive result. It is important to select software that has speech and sound output and interesting graphics, to structure computer activities to stimulate interaction and communication, and to provide choices and control within each activity.

Computers also provide opportunities to "surf" the Internet in search of special interest groups or individuals having similar issues. For some people the Internet is a more comfortable avenue for anonymous discussions about sensitive issues than face-to-face discussions. Email can also help people who need frequent contacts with others to maintain communication without tying up personal time and phone lines.

Things to do to make your life easier...

- Take a class that fosters an interest or a hobby
- Become a fan and follower of a local sports team, high school or college

- Join others to play cards, bingo, or just reminisce
- Volunteer to work for an animal shelter
- Invite wildlife to your environment by putting up bird feeders and squirrel feeders
- Write letters to a friend, relative, or pen pal
- Join a club, attend meetings, or serve on committees
- Develop hobbies and activities to do on your own...jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles, card games, gardening, crafts, collecting, or bird watching