Early communication skills

What do we mean by 'early communication skills?'

- These skills form the **foundations for communication and learning:**
  - ⇒ **Eye contact**
  - ⇒ **Attention and listening**
  - ⇒ **Anticipatory skills** (awareness that something is going to happen)
  - ⇒ **Joint/shared attention**
  - ⇒ **Pointing**
  - ⇒ **Copying** (gesture, facial expressions, play, babble, words)
  - ⇒ **Early turn taking** (e.g. back and forth babble between adult and child)



How can we support and develop children's early communication?

- By **adapting the child's environment** so that children can better understand routines, transitions, instructions, prompts and reminders.
- By **creating motivating opportunities** for children to communicate.
- By **adapting our interaction style** (the way we communicate with the child)
- By **using visual information** to support children's understanding

When to provide support in this area:

- The child overall communication development is at a **very early stage**—still learning about eye contact, taking turns and being aware of the other person.
- The child may only **communicate for a limited range of purposes** (e.g. to request, protest or ask for more of something)
- The child may have a **limited range of methods for communicating** their needs (e.g. unable to use pointing, gesture or words to request things).
- The child may use words/sounds but **not in a purposeful or obviously meaningful way** (e.g. 'oh dear' - 'Thomas')
- The child is likely to have **co-existing difficulties** with general development and/or social communication development.

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Developing communication skills through interaction strategies

Strategies to try:

One of the most effective ways to develop early communication is by **adapting the way we interact** with children and **following their lead**. By doing this we can create more opportunities for interaction, playing and learning. Find a **regular, quiet time** to practise using these strategies; later on, practise using them **in everyday situations** and **demonstrate these techniques to other staff** who work with the child.

- **Stop** and **pause** - this gives you a chance to see how the child tries to communicate and play. It is a good basis for responding to the child and making it into a meaningful interaction or play opportunity.
- **Follow the child's lead** and **extend upon the way s/he is playing** - this will maintain the child's interest and concentration, and so is a good opportunity for playing and interacting.
- **Be face-to-face**, get down to the child's level.
- **Keep language simple, e.g.** using 1-2 words to communicate with the child.
- Always try to support what you say with a **visual reference**.
- **Repeat key words** in the same situations so they are **consistent**.
- **Imitate** the way the child likes to play with toys. In doing this, the child may take more notice of you as a partner in play and interaction.
- **Imitate the sounds or vocalisations** the child makes. By doing this, the child may notice that you are 'tuned into' him/her and therefore take more notice of you as a partner in the interaction.
- Try to **interpret** what the child is trying to communicate to you - even if it isn't clear that the child's words or actions are purposeful.
- If the child tries to communicate, **model the words he could use** - e.g. if the child takes your hand to the tap, you can say: "Want a drink. OK."
- **Offer choices** - this creates an opportunity for the child to take a turn and communicate. You can start by offering a choice of something the child really likes vs something they dislike or feel indifferent about.



Measuring progress: Child's awareness of the other person signalled by increased enjoyment, increased eye contact etc - Increased attempts by child to communicate, using verbal or non-verbal methods - Child's ability to maintain an interaction for a longer period of time.

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Developing anticipation

Activities and strategies to try:



- **For all of these activities remember:**
  - ⇒ Use **motivating** objects or toys.
  - ⇒ **Get down** to the child's level, face one and other and encourage **eye contact**.
  - ⇒ Use **pauses** to allow anticipation to build.
  - ⇒ Make the activity **exciting** e.g. exaggerated tone of voice.
- **Ready, Steady, Go games:** Use motivating activities such as bubbles, rolling a ball or putting a car down a ramp to encourage participation. Use the phrase 'Ready, Steady, Go', emphasising each word. Briefly pause between each word to allow excitement to build. Gradually extend the pauses to build up anticipation of the next step. Wait for eye contact, gesture or the child to say 'go' before completing the final action e.g. blowing bubbles.
- **Cause and effect toys:** Use motivating cause and effect toys such as ball runs, car ramps and pop up frog. Model the activity a few times so the child knows what to expect. Then begin to introduce longer pauses before initiating the action that sets off the activity.
- **Building blocks:** Use building blocks to build a tower and build anticipation by commenting on the tower wobbling, whether it will fall down and pushing it over at the end.
- **Feely box:** Place an objects of interest to the child in a box or bag and open the box/bag slowly. Let the child put their hand in the box and feel it, take an object out, explore and play with it. For a child who finds it difficult to maintain their attention, use one object so they are not distracted by other objects in the bag/box.
- **Hiding:** Hid a toy or interesting object in or under a box and encourage the child to find it.

Measuring progress: The child will show signs of excitement by smiling, laughing and body movements. They may start to request the next step of the activity by e.g. making eye contact, using gesture or saying a word such as 'go'.

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Developing shared attention and enjoyment

Activities and strategies to try:

Shared attention is the enjoyment of the same activity / object and enjoying communication and interaction with another person.

- **For all of these activities remember:**
  - ⇒ Use **motivating** toys or activities.
  - ⇒ Follow the child's **interests**.
  - ⇒ Be **face to face** with the child, on their level.
  - ⇒ **Adapt language** levels appropriately for the child.
- **Building blocks:** Make a tower together
  - taking turns to knock it down
  - line the bricks up and push them along a table like a train
  - bang them together



- **Rolling cars or pushing training back and forth:** 'Ready, steady, go!' Encourage them to wait for 'go'.
- **Blowing bubbles:** Wait for eye contact before you blow.
- **Joint action games/songs:** 'Row, row, row your boat'/'Horsey, horsey, don't you stop'/'Pat-a-cake', etc.
- **Finger rhymes:** 'Round and round the garden', leave a big pause and build up the anticipation for 'tickle under there'.
- **Pointing**: During play, model pointing to an object of interest whilst naming it to encourage shared enjoyment and attention of the same object. Avoid direct pressure to make the child point, let it occur naturally.

Measuring progress: Joint attention and enjoyment is achieved when the child alerts another person to the object or activity. This can be through eye gaze, gesture, pointing or words.

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Developing turn-taking (Early Years Children)

Activities and strategies to try:

Turn-taking through play is an important basis from which children learn to take turns at talking, i.e. have a conversation. It is an important social skill to learn. For the young child beginning to communicate a 'turn' can be a look, a gesture or a sound. The more turns they get to take the more opportunities they have to learn.

- **For all of these activities remember:**
  - ⇒ Use **motivating** toys or activities.
  - ⇒ **Be explicit** when saying who's turn it e.g. 'Johnny's turn, Teacher's turn'
  - ⇒ Use **specific praise** e.g. 'good waiting', 'good turn taking'
- Ideas of activities:
  - **Water and sand play** - taking turns to pour through a sieve / fill a bucket
  - **Life the flap books** - take turns to lift the flap and turn the page
  - **Skittles and ball** - take turns to knock them down
  - **Pop-up toys** or Jack in the box - take turns to press the button
  - **Building blocks** - take turns to add a block to build a tower
  - **Inset jigsaw or shape sorter** - take turns to put in pieces
  - **Cars and train** - take turns to push round tracks/roads/under bridges
  - **Rolling balls back and forth** to each other
  - Throw balls and bean bags to each other
  - **Point out good turn taking during daily activities** e.g. Waiting to wash hands



Measuring progress: The child will be able to sit with another person and take 3 turns of a game, increasing to 5 turns etc. The child will then be able to take turns with an adult and a peer before gradually increasing the number of children, allowing the adult to step back and monitor.

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Creating Communication Opportunities

Activities and strategies to try:

It is important to create communication opportunities to encourage requests and interaction.

- **Choices.** Offer the child choices at many different times in the day, like snack time or during play. Using objects show them one “do you want ball…..” then show them the other “or bubbles” then hold both objects out in front of them and let them choose, always name the one they choose. Encourage them to scan both items first.
- **Giving items in small amounts.** Give the child a small amount of drink/food or one item at a time so that they have to ask or indicate they want more. You could do this with toys in a box or a bag, give them one at a time to encourage them to indicate they want more. It is important that they can see that more is available.



- **Do the unexpected.** Do things the child wouldn’t expect, like putting a banana in a cup rather than a drink! See if they can indicate in some way that it’s wrong.
- **Wait before helping.** Wait for the child to indicate they need help with everyday tasks like putting their coat on. Position yourself next to the child to indicate that you are there to help. Allow time for the child to give an indication that the need help before stepping in to help. Waiting before helping provides the child with the opportunity to indicate they need help (e.g. bring a cup to you).

Accept any form of communication the child displays even if this is not verbal e.g. reaching for you or the object, using eye contact or giving you the object .
Always model the name of the word or action.

Measuring progress: The child is able to make requests more consistently.
Help them generalise these skills by using these strategies with a variety activities.

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