Berkshire Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Communication Friendly Environments

What is a communication friendly environment?

A communication friendly environment is one that promotes and supports children's language and communication skills. It is a term used to describe key features of the environment, and the way adults/practitioners within the environment interact with children.

The 'Better Communication Research Programme' (2012) looked at how education environments can support children's language and communication.

What does it cover?

A communication friendly environment should consider factors involving:

- The language learning environment
- The role of the adult in supporting language interactions
- The opportunities available for supporting language interactions

The Environment

The communication environment should have:

- Cosy, quiet spaces that provide different experiences and areas to communicate e.g. areas for working 1:1, and in small groups.
- Minimal background noise. Music or songs in the background can make it more difficult for children to listen and focus their attention. Can everyone hear and be heard?
- Signs, symbols, photographs and writing. Resources may be labelled to help children be more independent in accessing what they need, and to encourage independent organisation skills. How widely and consistently are these used? Are parents shown how these work?
- Clear and consistent routines – how does the environment help the children know what to expect, and when?
- Opportunities to have experiences to talk about their thoughts and ideas. Children are more likely to engage in conversation when they are interested or excited by what they are doing. They should have opportunities to have new experiences and learn new words.
- Open ended activities that are accessible for children of all language levels.
- An 'asking friendly' attitude where children are encouraged to seek clarification where required e.g. 'please say that again', or 'what does……mean'.
- Opportunities to engage in structured conversations with peers.

What can adults do?

There are many key strategies that adults can implement, which help children to develop their language and communication skills. These strategies can be introduced throughout the normal nursery environment, whilst you talk and play with the children. You may already be using many of these strategies; however it is useful to think about which strategies you use consciously, and consider how you could introduce different strategies with different children.

- Follow the child's interests – children will often stay at their own activities for a longer period of time. You can show that you are listening, and enjoying their activity, demonstrating your interest in what they say and do.
- Join their play – children will often stay at their own activity for a longer period of time. You can show them your interest in what they are doing, and how they are playing. By joining a preferred activity, you may gradually be able to model language to expand vocabulary, model how else we may play with this activity, and try taking turns and sharing toys together.
- Model language – children learn words best when they hear them in context. You can model words based upon what the child is doing, when they are doing it e.g. 'red car', 'you're climbing the ladder'. This is also a good way to introduce new vocabulary, so the child can apply it to an appropriate context or situation. Also, remember, repetition, repetition, repetition!
- Pause – sometimes children may need a little longer to process, understand, and respond to what we have said. Try to provide children around 10 seconds to communicate back to you. This will also help show the child that you have time to facilitate their communication attempts, rather than them feeling rushed or under pressure to respond.
- Break down instructions – children may need instructions to be broken into smaller steps, so they can focus on one instruction at a time. Their ability to follow instructions may also be impacted by distractions within the environment, or by their understanding of the words that you use.
- Check they have understood – this enables the adult to gauge whether or not a child has listened and understood what has been said, but also provides the child with an opportunity to seek clarification if it is required. Questioning when not understanding should always be encouraged.
- Provide opportunities for children to work together – structuring games with peers, having talking partners, or working within small structured groups enables children to practice their turn-taking and social interaction skills. Together, children may have to problem solve, and overcome communication breakdowns. Children may initially need adult support with this, before being able to do so independently.

The benefits

A communication friendly environment should make communication easy, effective, and enjoyable!

This will provide support for children with speech, language and communication difficulties, enhance communication development universally, and remove barriers to communication. This in turn, will support learning, and social and emotional development.

Audit Tools

There are some audit or assessment tools available for settings to self-assess their environment to identify what is going well, and how they can make adaptations to improve their communication friendly environment.

Please see the following sites below, to find example checklists available for download.

The communication supporting tool: https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct_bcrp_csc_final.pdf

There is a specific programme called Communication Friendly Spaces which was developed by Elizabeth Jarman. Further information can be found at: https://elizabethjarman.com/

Creating Opportunities to Communicate

If a child is able to access everything by themselves then they do not have a NEED to interact with those around them. If rather than coming to an adult to ask for help they can achieve this independently there is a missed opportunity for interaction and communication.

Below are general communication strategies that will benefit ALL children, and therefore can be implemented within a whole nursery environment.

Setting up a communication environment is key to developing a child's communication skills.

What does this involve?

- Do not anticipate needs, allow the child to ask for things that they require
- Don't be too quick to offer assistance, allow the child time to problem solve for themselves and request help as and when they require it
- Ensure that not all things are freely available to the children

How to create communication opportunities within the nursery environment for all children:

- Do not anticipate needs, for example if a task / activity requires certain equipment perhaps let the children collect this for themselves – or work out what it is they need and/or are missing
- Approaching a child to ask if they need help does not allow them to initiate an interaction. Instead you could initially stand near by the child to see if they need help, or use some non-verbal queues if the child is really struggling – e.g. holding your hand out towards them. Gradually you may be able to move further away from the child and find that they can come to you/ raise their hand for help.
- Whilst there might be times when you wish for children to have a free choice over the activities they can access you should try to create times when these are not as easily accessible, e.g. certain stationary items may be out of reach, or certain activities may been in boxes that are not as easily accessible by the child themselves.
- Create pauses in familiar routines, for example when discussing getting ready for lunch e.g. 'first we line up to go and wash our…' – leave the gaps for children to fill in. This can also be done with nursery rhymes and songs, pause and leave gaps – you may find that the child does not initially respond – in which case you can complete the gap yourself.

Using Sabotage & Withholding to entice the child to communicate

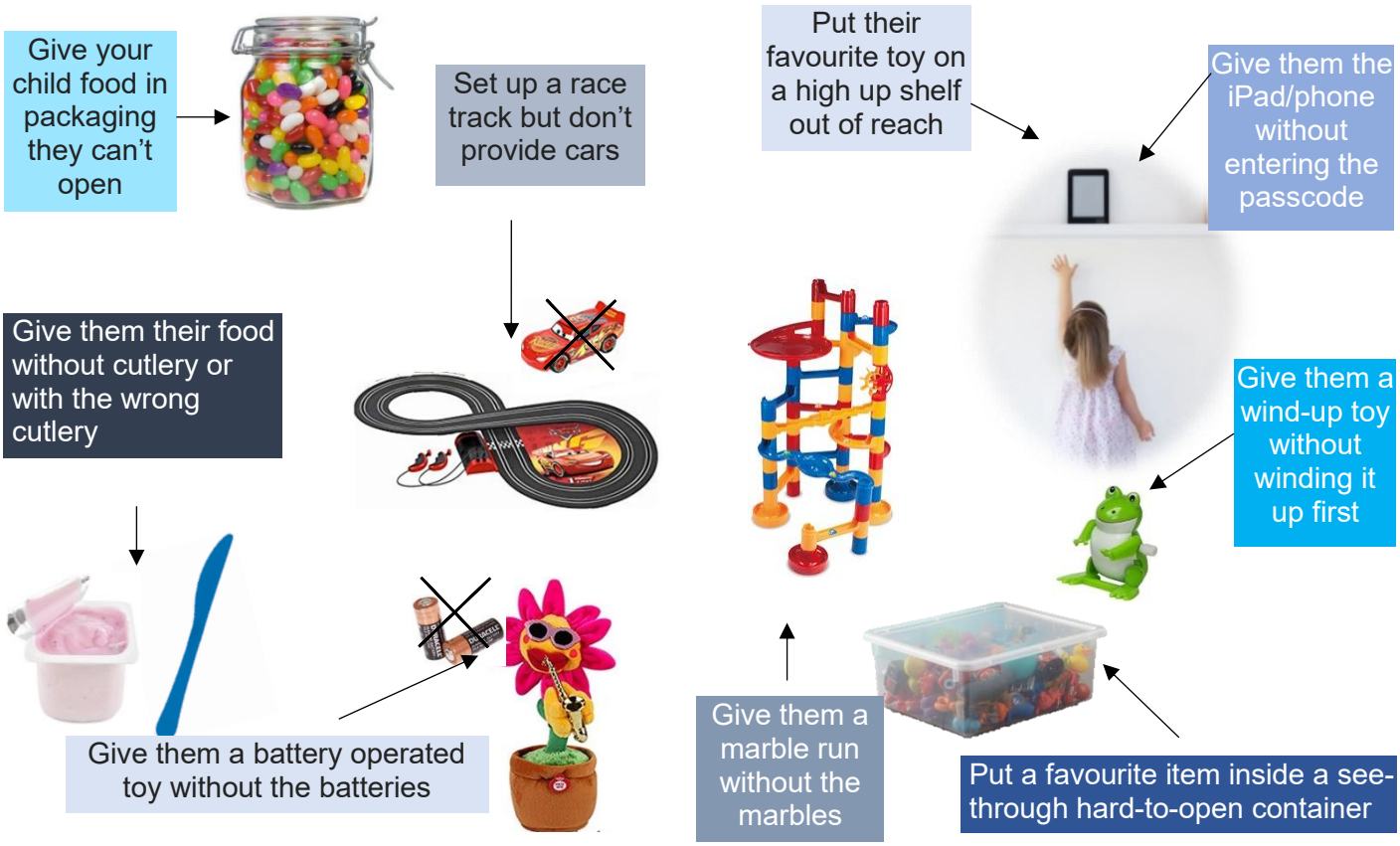
Some children may require more specific opportunities to be created for them in order to encourage communication.

Withholding

Purposefully keeping something away from a child until they say the word (or signs/gestures)

Sabotaging

Setting up situations/problems so that a child needs to communicate with you to get what they want.



5 steps to using 'Sabotage':

- STEP ONE: Work out what the child is motivated by! This might be food, games such as tickles/peek-a-boo, a toy, a comforter, the garden
- STEP TWO: Sabotage in some way (see the examples above) e.g. so the child can see the item but is unable to access it.
- STEP THREE: Wait for the child to notice the error and look at them expectantly. Be available but don't jump in! They may come towards you or make eye contact, take your hand or point at the item.
- STEP FOUR: Wait a few seconds longer to give them the opportunity to use/sign the desired word before saying/signing the word for them e.g. 'help!'
- STEP FIVE: Respond immediately by providing the item/activity (even if they didn't use the word themselves)

Repeat this on multiple occasions, always waiting for the child to show you they need help and leaving a pause for them to say/sign the desired word before you model it for them.

Top Tips for success:

- Approach the situation with a FUN attitude.
- If the child becomes genuinely upset, stop the game and provide them with the item
- If the child gives you a word or "try" that's acceptable, but not perfect, reward the effort - When you reward the effort, they are likely to try again
- Don't overuse sabotage so that they feel like they shouldn't even try.

Offering Choices

Choices are a great way of providing opportunities for children to communicate. They also help to give children independence by showing us what they want or what they do not want.

How to offer a choice

- Start by offering the child a choice of two items. Offer one item you know the child wants and one that is less motivating, e.g. “do you want a drink or a spoon?”
- Hold the items a little way apart and look for how the child responds. They may look, reach, point, sign or say the item they want.
- When the child can choose between these items, offer a choice of two items they might want, e.g. “do you want an apple or banana?” or two items that are less motivating, e.g. “do you want red socks or blue socks?”
- When you have observed how the child makes their choice you can encourage them to use the next stage, e.g.
    - If they are looking, help them to reach
    - If they are reaching help them to point
    - If they are pointing encourage them to sign or say the word

When to use choices

Choices can be used in every part of the daily routine and during play.

Here are a few examples:-

- Snack times, e.g. “do you want apple or banana?”
- Story Time – offer a choice of books
- Play – offer a choice or toys

Note: A child may not always respond to verbally to these communication opportunities, instead they may use signs/ gestures/ point/ reach or grab towards what it is they want. This is then the opportunity for you to provide the chid with the language they need e.g. ‘help please’, ‘want bricks’. You can base the language you model at the level appropriate to the individual child.

Using Visuals to Support Communication

Introduction

Visual supports come in all different forms and are a great aid for supporting communication; they can support understanding of what is being said and also a person's ability to express what it is they want to communicate.

You can find out more information about each of these visuals throughout the next few pages

- Photographs/Pictures/ symbols
- Objects of Reference
- Key word signing (see our handout on **'Key Word Signing'**)

Photographs / Pictures / Symbols

Visual support cards should be stored and presented by adults to support understanding of spoken language. For example, show the child a picture of their coat to signify that it's time to go outside.

Please note that if you are using this form of visual support **and** are also using PECS, you will need to ensure that the card sizes are different e.g. PECS sizes will be slightly smaller than those used as a visual support. You could also make the symbols/pictures that you are using as a visual support a different colour to the PECS symbols. This will help to differentiate between pictures being used to give the child an instruction vs the ones that the child uses to request items they want.

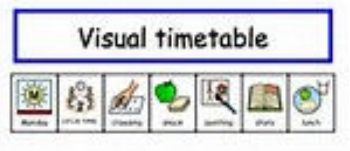
Visual Timetables

Picture cards can be presented in the form of timetables to demonstrate routine and sequences of activities to groups of children. Some children may require a more specific sequence of visuals called a visual schedule. Visuals such as these are a good way to introduce changes for those children who find these difficult to manage. Please ask the speech and language therapist for more information on this.

Visual Timetable Strip: These can be used to maintain a child's attention and help them to follow class routines. You can have whole class visual timetables (e.g. on the whiteboard at the front of the room – whereby the teacher controls the placing and removing of activities) or you may to choose to have individualised schedules for a child as required.

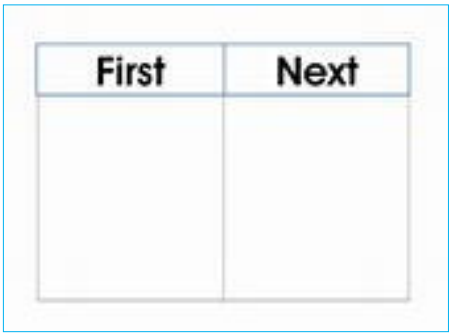
Individualised schedules are used to reflect the individual child's needs which may differ from that of the whole class e.g. movement breaks/ jobs.

The picture representation can be taken off or crossed out by the child themselves.



First/Next Board:

Use a first/next board with visual pictures (these can be drawings/ pictures/ photos or symbols) of the task and next activity following the task. For example, First Counting, Next Bubbles. Break up each task into manageable chunks to ensure that tasks are short and achievable. Ensure that the 'next' task is not reliant on the child completing the 'first' task. For example, the child is able to have the bubbles whether or not they finish the counting task. This is to ensure that the child is more willing to complete tasks on other occasions and is not only doing so for the reward.



Objects of Reference

Similar to picture cards, objects of reference are presented to a child to aid understanding.

You may find you need to use objects of reference if the child is unable to recognise or associate with the pictures/symbols or photos.

What should an object of reference be?

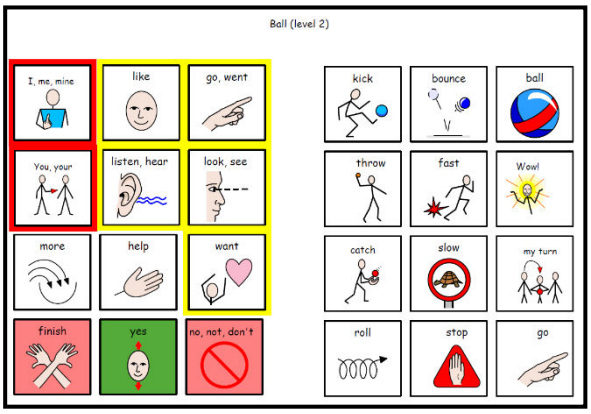
- safe (should be safe for unsupervised use)
- hygienic (should be able to be easily cleaned)
- not to big or too small (portable)
- not too heavy to hold/carry
- unique (the child should not be directly encountering item in other situations)
- durable (they have a tough life and need to last so durable is better)
- available (they go missing and have to be replaced)
- inexpensive (if they cost a lot to replace it becomes very expensive)
- multisensory (as is practicable and possible but don't have to cover every sense)
- iconic (ideally should directly represent the activity: Concrete rather than abstract. However, **consistency** is more important)
- saliency (has the object of reference got a direct link to what is meaningful in/from the activity in the mind of the child)
- meaningful to the child where possible
- adaptable
- property of the child (ideally the set should belong to the child and move between their different environments with him/her);

How to use an object of reference

- Always present it to the child **immediately before** the change of activity (this avoids confusion or impatience)
- Try to gain the child's attention by calling their name
- Use a simple and consistent phrase e.g. "Sophie, it's choice time now" "Look/feel, it's time for choice"
- Always emphasise and repeat the main word as the object is explored
- Allow the child time to explore the object to experience and process the information through hearing touch and smell.
- Where possible the child should hold on to the object
- Take the object to the next activity and then repeat the phrase above.

Using communication boards

What are they and why use them?



- Communication boards use symbols to depict a range of vocabulary important for children to communicate and interact with others in a particular activity.
- They can help children to:
  - Understand what an adult is saying
  - Have a more effective way to communicate particularly if:
    - ✓ their speech is slow to develop
    - ✓ their speech is difficult for all people to understand
    - ✓ they are having significant difficulties learning to use speech to communicate meaningfully

What activities can you use communication boards for?

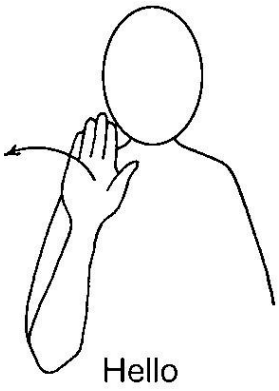
- Communication boards can be used in ANY activity.
- Routines: snack, bath time, circle time etc.
- Activities: messy play, outdoor play etc.
- Games: Mr Potato Head, bubbles, shape sorter etc.

How do I use them?

- Point to the pictures on the board as you talk. This is called **modelling**. The students get to see and hear you using the words on the boards, which will help them learn how to "talk" back using pictures and words.
- You will find yourself pointing just to the 'key words' in the sentence (e.g. for the sentence 'Let's draw a picture', you would point to pictures for the underlined words.)
- Remember to pause while you are talking/playing, to offer the student a chance to say something to you with support of their board.
- Make it easy to remember to use the board, by ensuring they are always available in the location they will be used (e.g. keep the 'snack' board on the snack table, keep the 'water play' board tied to the water tray etc.)
- The more you use them, the easier it gets to remember where the vocabulary is on the board and to slow down your talking as you point.
- Avoid direct instructions e.g. 'point to the board'.

Makaton Signing and Symbols

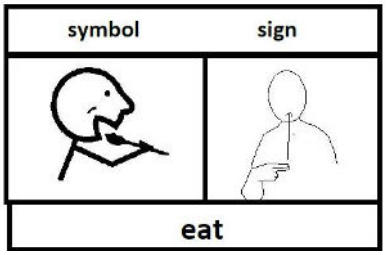
What is Makaton?



Makaton is a language system that uses signing and symbols to support people to communicate.
Makaton supports the development of essential communication skills such as attention and listening, comprehension, memory, recall and organisation of language & expression.
You may have seen Makaton being used on Cbeebies – Something Special or Bedtime stories.

Can Makaton Help my child?

Makaton can help lots of children to communicate. For example those who have difficulties understanding or remembering what has been said, children who have little or no speech or whose speech is difficult to understand.
Makaton builds on early communication skills such as pointing and gesture and can help children with communication difficulties to express themselves more easily.



Will Makaton delay my child's speech?

No! There is robust research evidence that Makaton supports communication and can often act as a 'stepping stone' or 'bridge' to developing speech and language skills

How do I start to use Makaton with my child?

A small range of everyday vocabulary is usually a good place to start. Your Speech Therapist can help you to choose some words to get started and share the signs with you. Use the signs alongside speech in your daily routines with your child. Teach the signs to other family members so that they can use them too. It may take a while for your child to make the connection between the sign and meaning of the word. Try not to be disheartened if your child does not sign right away, even your average baby will listen to language around them for 12-18 months before they start to speak

If you would like to attend Makaton training to learn more about Makaton, to learn signs and symbols either speak to your child's Speech and Language Therapist or email the team at CYPMakaton@Berkshire.nhs.uk You can also find out more about Makaton at www.Makaton.org.

More

Look

Finished