

Creating a Communication Friendly Environment



The purpose of a communication friendly environment

A communication friendly environment should make communication as easy, effective and enjoyable as possible. It should provide opportunities for everyone to talk, listen, understand and take part. A communication friendly environment will support the development of all children's communication skills and usually includes features which will also be particularly beneficial for children and young people with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN). Developing a communication friendly environment can also be removing barriers to communication. A communication friendly environment will also support learning, social and emotional development.

The Communication Trust – Making your place great for communication



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TOP TIPS FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN

Follow your child's interests

Your child will listen to you more and they will know you are interested in them

Talk about what your child is doing

Your child hears and learns the words that relate to what they are doing

Keep it short and simple

It will be easier for your child to understand what you say, and copy your words

Say it again and again

It helps your child to work out what the word they are hearing means.

Children like repetition

Copy and add to what your child says. (Example: your child says "car." You say "Car. Big car.") - It helps your child learn how to say longer sentences.

Give your child choices

(Example: Do you want apple or biscuit? Apple? OK Here's your apple") It gives your child the words he needs and makes him think about what he wants to communicate

Listen and react to what your child says – note how they say it

(Example: your child says "tar", you say "Yes car. Here's your car." It helps your child learn how to pronounce words

Don't ask your child to copy words after you

(Example: can you say car? It can make children feel self-conscious and they may go quiet

Don't ask too many questions

It can make a child feel pressured or frustrated and they may stop listening to you

Books, rhymes and songs every day

Looking at a book together or singing a rhyme together at least once a day helps children learn new words, especially when the words are repeated often

Ten minutes special time every day

Find ten minutes every day where you turn off the TV, the iPad etc and get down to your child's level and play, using all the tips shown above.

VISUAL DISTRACTIONS AND NOISE LEVELS

Visual distraction

Children can be easily distracted and lots of visual distraction can impact on their communication skills. Displays should be minimalistic with plain or neutral coloured backgrounds as this allows the children to focus on the work that is displayed. Hanging things from the ceiling should only be done in specific areas and there should be areas free from clutter. Children who are distracted by their surroundings will be unable to keep their attention or use their listening skills effectively.

Noise Level

Noise is a very important factor in creating a communication friendly environment. Children need to acquire sound attention and listening skills in order to communicate effectively. Environments where sound travels or creates an echo can be disrupting to a child's communication. Creating spaces where sound can be absorbed or children can access some quiet time is vital in supporting their communication development. Can you create a quiet area within your space?

SPACE AND LIGHTING

Space

Children need space to be able to communicate effectively with others. If they are too cramped or not given adequate space they can become frustrated and feel overwhelmed. It is similar for adults, we tend to feel much more comfortable communicating with a person if we are given some personal space. Does the environment offer children enough space?

Lighting

Lighting can affect a child's mood and behaviour. Natural light will help your child to feel calm and cosy, while brightly lit rooms can have the opposite effect and be very distracting. Can your space offer darker areas of the room? Fairy lights inside dens or tents are a great way to alter lighting and create a soft lighting area for children to relax and reflect.



CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHOICES

Using choices as much as possible through the day is a very effective way of helping your child learn new words and then use the words they know.

How to use choices:

Hold up two items (where possible) and offer your child a choice of two words relating to the items. If your child points to the item they want accept that they have made a choice, model the word for your child, and wait for 2-3 seconds before modelling the word again and waiting to see if your child copies. If your child does not copy, give them the item and model the word again for them to hear.

Examples:

Adult: "Do you want apple or biscuit?"

Child: no response

Adult: Show the child the items and say again "apple or biscuit" showing each item as you say the word.

Child: points to the biscuit

Adult: "oh you want biscuit" (*stressing the word you want them to learn*)

Offering the child a toy when they can say some words, but not clearly:

Adult: "Do you want car or train?"

Child: "ar"

Adult: "oh you want the car" (*stressing the sound you want them to learn*)

Offering the child, a snack:

Adult: Show the child the items and say again "apple or biscuit" showing each item as you say the word.

Child: points to the biscuit

Adult: "oh you want **biscuit**" (*stressing the word you want them to learn*)

Choices can be used throughout the day for choosing food, clothes, toys etc.

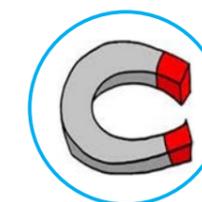
THE ROLE OF ADULTS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

The adults play a vital role in providing communication friendly spaces. You should use these language principles when interacting and having conversations with children.

Have **Quality conversations** and **interactions** with children

Be a magnet for communication

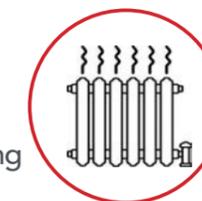
Help children to feel valued and noticed. Show that you know them as individuals and give each child individual attention.



- Use descriptive commentary to narrate a child's actions.
- Be an active listener and a responsive language partner.
- Show interest by using body language, using their name and getting down to their level.
- Use specific praise and encouragement often.
- Observe, wait and listen before speaking, to allow the child space and time to think and respond.
- Let children know you have understood them by confirming, repeating and extending their communication

Be a language radiator

- Where are children getting new words from in your environment?
- Model rich language and thinking. Talk often in different contexts, using varied and rich vocabulary which is just above children's level.
- Use unusual words as well as everyday words.
- Pay attention to using correct words and grammar to provide a good language model.
- Use opportunities provided by resources and activities to introduce new words, and make sure you plan for this.
- During play activities and routines, use techniques such as commenting and running commentaries to model the language for what children and adults are doing, experiencing and thinking.
- Read books with children daily, including reading aloud to children and reading with children.



Be a conversationalist



- Create a culture in your environment of adult-child conversation
- Discuss a wide range of subjects with children, including non-present as well as present topics, and stick around in conversations to deepen topics over multiple turns.
- Use a range of techniques to keep discussions and conversations going, including commenting, questioning, explaining, speculating, adding information and ideas to what children say, and encourage children to use new words themselves.
- Read and discuss books with children often. Re-read books to allow for more in-depth discussion in later-readings, as children become more familiar with the words and ideas.

Materials used in this professional development are drawn from the URLEY Professional Development Programme.

These were developed by Sandra Mathers (University of Oxford), Clare Williams (A+ Education Ltd), Iram Siraj (UCL), Denise Kingston (Birth to Seven Matters), Janice Woodcock (A+ Education Ltd) and Maria Evangelou (University of Oxford) and are being evaluated as part of a research study funded by the Education Endowment Foundation.



USING AN OBJECTS OF REFERENCE TIMETABLE FOR (0-18 MONTHS)

What are Objects of Reference?



- ✓ Objects of Reference are **everyday** objects that represent an **activity**, place or person. They tell the child that a specific activity is going to happen, or that they are going to a specific place, or that a special person is coming to see them.
- ✓ Many young children (and babies) use a form of Objects of Reference without the parents knowing, e.g. a toddler might get excited when they see their coat because they think they are going out.

How do they help children?

- ✓ They help the child to **understand** their daily routine and what is going to happen to them next.
- ✓ They help the child to **remember** where they are going or what they are going to do.
- ✓ When the child has got used to the Objects of Reference they can make **choices** between activities and hopefully they will be able to tell people what they want to do without any help.
- ✓ They can help to **reduce** behaviour problems by reducing the fear and **frustration** the child feels at not knowing what is going to happen to them.

How to make an object of reference timetable for baby room

- ✓ Make a **list** of all the **important** things that the children do every day and all the places they go to e.g. nappy change, garden, singing songs
- ✓ Think about objects that you may **already** use e.g. a nappy for nappy change time or a packet of wipes, that can be used as an Object of Reference. The following tips may help:
 - Choose objects that are **not** too **big** or **heavy**, so that they can all be kept in one bag and can be carried with you.
 - Choose objects that the child can **keep hold** of, not something that you are going to have to take out of their hands, e.g. not the spoon you are going to feed them with but an extra one they can keep.
 - Choose objects that are **easy** to **replace** if one gets lost or broken. It is useful to have a spare set of objects just in case.
 - Choose objects that are **safe**, for example if your child likes your car keys get them a set of toy plastic keys for their Objects of Reference.



- ✓ Gather all your objects together and put them into a box.
- ✓ It is **important** that **everyone** uses them as a reference alongside spoken language. The **more often** the objects are used the **quicker** the child will know what they mean. By speaking alongside showing them the object they have the opportunity to learn the language.

Examples of Objects of Reference

- ✓ Musical instrument- rhyme/ singing time
- ✓ Toilet – a nappy or a piece of towel
- ✓ Water play – bath toy or piece of sponge
- ✓ Going out – plastic keys
- ✓ Sleep – teddy or a blanket
- ✓ Drink – cup
- ✓ Dinner – plastic spoon
- ✓ Story – small cardboard book



Stages of Use

There are three stages that your child (children) will go through when learning to use Objects of Reference. These are **Anticipation**, **Choice Making** and **Initiation**.

- ✓ **Anticipation** – Your child will start to learn what is going to happen next, by seeing the Object of Reference for that activity. When your child does not know what is happening they can be frightened. Seeing the object will tell them what is going to happen, and they will feel happier and less frightened.
- ✓ **Choice Making** – When your child knows that an object means that something specific is going to happen they can start to make choices. You can give them a choice of two objects and ask them what they want to do next.
- ✓ **Initiation** – When your child knows that they can choose what they want to happen, they will feel that they have some control over their world. They can then use their Objects of Reference to ask for things for themselves without any help from you.

How to work with Objects of Reference

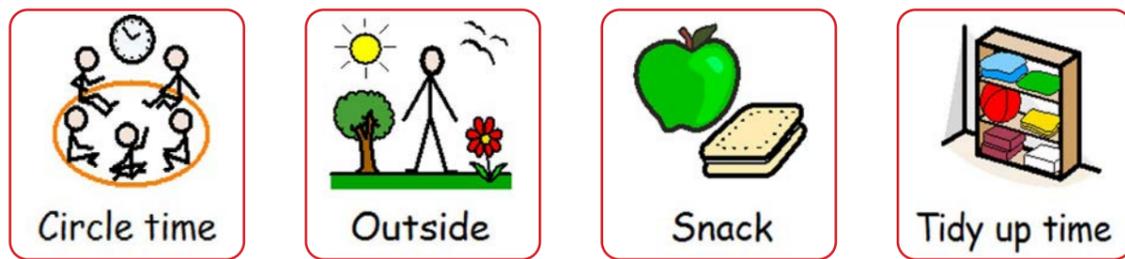
You will need to work with your child through each stage described above.

- ✓ **Anticipation** – Just before an activity is about to start, give the Object of Reference to your child (they may not want it and might throw it because they do not understand what it means). You may need to help your child hold the object until the start of the activity. Please consider how many objects you may need for a group activity. It is important that your child does not have to wait long before the start of an activity, to begin with. As they get used to the object they can wait longer for the activity to start. When the activity is finished help your child to put the object back into the bag. Some children learn what the objects mean very quickly, and others need longer. Once your child knows what the objects mean and you're confident they can associate the object with the activity you can move on to making a choice with the reference object.
- ✓ **Choice Making** – Pick a time in the day when your child can choose what they want to do e.g. in the morning you can ask your child if they want a drink or a snack. It is important you have both choices close to hand so that you can give them to your child as soon as your child has chosen.

Hold both Objects of Reference up in front of your child and ask them what they want e.g. hold up the cup and book for a drink and a story. Your child can then pick what they want, either by reaching for or looking at one of the objects. When your child has shown you which one they want, do the activity that it stands for or give them the item they want e.g. if they reach for the cup give them a drink, or if they reach for the book read a story with them. When your child can choose between two objects give them a choice of three. Give your child more chances in the day to choose what they want to do. The next step is to put the objects in front of your child and encourage them to pick one up and give it to you.

- ✓ **Initiation** – Initiation is like making a choice, the only difference is that your child should be choosing objects and giving them to you without you putting them in front of them. They should be going to the box of objects and picking them from there and bringing them to you. In baby room this might look like a child going towards the box of objects and asking for a member of staff to reach for the box. The box should then be brought down for the child, so it is easily accessible.

USING VISUAL TIME TABLES IN YOUR ENVIRONMENT AND ESTABLISHING A ROUTINE



Visual timetables are a sequence of symbols, line drawings or photographs that represent the activities that make up the daily routine. The most recent advice is that you use the symbols; can be any symbols but consistent with other symbols being used in your setting. Widely used symbols are widget and board maker. Symbols will reduce the differences in what an object looks like in different settings whereas a symbol is a consistent common language.

Why do we use them?

- They help all children understand the routine
- They help all children process and understand what you are saying
- They help all children feel reassured; they reduce anxiety about the unexpected
- They help all children follow adult lead
- They help children learn sequencing language e.g. now, next
- They can be used by teachers sometimes to offer a choice of activities
- Children with additional needs benefit from having their own personal visual timetable as well, or a Now-Next board, but that is not covered in this summary

What do you need?

- Symbols, line drawings or photographs to represent the different activities of the day. NB: You can have one to represent free play time.
- Velcro/Velcro strip or blue tac to stick the Symbols, line drawings or photographs to the wall
- A clear pouch, large envelope or basket to put them in once the activity is finished.

How do we use them?

- Place the Symbols, line drawings or photographs for the day in chronological order on the wall at eye level.
- Use Velcro or blue tac so that you can easily put them on/take them off.
- Nurseries often prefer to place them in the group time area for ease of access.
- A typical nursery day might start with free play, then group time. So, when the children come and sit down together, you point to the free play symbol and say:
 - **“Play time is finished”**. Emphasise the word finished by using the Makaton gesture.
 - Take the play time symbol off the board and put it in the pouch.
 - Point to the next symbol and say: **“Now it’s group time”**. (You could add “so we need to do good looking, good listening and good sitting – use Makaton and Active listening prompt cards, perhaps on a lanyard, to support this.)
 - When you come together for the first group time, talk about what is going to happen today and point to the timetable as you explain.
 - When group time is finished – again point to the time table, say **“group time is finished”**, use the Makaton gesture, take the picture off the wall and put it in the pouch, point to the next activity, and say **“Now it’s time for...”** etc
 - Throughout the day, when you signal a transition from one activity to another, draw attention to the timetable, pull the symbol off the wall, say it is **“finished”** and highlight the next activity, and so on.
- Remember it may take a while for the children to understand what a symbol, represents. At first you may need to reinforce the meaning of the symbol by showing it to the children as they do the activity – so that they link the Symbols with the activity.
- Some smaller routine activities can have their own mini timetable in the right location. For example, in the bathroom over the sink at the child’s eye level there could be symbols to show: Turn the tap on, wet hands, put soap on, wet hands, turn the tap off, dry hands, paper towel in the bin.



Example of Visuals to support your Visual Aid Timetable



MAKATON SIGNS

What is Makaton?

- ✓ Makaton uses signs alongside the normal speech, so the word order for the signing is the same as spoken English. Many of the signs are the same as those used in British Sign Language. It also encourages the use of symbols (coloured line drawings) as an aid to communication.

How does it help children?

- ✓ Being in a Makaton signing environment can help a child to understand verbal language.
- ✓ Being in a Makaton signing environment can encourage a child to use the signs as a form of expression. This can be when the child has little or no speech, or when a child's speech is difficult to understand (usually because of some other difficulties).
- ✓ Using Makaton signs can encourage a child to use more speech and can encourage clarity of speech. Using Makaton signing can also help to slow down a child's speech therefore increasing clarity.
- ✓ Being in a Makaton signing environment can also help children who do not speak English as their first language, to understand spoken English.

How to get the most from Makaton

- ✓ Children benefit from Makaton when they are in an environment where it is being used all the time around them – a Makaton signing environment.
- ✓ When in a Makaton signing environment, the child can understand more of the verbal language around them, and they will be more likely to use signs as a form of expression if they see everyone around them doing so too.
- ✓ Encourage the other children in the class/members of your family to use Makaton signs as much as they can e.g. for saying please, thank you and good morning. The child who uses Makaton for expression will be more motivated to do so if they see it as a valued form of communication. Also, the other children in the class/members of the family will be able to communicate with the child.
- ✓ Use Makaton according to the child's level of understanding. If the child only understands single words, then use only one sign at a time. If the child understands more than sign as many key words in a sentence as possible.
- ✓ Do not worry too much about the signs you don't know and concentrate on using the ones you do know as much as possible. Practising the signs can help you to remember them, and then when you are ready you can learn some new signs.

Makaton Signs MUST be used with your children every day



USING A VISUAL AIDED LANGUAGE DISPLAY

"Your Speech and Language Therapist may recommend you use these in your settings. They can give you advice on how/when to use them and what vocabulary to use.

What is an aided language display?

An aided language display is a page of the most important words for a child to use in everyday life and also for a specific activity.

Why do we use Aided Language Displays?

They can help to develop a child's language skills by expanding their sentences or teaching new words. For some children this may give them a different means of communicating through symbols. They also act as a link to literacy skills.

They also help adults to slow down and simplify their talking in order to be the best models to the child for language use.

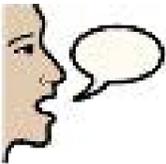
To start with the child may not know how to use the aided language display or what the symbols mean. As adults we need to show them by **modelling** the symbols as much as possible.

What is modelling?

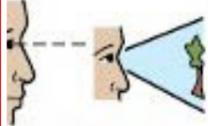
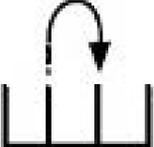
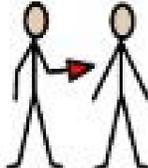
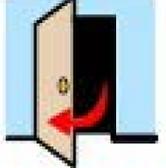
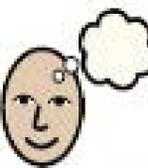
Modelling is where we teach meaning of symbols and words by pointing to symbols for key words as we speak to the child. Be animated and have fun and don't be afraid to repeat yourself by pointing to the same words again and again!

Typically we model spoken language to children for at least 12-18 months before expecting any words back. This is the same for modelling and using symbols.

Top Tips for modelling Visual Aided Language Displays

	Give the child lots of time to respond - try and show them it's their turn to talk
	Say the words that you are pointing to - this helps the child to learn what the symbols represent and how to use these themselves (you don't need to point to every word, just the most important ones).
	Comment - don't ask questions you know the answer to. Instead comment on what is happening on model the answer yourself.
	Keep things motivating and fun!
	Have the aided language display available at all times so you can model at every opportunity.
	Add words - if the child uses a single word model this back with another word added on the display
	Try not to guide the child's hand or point to a cell to tell them what to say. Instead model the word naturally during the activity. If the child does not point to the symbol, carry on the activity and continue to model.
	Help your child to learn the meaning of symbols by mapping their reactions onto a symbol. For example, when your child looks happy you can say "you look happy" or "I think you're enjoying this" and point to the happy symbol. If your child appears to be enjoying their juice you can say "I think you like your juice" and point to the like symbol.

20 Core Vocabulary symbols used in everyday interactions

 I	 want	 look/see	 next	 finish
 You	 more	 stop	 now	 open
 good	 like	 choose	 oh no	 who?
 bad	 help	 play	 turn	 what?
 different	 hurt	 think	 no	 where