

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a skill that is often taken for granted – somehow, like magic, we expect children to acquire the basic tools as they grow. My son Ashley (Deletion 22q13), who is 12yrs old, has only ever ‘communicated’ by pulling and pushing. I look back to when he was a baby and wish that I had known then just how important it is to work on improving his eye contact, attention span, and listening skills. Here I have tried to give you a few pointers to help communication. Lydia

Communication – It’s not what you say but the way that you say it!

A twitch of an eyebrow, a wrinkle of the nose, even a wink can convey an immense amount of information to another person but not necessarily the right message. Communication is a very complex process, sometimes described as an iceberg, where what is seen or heard is just the tip floating above the surface. Underneath, hidden from view, is an enormous range of skills that are required to understand and communicate effectively. A child must have enough attention span to listen, an understanding of the words, an ability to remember and be able to appreciate that words are in a sequence. Occasionally there are physical reasons such as low muscle tone that stop a child from using the most complex muscle in the human body, the tongue. So it is very hard for them to make appropriate sounds, it takes a lot of effort and extra work. Some children may have hearing problems or just cannot process the ‘hearing’ information. There could be any combination of these difficulties affecting a child’s ability to communicate.

How can you help you child to communicate? Typically at around 6 to 12 months a child will be listening, looking at you when you speak, maybe babbling or making noises to get your attention. However your child may not be typical, mine certainly wasn’t, so it is even more important to encourage their listening skills and non-verbal communication as soon as possible. Use lots of *different* sounds to attract your child’s interest – they can be sounds that you make yourself or using squeaky or rattle toys.

Observe your child, what do they like to do? Use what you see to develop an interaction. For example, if they like bubbles, and most children do, blow some bubbles. As soon as your child takes an interest, makes the slightest move, facial expression then respond with more bubbles. This is how a child can learn that an **action** brings about a **reaction**, the **interaction** that is necessary for communication.

Wait and give your child time to process the sounds. There are children whose chromosome problems make it difficult or impossible to sort sounds in any meaningful way. But it may be that it just takes them a bit longer so don’t rush them.

Listen to what your child is trying to communicate. Sometimes it is just the slightest of sounds but it could be the beginning of communication. Draw your child’s attention to the sounds in their environment; it helps develop their awareness of things. Every day activities like getting dressed, feeding or nappy changing can provide great opportunities for encouraging your child to look at you and make good eye contact. This helps to gain and maintain your child’s attention, which will add to their communication skills. Use actions and gestures with words such as waving as you say ‘bye-bye’ or point to or pick up their cup as you say ‘drink’. The more that you use gestures and actions with words, the easier it is for children to relate what they see and you do with the language that they hear. Use gestures to illustrate objects or actions. Encourage your child to communicate in **any** way – it does not have to be just words.

They may be able to understand ‘visual’ information that uses objects, signs and gestures, photos, symbols and written words. There are many alternative ways to assist communication. AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) provides a visual plan and a visual structure to help your child make sense of the world. Visual communication uses objects, signs and gestures, photos, symbols and written words. PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) teaches children to start an interaction and to exchange a symbol for something they like. It can be learnt quickly, help the development of language and can reduce frustration. It is a means to helping a child to communicate and gain some independence.

The visual timetable gives a child a method to cope with change and can reduce stress. It can be made up of objects or parts of objects, photos, line drawings or symbols, words or sentences or a combination. The timetable helps a child to

- follow daily routines,
- change activities
- handle stressful situations
- accept a routine
- accept new items into a routine
- change items within a routine.

How often are you faced with trying to explain to a child that they have to **wait** before they can go out, have the TV on, eat dinner etc? Explaining the concept of ‘time must pass’ before something happens is quite tricky. I was shown an excellent idea at a recent talk. Cut out the shape of large hand, colour it brightly, say red, and laminate it. A small Velcro button was glued onto each ‘finger’ and a black felt ‘fingertip’ button was then stuck onto the Velcro. The hand is shown to the child. At first each black button is removed fairly quickly, one after the other, and then a reward is handed over, (a book to read, a video or TV to watch, a sweet etc). Gradually, over a few days, the gap between removing each button is extended, so that eventually the child learns that once all the black buttons are removed, they will then get what they have been waiting for. After a while the hand can be used to represent various periods of time, ranging from five minutes, five hours, five days. A little maths will help you to adjust the periods of waiting to suit the desired delay. It **visually** helps the child to wait for a period of time

There are a number of websites that will give more information and suggestions for play activities.

www.speechteach.co.uk - for parents and professionals supporting children with speech difficulties

www.do2learn.com - provides activities and ideas to encourage communication and promote independence

www.1voice.info - Network and support for children and families using communication aids

www.talkingpoint.org.uk - information about speech, language and communication difficulties

If you are at all concerned about your child's communication then it is crucial to seek professional advice from a Speech and Language therapist. Your G.P. or local Child Development Centre will be able to refer your child to a specialist.

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