Developing Early Communication

A handbook for staff supporting children at the earliest stages of development

Acknowledgements

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About this handbook and its purpose

Overview

This handbook is focused on supporting children with potential or identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Some children may have significantly delayed or disordered patterns of development and will not have gained some of the necessary early communicative skills that may typically be expected for their age upon entering a setting. They may not see the value of communication or have a sense that it is enjoyable and a way to connect with others and have an effect on them. They may have a desire to be understood and communicate with others but just not know how to go about it effectively. These children will likely be at the earliest stages of developing their communication skills and are unlikely to yet be speaking within their setting.

This is a toolkit for staff working with children at the earliest levels to assist them with their approach to developing communication and supporting learning. The handbook has been written with EYFS staff in mind, however the principles could be applied to older children at the early stages of developing their communication.   It aims to enable staff to start from the child where they are, and to facilitate building the necessary fundamental skills that underpin the communication process. It also suggests some ways of supporting the child to develop an understanding of and to gain confidence in using more symbolic communication skills (using objects, pictures, symbols and words).

Communication is about more than just having words. Early communication skills intersect with social interaction and play. So, many of the strategies and activities you can do are not exclusively focussed on just 'talking.' Children need a range of skills to become successful communicators.

The good news is that communication is everywhere. Most of the activities that support the necessary development of these skills, can be part of your daily routines.

> *'Every child deserves the best start in life. The experiences children have in their first five years are crucial for their future well-being, learning and development. High quality early years education and care have a positive impact on children's attainment up to the end of secondary school.'*
>
> *(Ofsted, 2022)*

Responsibilities

SEND is the responsibility of all staff. Everyone should be aware of the needs of children, have access to relevant plans and profiles.

When a child has difficulties understanding others and making their needs known, check with your school SENDCo if the child has a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT)- early SLT support gives the best outcomes *(Public Health England, Best start in speech, language and communication: Supporting evidence, 2020).*

Teachers should work closely with other staff, to plan and assess the impact of support and interventions and how they can be linked to classroom teaching *(SEND Code of Practice, 2015).*

Schools should provide sufficient time for TA training and for teachers and TAs to meet out of class to enable the necessary preparation and feedback. Research indicates training on specific provision delivery yields positive benefits *(Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2018).*

'If children don't learn the way we teach, then we must teach the way children learn.'

(Dr Ivar Lovaas)

Total Communication Approach

We all want to feel connected, valued and included. A Total Communication Approach aims to empower children to communicate and express themselves using the best method for each child, so they can form connections, have successful interactions, exchange information, and learn to have conversations with others. Although verbal speech may not be possible for all children, communication through any means is the ultimate goal *(Mueller, 2013).* This approach involves using and accepting all types of communication, not just speech, equally. It includes facial expression, body language, gesture, sign, sounds, objects of reference, symbols, pictures and written language.

Components of effective, total communication approach:

- Identify and support your child's means of communication.
- Motivate your child by providing a reason for them to communicate.
- Practice and create many opportunities for your child to communicate.

This handbook will advocate the use and incorporate elements of a total communication approach.

Starting questions

How do they currently tell you what they want?

_____

_____

_____

How do they currently tell you how they feel?

_____

_____

_____

What support are you giving that's working well?

_____

_____

_____

For children with communication differences and difficulties, consistency and repetition is key for development and inclusion – is there anything you are doing that could be done more regularly or intensively?
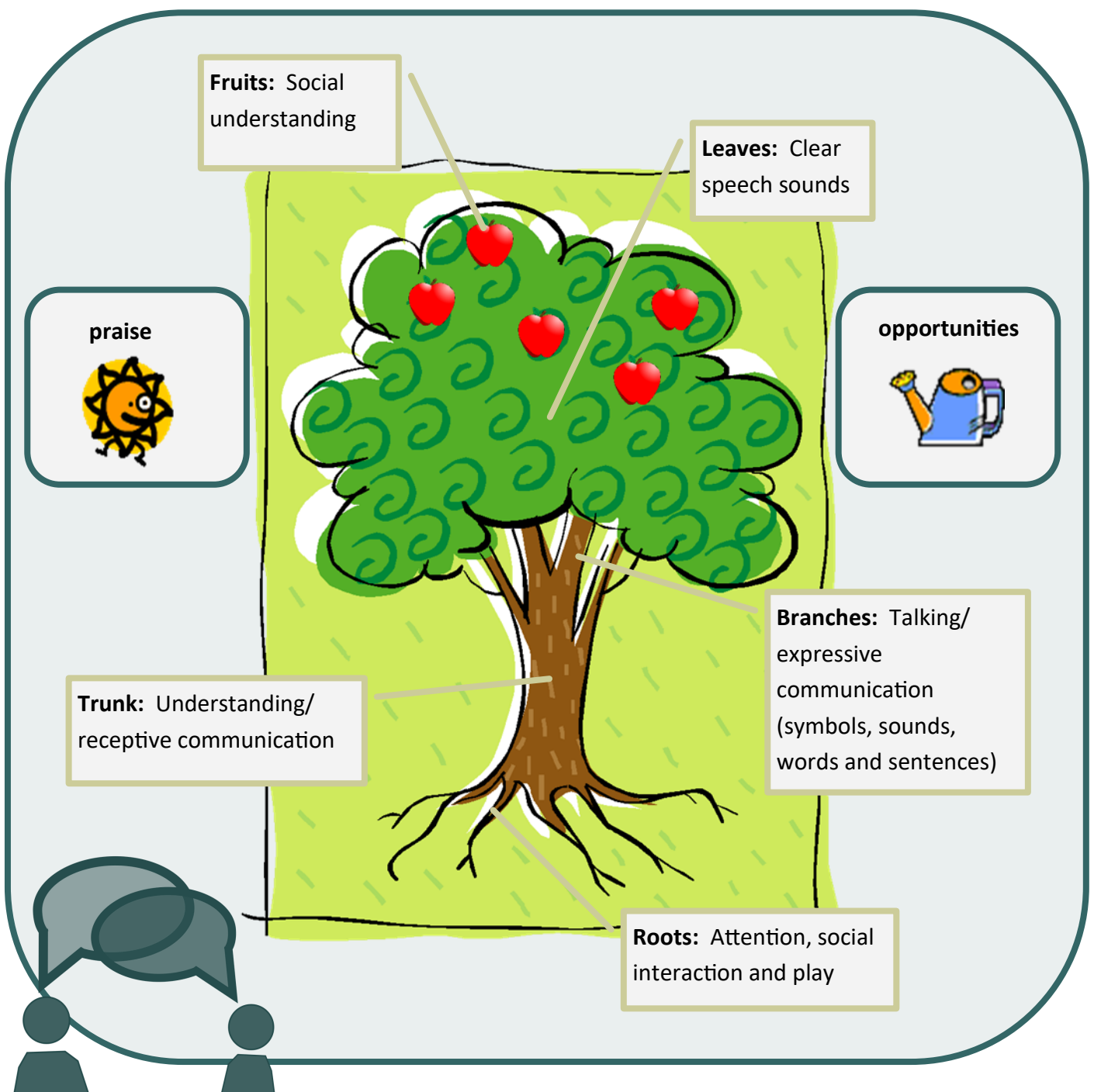
_____

_____

_____

What are their interests? How do you know this (how are they communicating this)?

_____

_____

_____

All children have wants and needs, for children with communication differences and difficulties, they will need support expressing these. If you were them, what would you like to communicate?

_____

_____

_____

How communication develops

For most children, this is how communication skills grow from roots to the trunk, to the leaves and then the fruits.

The development of the tree may look different for some children – what is important is that we are giving support at those 'root' skills as well as more apparent areas of need (e.g, talking), as this can support the communication skills higher up the tree.

Fruits: Social understanding

Leaves: Clear speech sounds

praise

opportunities

Branches: Talking/ expressive communication (symbols, sounds, words and sentences)

Trunk: Understanding/ receptive communication

Roots: Attention, social interaction and play

Communication definitions:

- **Social interaction –** one person conveys a "message" to another, e.g., this can be through sharing, take turns or showing interest in others.

- **Shared attention** - you and another share your attention on the same stimulus.

- **Play –** engage in an activity for enjoyment (on your own, or with others).

- **Understanding**- how you process and understand what others are saying to you.

- **Talking/expressive communication** – relaying a specific message to another (whether this is through spoken language, symbol exchange, signing etc.).

- **Speech** - pronunciation of spoken words.

- **Social understanding**- understanding social rules, exceptions to rules, interpreting what others are thinking and/or feeling or what might happen next in an interaction.

Section two:

General classroom practice

In this section -

- **An enabling environment**

- **Structure of the day and learning activities**

- **Effective deployment of staff**

An Enabling Environment

Speech, language, and communication are critical areas of development

for children. To learn well, children must approach opportunities with curiosity, energy, and enthusiasm. Effective learning must be meaningful to a child, so that they are able to use what they have learned and apply it in new situations." (Birth to 5 Matters 2021). It is important to create an inclusive, language rich environment that enables all children to access their learning. When reflecting on an inclusive, language rich environment, this will include the following factors.

The Physical environment—Classroom organisation

Suitable resources

Provide a range of resources suitable for the stage and development of your children, offering sufficient challenge and interest.

Reach displays and resources

Observe the environment from a child's height, can they reach resources and see displays?

Clear areas and boundaries

Create zones and boundaries so areas have clear purpose and function and are not unnecessarily disturbed as they are well placed and spaced.

Collaborative areas

Create collaborative activity areas where several children can engage together on the same theme and interact together to achieve a common goal.

Quiet spaces

Create quieter spaces for individual work, decluttered space where it is easier to focus on a work task.

Labelled resources

Open- ended resources, store resources in accessible containers that are clearly labelled with photographs. Plan your environment so that children can access resources independently.

Interactive displays

Use posters, photographs, and interactive displays to stimulate interest (e.g., picture books or photos up of recent experiences child involved with in relevant areas).

Use of visual sequences

Visual sequence to support independence (e.g., easel, hand washing, toilet, water tray etc).

Please see the appendices for additional photographic examples from Ealing schools.

Emotionally Safe Environment

Children need to feel secure in an emotionally safe environment to be able to reach their optimal stage of development, form close and secure adult and peer relationships and experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions. An emotionally safe environment ensures that children feel visible, valued, and supported.

Components of an emotionally safe environment

Development responsive, consistent, and caring relationships.

Develop your key person approach to enable and support close attachments between individual children and staff, so staff know children really well and can keep each child 'in mind' when planning for play, care routines, settling in and transition times.

Develop clear and safe boundaries.

Boundaries are communicated clearly to children through adult actions as well as words, adults are patient in repeating the guidance and explanations many times, make a visual poster of the settings boundaries and ask children to help draw it with little symbols so they feel a part of it.

Be accepting and give a sense of belonging–being welcomed and valued, treated with respect.

Ensure each child is warmly welcomed by name, smile, use an 'all about me' sheet to include all the interesting information about the child, provide multicultural resources that are related to your cohort.

Have positive team and adult interactions.

Share observations and knowledge, be 'available' for all children, adults model what they want children to do.

Value each child's family.

Plan times for meetings with new parents to find out about their child, encourage open visiting before the child starts, arrange home visits, and encourage parents to stay and play.

Carefully structure the routine in the setting.

Ensure a balance of adult and child–led activities, individual, small, and large group activities. Emphasise on time needed for sustain shared thinking and development of ideas.

Teaching practices to support a language-rich environment

- **Observe children,** note their preferences, ways to communicate, friends, interests and learning styles.

- **Plan activities and experiences in response to your observations** to support children's development in ways that are relevant, meaningful and interesting to them.

- **Ensure planned activities are worth talking about and create a need to talk or collaborate**. This creates excitement, a buzz and generates great conversation and thinking.

- **Plan the timetable so that there are not unnecessary breaks in the day** – have an unhurried regular routine that children understand (a visual timetable which shows the structure of the day can be reassuring). This ideally should be one that allows for reasonably long periods of uninterrupted play that help facilitate deep levels of involvement.

- **Keep focus activities for several days or even weeks** (repeating learnt and new vocabulary).

Over stimulating and under stimulating environment

- **Provide space/calm area** where children can take a time out for self-regulation from the excitement of group activity or when being overwhelmed.

- **Provide sensory breaks within daily schedule**- use and create sensory activities or apply sensory circuit intervention.

- **Reduce the noise or activity around your children** when you observe early signs of frustration.

- **Provide physical activities-for children who need extra stimulation,** e.g., trampoline, balancing and climbing activities.

- **Developing an understanding of the importance of conversational interactions** –create deliberate use of routines as opportunities to engage children to meaningful conversations.

Structure of the day and learning activities

Adult led and planned play activities

What you can do:
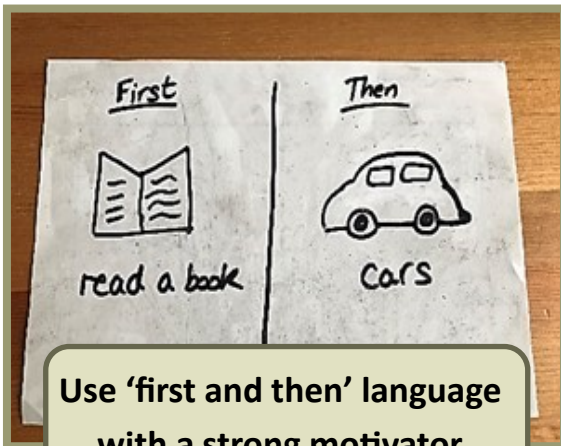
Use 'first and then' language with a strong motivator

Keep your adult led tasks short with easy success to begin with and immediately follow it with something that you know will be motivating for the child. Then gradually increase expectations within the adult led task over time.
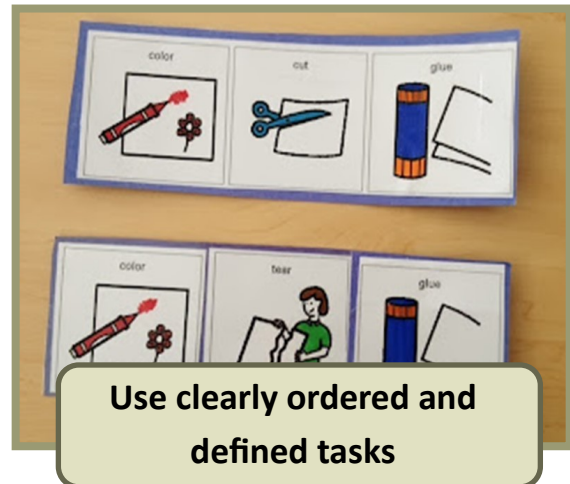
Use clearly ordered and defined tasks

Ensure it is clear what to do and in which order, how much is expected and when it will be complete. A simple pictorial sequence can help to visually break this down.

Build on the familiar and use interests

A child who repeatedly pours and watches sand descend might appreciate being shown small variations (pouring it through a sieve or down connecting wheels). Alternatively, they may like other toys with the same movement such as cars down a ramp or a marble run.

Clearly organise the space and resources for a task

Have out only what is needed in separate trays or containers in the order they need them to avoid confusing and overwhelming them.

Demonstrate and show them what to do

Use objects during verbal instruction so children can see what you are talking about. This can be enhanced with tone of voice, facial expressions, gesture, signing, and pictures.
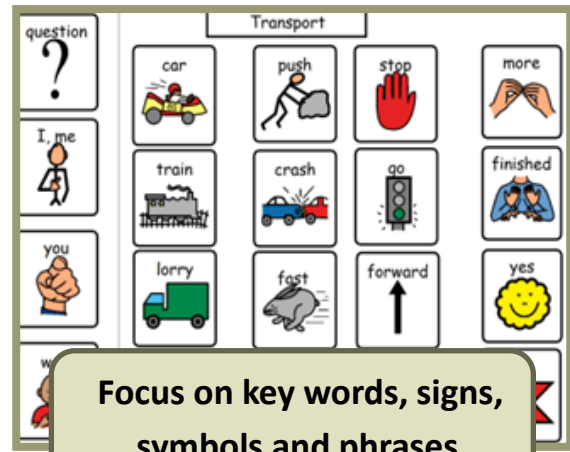
Focus on key words, signs, symbols and phrases.

Consider which ones are most important, useful for the activity and motivating to the child.

Group teaching times

What you can do:

General Strategies

Visual expectations and reminders that are referred to frequently

(e.g., good sitting, listening, looking).

Make abstract concepts visual

(e.g., the date and weather can be represented pictorially).

Give the information needed in a response within the question

(e.g., 'the green one or the blue one,' rather than, 'which one do you want').

Support children to answer questions through pointing to, showing you or giving items.

Reinforce language and redirect them if needed

(e.g., child is asked to find the lightest item on balance scales. However, the child selects the heaviest item. You say 'you found the heaviest one. Can you show me the lightest one?' Key words can be reinforced with gesture).

Stories, songs and rhymes

Use engaging ones that have a straightforward, predictable structure and simple repeated refrains.

Simplify the language if needed and sign key words.

Deliver in small groups and maximise opportunities for turn taking and interactivity.

Use actions, movements or vocalisations to give chances to actively participate. A choice board with visuals of each song or different movements, actions or instruments that can be selected works well. Alternatively, set up the story outdoors and act it out together or make it multi-sensory whereby the main sensations are experienced by the children in a multisensory way.

Use big books, pictures and props.

This helps to help maintain attention and focus and to support understanding.

Revisit a particular story several times in succession.

This builds familiarity, giving opportunities for repetition and mastery. Then revisit on a regular rotating basis.

Use a pausing technique once children are familiar with a story or song.

This will create anticipation and encourage them to fill in the words.

Effective deployment of staff

Research (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2018; Webster and De Boer, 2019) has shown that there is a positive impact on children with SEND outcomes when teachers, TAs and practitioners deliver a few carefully chosen and well-structured interventions, keeping consistency and tracking effectiveness. The aim should be to complement the overall teaching and learning objectives and minimise the time children spend away from the classroom.

Aims of structured one-to-one and/or small group intervention sessions

- To allow children more varied opportunities to communicate.

- To enhance attention and understanding.

- To create opportunities for task-free time dedicated to quality communication and interaction.

- Are often brief (5-20 min).

- Occur regularly (3-5 times per week).

- Timetabling in place to enabling consistent delivery.

- Have structured supporting resources and lesson plans, with clear objectives.

Suggested structure of staff roles

Rotating roles: Have a rotating timetable so that one day (or in one lesson) the teacher works with one group, the TA with another group, and other groups work collaboratively or independently. The next day (or lesson) the support is rotated.

*

Undertake different roles: Staff working in the classroom undertake different roles, depending on the needs of the class and the number of staff available; 'Individual helper,' who works with an individual or a group on a teaching activity for 5-15 minutes, the 'Activity manager,' who concentrates on the rest of the class, normally separated in small groups of 4-8 children, and the 'Mover' (where applicable), who moves equipment and deals with interruptions in order to free the other group from distraction.

Zoning: a model that allocates teacher and TA roles according to the classroom structure and assigns groups of children to each staff.

Co-teaching: a model that emphasises collaboration and communication among all members of a team (usually a general teacher and a specialist/assistant) with the purpose of jointly delivering instruction in a way that meets the needs of all children.

Different types of **co-teaching**:

* One teaches, one assists, in which the teacher leads instruction while the TA circulates and assists individual children.

* Station teaching, in which children are divided in three groups and rotate from station to station, being taught by the teacher and TA at two stations and working independently at the third.

* Parallel teaching, in which each teacher or TA instructs the same content to half the class group with one aim being to foster instructional differentiation and increases student participation.

* Alternative teaching, in which one teacher works with a large group and the other works with a small group for remediation, enrichment, or assessment, among others.

Section three:

Strategies and interventions

In this section -

- **Building a relationship, attention and social engagement**

- **Developing receptive communication (understanding)**

- **Developing expressive communication (speaking)**

Building a relationship, attention and social engagement

Intensive Interaction

Children may not have yet developed the fundamental communication skills linked to engaging and interacting with others. These fundamental skills include: Enjoying being with others, share your personal space, to give and share attention, to focus and concentrate on others, enjoying an activity together, initiating and responding through simple turn taking behaviours, understanding and using eye contact, facial expression, body language and other forms of non verbal communication. This learning is vital and underpinning to the development of communication, social interaction and play skills.

What it is:

A spontaneous way of supporting communication that can be done anywhere.

It helps two people feel connected and share moments together- through imitating a child's action, sounds and movements.

Children love it when we copy them as it shows we are tuned in and interested in them.

This intervention makes no demands on the child, instead the adult enters the child's world and enjoys spending time with them doing whatever they like to do, (Hewett, 2012).

How to do it:

- Sit with the child and watch what they are doing.

- Get down to your child's level and preferably face to face.

- Enter their world by copying and following exactly what your child is doing - movements, gestures, expressions and sounds, and playing with toys in the same way as them.

- Respond to the child's movements, gestures, expressions, sounds as if they are communicating with you.
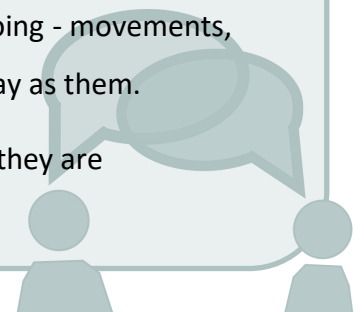
Bucket time

This intervention is aimed at all children who are at the early stages of developing attention. It is the first stage of a four stage programme developed by Gina Davis to support children to focus, sustain, shift and then refocus their attention. It is taught through visually stimulating and fun activities with a low cognitive demand to enable children to take the risk of joining in and experience joy and success (see references to find out more).

What it is:

It develops shared/joint attention. This has two aspects (responding and initiating). 'Responding' is looking and focussing where someone else is looking or pointing. 'Initiating' is getting someone else to focus on something. It is important for being able to look at or listen to activities with others, learning new words and successfully engaging in interactions together.

How to do it:

- Use a quiet space with minimal distractions.

- Have a bucket of toys (simple, entertaining toys that move, light up or make a sound).

- Show a toy, then use one or two key words while demonstrating it and name the toy before returning it to the bucket (the children do not touch the toys).

- Keep it brief to allow them to build up skills gradually. Initially, you are looking to gain two or three brief moments of shared/joint attention (use only 3-5 toys each session).

  - Make it fun by using exaggerated expression. Try not to rush through it.

  - The child can move around while watching (it's not a sitting intervention).

  - Check the toys work beforehand and rotate some to maintain interest.

Developing receptive communication (understanding)

Using visuals and a total communication approach

Sometimes the school environment can be overwhelming for children. They may appear lost and might not understand expectations and what to do. Their insufficient understanding can lead them to perceive things as unpredictable which can increase anxiety for them. Difficulties with communication and social interaction mean they may not pick up on cues and learn from others and could be at risk of becoming isolated and withdrawn. Some children won't be able to make sense of it all and may also lack some early play and learning skills, so need these to be explicitly taught in a manner they can easily comprehend. Otherwise, they will not be able to fully access the curriculum and learning opportunities on offer.
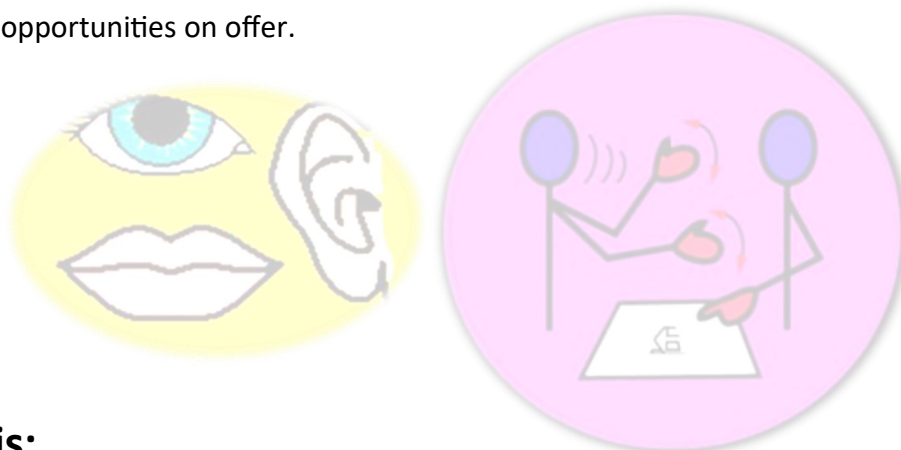
What it is:

Spoken words are transient and children may find it difficult to process and retain the information before it is gone- we can use visuals to help the children understand, process and see what you mean.

Using visuals and a total communication approach means using everything and anything to help a child understand what you are saying- pictures, objects, gestures, symbols, signing etc.

Using visuals helps provides predictability and reduce confusion or anxiety.

Using visuals helps promote independence, understanding and communication.

Remember: Visuals must be at an appropriate level, relevant, meaningful, taught to the child and referred to regularly to be effective.

How to do it:

Using gesture and signs: We all communicate using gestures and signs in everyday life (for example waving to say 'hello'). We can help the child understand what you are saying by using a few key Makaton signs, start by using ones that link to the daily routine (e.g., 'eat', 'toilet' or 'finish') or that the child is motivated by (e.g., if the child likes trains, use the sign for 'train').
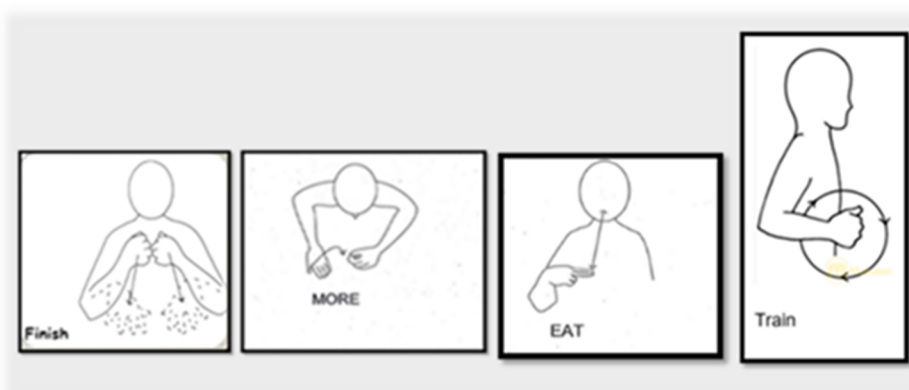
Objects of reference: Some children have not developed through the stages of symbolic development and may only recognise more concrete visual input such as objects. Objects of reference are any object which can be used to represent an item, activity, place, or person.
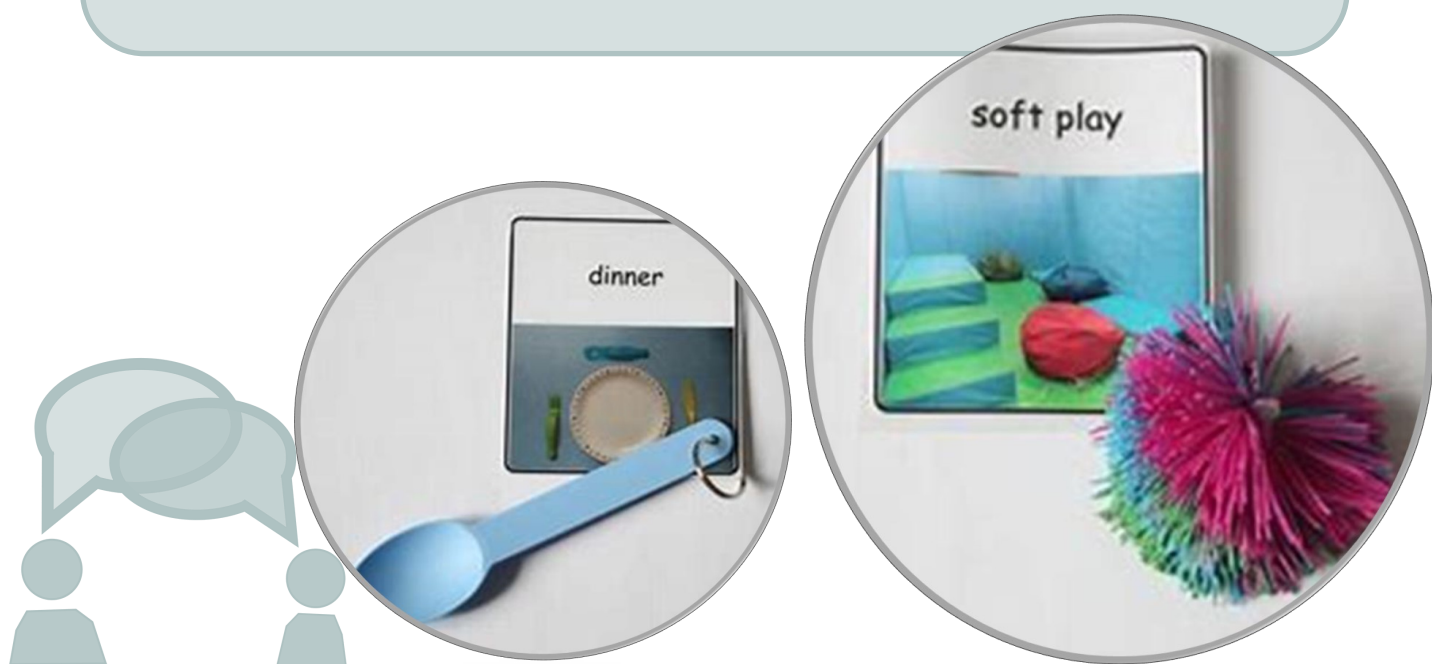
Pictures: Pictures can be used in many ways to help you communicate with a child. These pictures can be printed out and used in visual timetables and now and next boards.

tidy up

play
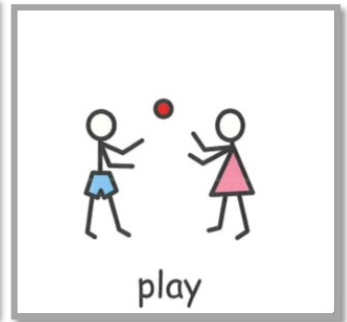
'Now and Next' boards: Presents what the child needs to do first (now) and what they will then do (next) in a visual way, using two visuals side by side, which can be removed and posted into a 'finished' pouch once complete. Remember, photographs are easier to understand initially.

Now

Next

transport puzzle

ball run
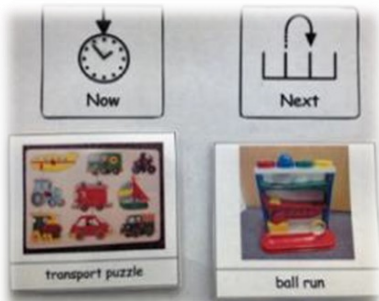
Visual Timetables: A visual timetable shows what is happening over a certain period in a visual way. It might use real photographs, or symbols with attached objects of reference. The visuals are removed and posted into a 'finished' pouch once complete.

Developing expressive communication (speaking)

Go slow and show; Say less and stress

These ideas are aimed at developing functional language skills in the classroom while doing activities that are part of the child's daily routine. The strategies enable you to teach language effectively through non-directed play situations that occur naturally within the classroom. At these times you can follow the child's lead and they are actively engaged, rather than only passively responding to your requests. These interactions through play also provide a natural communicative context that gives clues to support understanding and offer opportunities for a genuine exchange of information.

How to do it:

Stop, observe and respond
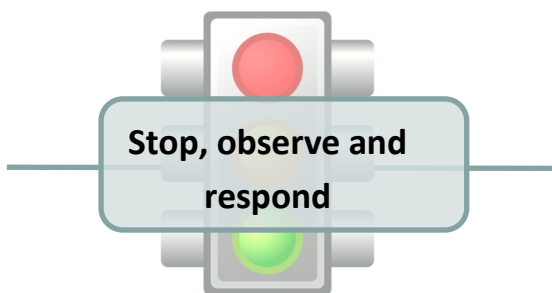
Tune into the child, interpret and act on their messages.

Follow the child's lead

Their interests at their pace.

Give time to respond

They need longer to process.

Use pausing
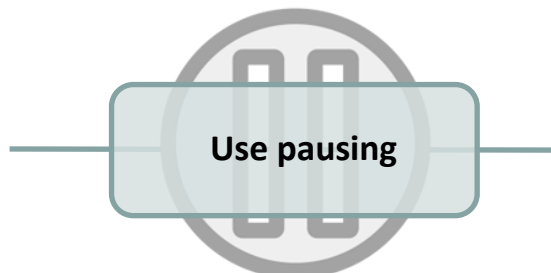
Creates anticipation and cues the child that it is their turn.

Add non-verbal information
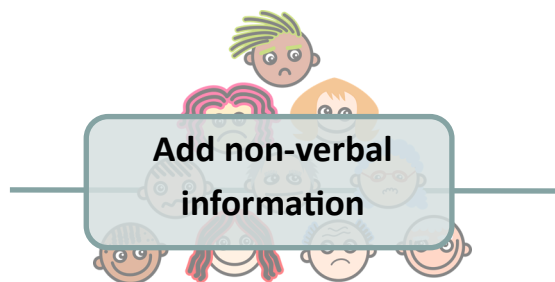
Facial expression, tone of voice and body language.

Use Makaton signing

Use for the words that are most useful, important, meaningful and relevant.
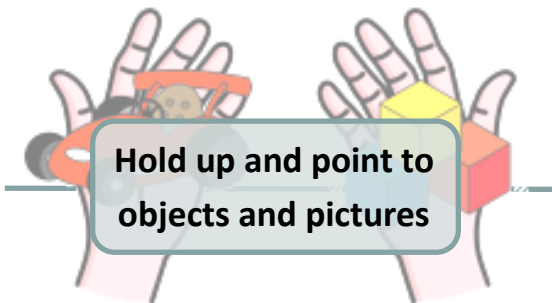
Hold up and point to objects and pictures

Showing things adds meaning when you model words.
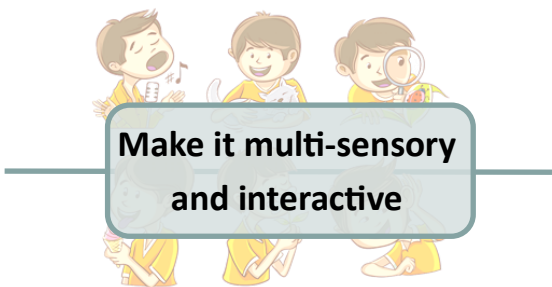
Make it multi-sensory and interactive

This allows children to experience it, forming connections and better memory.
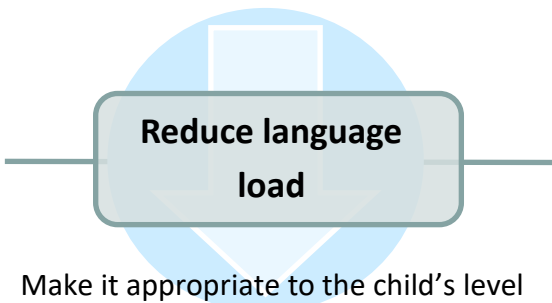
Reduce language load

Make it appropriate to the child's level of understanding.
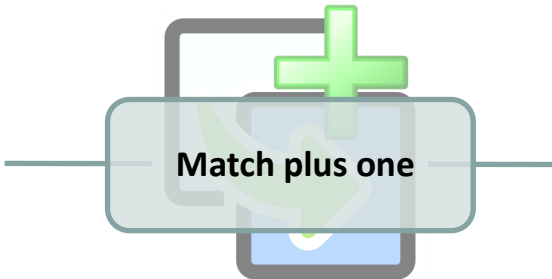
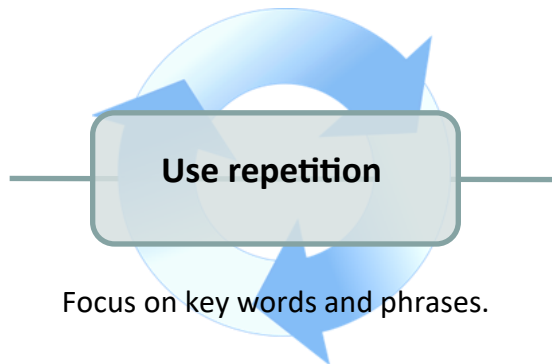**Match plus one**

Repeat their words and add only one more.
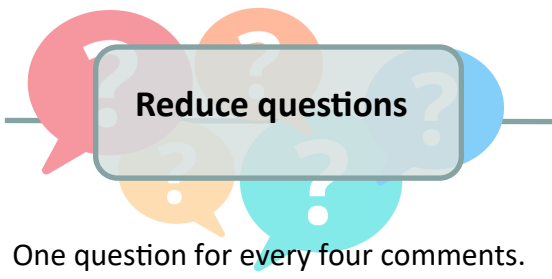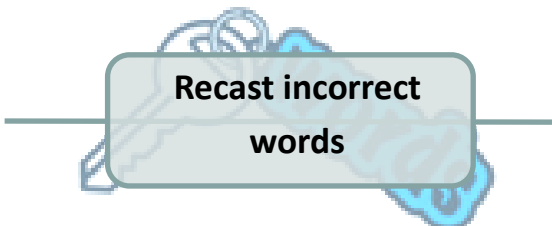
Reduce questions

One question for every four comments.
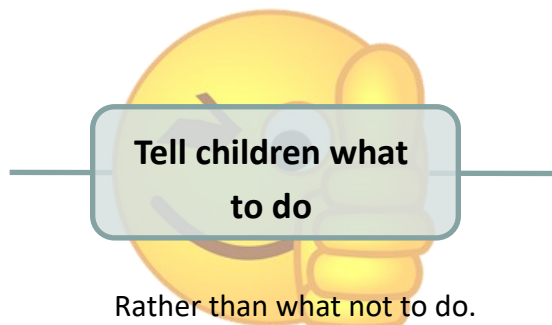
Comment on what is happening

Stress useful, relevant and meaningful words.

Use repetition

Focus on key words and phrases.

Recast incorrect words

Repeat the child's words back to them correctly, stressing the correction.

Tell children what to do

Rather than what not to do.

Please see the pull-out poster in the appendix that could be put up in class and summarises the key concepts.

Choices, chances and changes

Children frequently play quietly and as proficient communicators we often dislike silence and tend to fill in the gaps by talking and asking questions. We also generally want children to be happy and enjoy themselves and can consequently anticipate their needs without them having to communicate them to us. In addition to this, occasions to create communication can at times be overlooked in an early years environment where children can access resources and tools freely and select their activities by being self-directed.

These strategies create opportunities for talk. They help to show how useful communication skills are to a child and give them a sense of control over their environment. They support children to ask for things or make requests, and work to reduce frustration. In using these ideas, we can model the language required and build up our expectation of what the child must do as their skills develop.

How to do it:

Offer simple choices
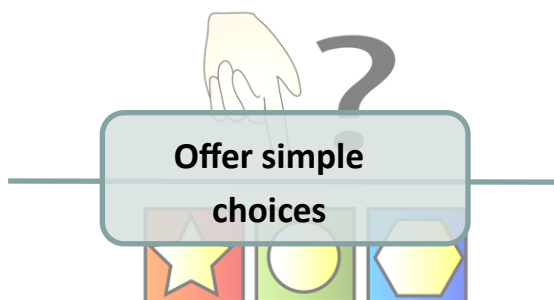
Show the items and name them.

Create giving opportunities

E.g., lid tightly on bubbles.

Create initiating opportunities
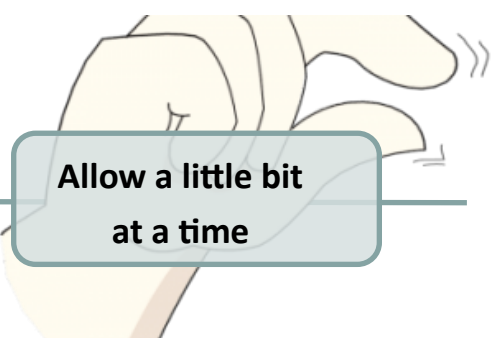
E.g., stop and go games or ready, steady go games.

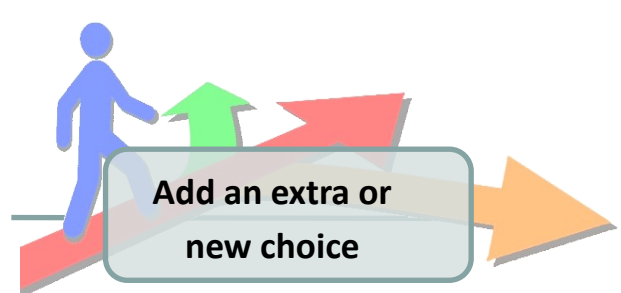**Create asking for help opportunities**

E.g., favourite toy in clear, lidded container. Alternatively, have desired items in a locked cupboard with clear pictures of them on the outside.
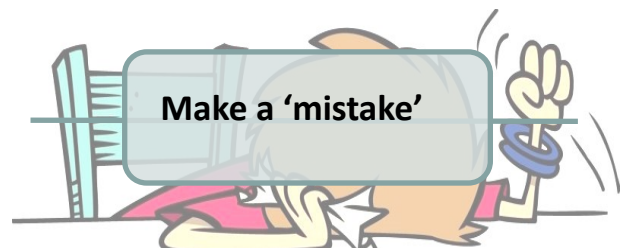
Allow a little bit at a time

Hold back resources so they can request and be given a small amount or only one piece, necessitating them to request again.

Add an extra or new choice

Switching a choice that is always selected by a child to something else they may like can broaden horizons.

Make a 'mistake'

E.g., give them a plastic apple at snack instead of a real one.

'Forget' to do something

E.g., give them their cup but forget to fill it up so it is still empty.

Create a novel event

Generate something worth communicating about. Silly things often work well such as wearing something weird or putting something in an unusual place. You can just make the most of fun moments. This takes the pressure off and lets the child just enjoy the fun of communicating.

Please see the pull-out poster in the appendix that could be put up in class and summarises the key concepts.

Appendices
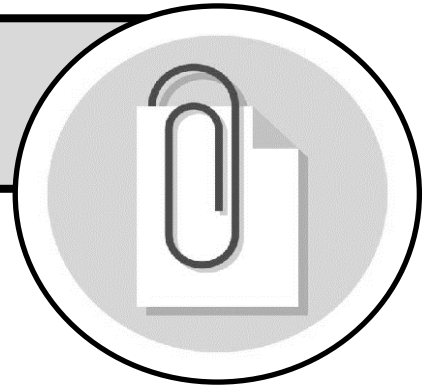
In this section -

- **Photographic examples of early years environments and resourcing from Ealing schools.**

- **Reviewing and reflection questions.**

- **Pull-out poster: Go slow and show; Say less and stress.**

- **Pull-out poster: Choices, chances and changes.**

Photographic examples of early years environments and resourcing from Ealing schools
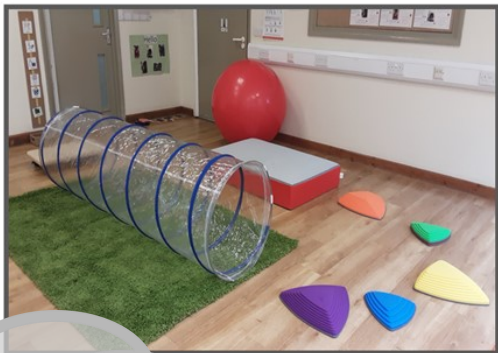
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Easy access to resources
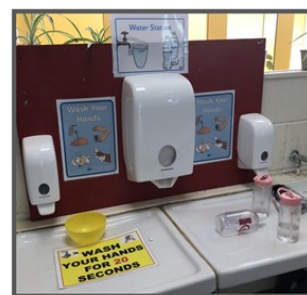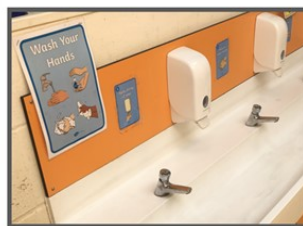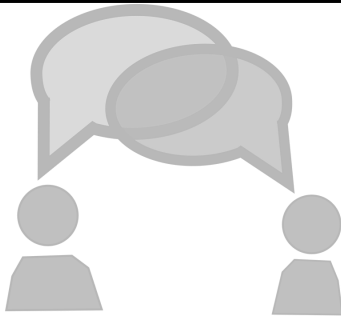

Visual instructions

Clear areas with labelled resources

Calm area and activities— Sensory circuit

Reviewing and reflection questions
(to be revisited on a 6-8 weekly basis)

How do they currently tell you what they want and how they feel?

_____

_____

_____

What changes have you seen in their communication in the past 6-8 weeks (for example, are they following more instructions, approaching you more for interaction, paying attention to activities completed by adults or peers for longer)?

_____

_____

_____

What support are you giving that's working well (for example, that they show enjoyment in, that staff are using consistently)?

_____

_____

_____

What environment change, strategy or activity can you try next (from the handbook) to further support their communication?

_____

_____

_____

Have their interests changed or have the amount of their interests increased? If yes - how have you applied these new interests into your practice?

_____

_____

_____

If you them, what would you currently like to communicate? Think about how you can help them with this, using the guidance in the handbook.

_____

_____

_____

Go Slow

- Stop, observe and then respond
- Follow the child's lead
- Give time for a response
- Use pausing

Show

- Add non-verbal information
- Use Makaton signing
- Hold up and point to objects
- Use a multi-sensory approach

Say Less

- Reduce language load
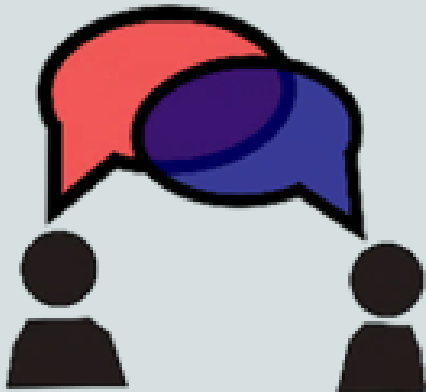- Use match plus one
- Reduce questions

Stress

- Comment on what's happening
- Use repetition, focus on key words
- Recast incorrect words or phrases
- Tell children what to do

Choices

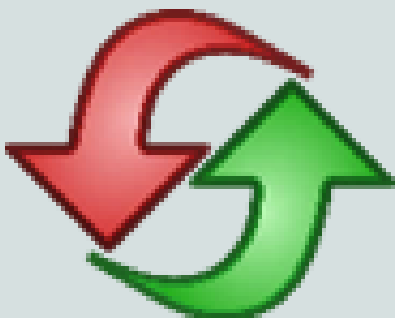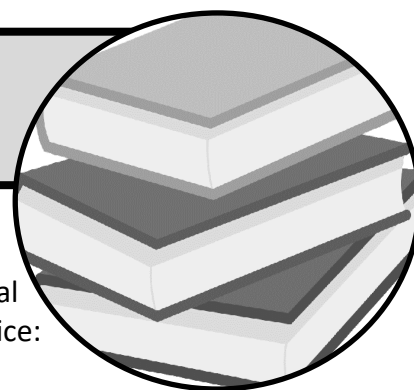- Offer simple choices.
- Show items and name them.

Chances

- Create opportunities for:
  ⇒ Giving
  ⇒ Initiating
  ⇒ Asking for help
- Allow a little bit at a time.

Changes

- Add an extra choice or a new choice.
- Make a 'mistake.'
- 'Forget' to do something.
- Create a novel event.

References

Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care (2015) Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years.

Hewett, D. (2012) 'What is Intensive Interaction? Curriculum, Process and Approach', in Hewett, D. (ed) Intensive Interaction: Theoretical Perspectives.

Mueller, V.T. (2013) Total Communication (TC) Approach, In: Volkmar, F.R. (eds) Encyclopedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders, Springer, New York, NY. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1698-3_1708

Ofsted (2022) The Annual Report of his Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22, pp.15.

Sharples, J., Webster, R. and Blatchford, P. (2018) Making the best of Teaching Assistants, Guidance Report, Education Endowment Foundation.

The Early Years Coalition (2021) Birth to 5 Matters: Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage. St Albans: Early Education.

Webster, R. and De Boer, A. (2019) Teaching assistants: their role in the inclusion, education, and achievement of pupils with special educational needs, European Journal of Special Needs Education, 34 (3), pp. 404–407.

Websites

- Attention Autism, Gina Davies Autism Centre Youtube Channel: Gina Davies Autism Centre - YouTube

- The Makaton Charity: Home (makaton.org)

- Intensive Interaction: Intensive Interaction - Fundamentals of Communication

- Ealing Speech and Language Therapy YouTube channel: Ealing Children's Services - YouTube
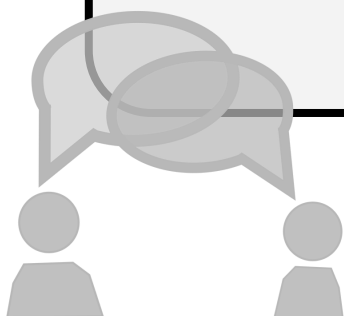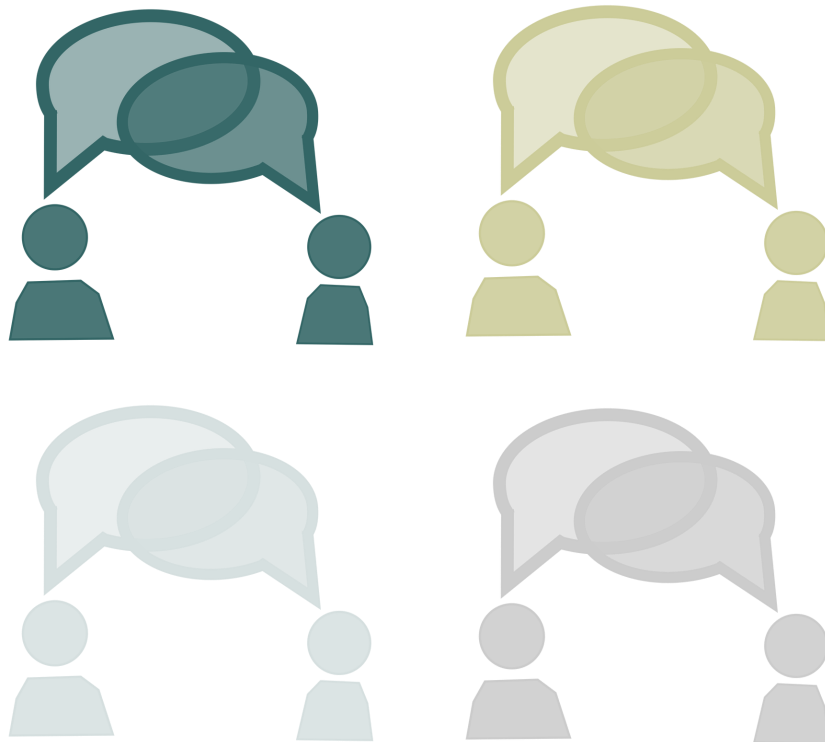
This handbook has been written and compiled by Ealing Specialist Advisory Teachers with collaboration and support from Ealing Speech and Language Therapists on behalf of Ealing local Authority for the use by maintained schools within the borough.

(September 2023)