

Supporting Early Language and Communication

Practical activities to support young children's developing speech language and communication

Introduction

Communication and Language is one of the three Prime Areas of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage, alongside Personal and Emotional Development and Physical Development.

Making progress and securing attainment in these three areas are critical to children's ability to fully access the curriculum and achieve successful outcomes at school. As practitioners working in the Early Years we therefore need to be able to identify when young children need additional support to help them to progress and start to narrow the gap with their peers.

This booklet is divided into the three strands of Communication and Language in Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage;

- Listening and Attention
- Understanding
- Speaking

The strategies and ideas are designed for practitioners to use during free-flow play whilst supporting and following children's interests. There are some suggestions for resources and activities but the most important resource of all is a sensitive, tuned in key person who knows their children and their fascinations.

A note of special thanks should be given to Sarah Phillips, the SENCO at Lydalls Nursery School who has provided material for this and other resources used in the Oxfordshire Early Language project.

We hope that you find this booklet useful in your work with children in your settings.

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First things first...

In all aspects of Communication and Language it is important to start with a child's stage of development rather than their chronological age. You may have children in your setting who need to experience language activities at a much earlier stage of development than their chronological age.

You will also need to be ready to physically get down to the child's level. Lots of the suggested strategies involve following a child's particular interests so get ready to move around the floor!

Listening and Attention

It is not difficult to recognise when you have a child in your setting who finds listening and attention challenging.

These are the children who may find following instructions and transitions to adult led activities very, very difficult. No matter how fabulous the singing and rhyme sessions are in your setting they really don't want to come and join you on the carpet and will let you know how they feel about it. If they do join you, they might just get up and wander off when they've had enough. They don't like to sit still long unless it is with something that they have chosen.

They may not seem to be hear you when you tell everyone that it's tidy up time or time to wash hands for snack.

They may also get really fixed on particular toys or activities in the setting, finding it hard to move on to different activities.

Parallel Play: Becoming a tuned in communication partner

This starts with letting the child lead their play.

- Get down to the child's level and copy what they are doing, including copying any noises, babble, or words that they may say.
- Mirror the child's body language as closely as possible. If they lie on the floor, you do too. If the child is pushing a car backwards and forwards across the floor get another car and do exactly the same thing. If they stop moving, you stop. When they start to move again, you move again. Keep copying closely.

This works because it is a way of helping the child to begin to understand that interests and attention on a task can be shared. They are starting to understand that the actions and sounds that they make have an impact on someone else and this feels good.

This is a simple but incredibly powerful way to encourage social relationships and communication.

Some activities and strategies to support listening and attention

The following activities and strategies can all be used within the free-flow play session by supporting

whatever a child is interested in

Strategy	What does the communication partner need to do?	What resources/activities support this?
<p>Anticipation games: Ready, Steady Go!</p>	<p>Choose a resource or activity that the child is interested in so that motivation is high; cars, balls, sand, water</p> <p>Once the game is established, wait for a response from the child before saying 'Go'. This could be the child giving you eye contact, making a sound or saying a word.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication partner drops cars/balls down a piece of guttering or tubing • Communication partner blows bubbles • Communication pours a container of water/sand through a water/sand wheel at the water/sand tray • Communication partner throws/rolls a ball • Child is travelling down a slide • Singing songs that include anticipation e.g. 'Round and round the garden' (pausing before the 'tickle you' part), 'Row, row, row the boat' (pausing before making a screaming noise after 'don't forget to scream')
<p>Turn taking games</p>	<p>Turn taking games can be played in lots of ways; posting items, rolling a ball, rolling cars down a ramp, tipping sand into a container with a spoon</p> <p>Choose a resource or activity that the child is interested in so that motivation is high; cars, balls, sand, water</p> <p>Use the language of turn taking e.g. 'Fred's turn', 'Julie's turn'</p> <p>Initially play with one adult and one child.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shape sorters • Shoe Box with a posting hole • Sorting posts • Mug trees and kitchen roll holders with bangles, hair scrunchies, napkin rings • Balls

Remember – Listening and Attention is hard work, particularly if you have a speech and language delay or if English is not your first language.

Points for professional reflection

- Does the child have a hearing loss? Ask parents to get this checked so that this can be ruled out. Bear in mind that if a child has 'glue ear' that their hearing loss may go up and down at different times of year or if they have a cold.
- When very young children are really focusing on and enjoying playing with a particular toy they may well not hear you when you speak to them. They aren't being rude, they are just engrossed! Get quietly down to the child's level and use their name to get their attention. You may need to gently touch their back or shoulder and softly repeat their name if they are really concentrating and still don't respond.
- When working with two and three year olds keep adult led activities, including singing and rhyme times, short. 10 minutes of quality is better than 20 minutes of stress and struggle.
- The smaller the number of children in the group, the easier it is for children to concentrate.
- It is easier for children to concentrate when group activities are led in a quieter area of the setting.
- Support children's attention by keeping things visual. Add props such as toys and puppets or picture symbols to represent songs and rhymes. Add sign and gesture to support children's understanding of language.
- When children find it hard to make transitions within the daily session use a visual timeline that shows the routine of what is happening now and next. Some children may also need a 'five minute warning' with a sand timer to show that part of the session is coming to an end and to help them prepare for the transition.
- Favourite toys and activities are an important part of settling in and enjoying being in a setting. Make favourite experiences part of every child's day but where children are very fixed in their play you may want to introduce a choice board that uses images/photographs of different resources or experiences on offer to help children to make choices within the learning environment. Limit the images/photographs to just a few choices so that children aren't overwhelmed. The Twinkl website has resources for choice boards that can be downloaded.

Understanding

This is the aspect of communication and language that is the most important. It is the foundation upon which interaction and communication is based and children with a delay to their understanding of language need early intervention and support.

It can be more difficult to identify when a child has a delay to their understanding. Most settings have very structured routines to their sessions and these, along with strong key person relationships, really help children to settle and feel secure in their setting. They quickly learn who will be in their setting, what will be there to play with every day and that some routines will be predictable e.g. snack, singing time.

Without realising it, we also give lots of non-verbal cues and gestures when we talk to children e.g. pointing and nodding. These are all helpful but may be stopping us from noticing a child's lack of understanding.

These children are often the last to follow an instruction when it is given to the group. They may have a more confident friend or sibling who seeks them out to make sure they are where they need to be! They may have learned to wait and copy others.

The message here is to stand back and observe your key children from time to time to see if they really are understanding.

Look out for children who, when you ask a question, repeat it straight back to you. This is called echolalia and is a serious sign that a child really isn't understanding what you're saying and would definitely be a reason to refer a child to speech and language therapy with parental permission.

Also look out for children who repeat large chunks of film/TV scripts out of context or who say phrases that they may be reading out of context without any intonation (up and down) in their voice. This is also a symptom of echolalia.

Developing the visual environment: Supporting understanding

When a child doesn't understand what is happening, things feel scary and chaotic and a child will reflect this in their behaviour.

Pictures, particularly photographs of actual resources and people in the setting, when used as visual cues, can be very helpful to develop shared understanding.

Use a visual timeline for the whole session so that all children develop an understanding of the routine and what is happening now and next. Some children may then need an individual visual timeline that breaks down particular parts of the daily routine that they find more challenging e.g. snack, carpet time, adult led group time, getting ready for lunch

Practitioners may also find it helpful to have photographs or symbols that they keep on a keyring that they wear during the session. These could be used to add a visual support to an instruction e.g. a picture of a child's coat that the practitioner can point to when they say "Coat" to the child when it is time to put coats on to go outside.

Keep instructions simple: Don't overload and say what you want

"Ok, everyone. It's time to stop drawing now, put our pens down, put the lids back on and get ready to go for lunch".

That's four instructions given quite quickly, particularly if it was one of those group times when time ran away with you a bit and it's all a bit of a rush at the end. We've all been there!

Unfortunately, a child who has difficulties with understanding has just been overloaded with instructions to process. They may just freeze. They may carry on drawing or they may have caught the last part of the set of instructions and run for their lunchbox.

We need to keep instructions precise and simple. We need to give one instruction at a time. Understanding a two part instruction is at 22-36 months in Development Matters but responding to it is at 30-50 months.

It is useful to remember that usually, children retain the last thing that is said. That is why when managing behaviour with all children in the setting it is useful to use positive prompts to state the behaviour that you are expecting e.g. "Walking inside" rather than "Don't run".

Give children time to process instructions

A child who has a delay in their understanding of language will need a longer time to process an

instruction, request or question.

When you have spoken to the child give them time to process and respond. Response times for children will vary but if you make another comment or ask another question you will double the time that the child takes to process.

Some activities and strategies to support understanding

The following activities and strategies can all be used within the free-flow play session by supporting whatever a child is interested in

Strategy	What does the communication partner need to do?	What resources/activities support this?
Choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The communication partner increases the opportunity to communicate by giving a controlled 'either/or' choice • The child may show their choice by reaching out, pointing at or by making a sound to indicate their choice • When the child has made their choice the communication partner models the choice e.g. 'milk' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The communication partner uses real objects or pictures to offer a choice e.g. holding up the jug of milk and the jug of water at snack time
Descriptive commentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The communication partner provides a running commentary of what the child is doing as they do it • The communication partner keeps their language simple and repetitive • The communication partner adds sound effects to the play e.g. 'moo', 'brum'. This is particularly important if the child is not yet using words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No special resources required

Speaking

Sound production and the development of speech is often the area of communication and language where a difficulty is particularly visible.

The development of speech sounds begins with the babbling sounds that babies begin to make. The babbling sounds start to imitate the 'ups and downs' of speech and the sounds eventually start to sound almost like words. Babies love to have babble conversations with a communication partner and will start to copy sounds that you make in 'conversation' with them.

Typically, somewhere between 8 and 20 months, a child will be interested in the sounds that match vehicles and animals. Expect to hear noises that accompany their play e.g. 'brmm!' as they push a car along the floor.

At this 8-20 month stage, children are typically starting to learn that words are powerful. A child is making the connection that a word can get them what they want, particularly if accompanied by looking and perhaps pointing! A child will be starting to use single words to name things and people that are important to them. "No" and "more" are particularly strong words for children to discover as they become toddlers! Young children will also make up their own 'special' words for people and objects e.g. 'Wawa' for Grandma. They may link what they know about the sounds that objects and animals make to names e.g. calling a duck a 'wack, wack'.

In the 16-26 month stage, children are usually able to put two words together e.g. "want teddy". There is huge variation in what is typical at this stage and some children will be speaking in much longer phrases by this point. If however you have a two year in your setting who is not putting two words together you should be involving the child's parent or carer in conversations about making a referral to Speech and Language therapy with their agreement.

The 'Ages and Stages' 2 year old assessment undertaken by Health Visitors includes a section on Communication and Language and it may be very helpful to use this as a starting point for a conversation with a child's parent and carer to see if this assessment has taken place and whether this raised any concerns.

It can take some time for a child to see a Speech and Language therapist but the strategies suggested in this booklet will provide very practical ideas on how you can support a child's language in the meantime and help them to make progress.

Sound articulation - Take the blame: 'My ears aren't working'

One of the most difficult challenges we can face is when we are working with a child who has a lot to say but we can't understand what they are saying. Sometimes it is possible to work out what they might be saying from the context of the situation but unfortunately that isn't always the case. We may also start to 'tune in' to a child who has difficulty articulating particular sounds. Parents and carers may be able to understand their child, as might siblings or particular friends.

It is important to remember that the child thinks that they are being absolutely clear. So what can you do?

- Take the blame. Apologise to the child and tell them that your ears aren't working and can they say that again? Alternatively, blame a noise in the environment such as a lorry driving past outside, for example.
- Ask the child to 'show' you what they are talking about. This may give you a context from which to understand what the child may be saying.

If a child does mispronounce a particular sound or series of words don't say the sound or word and ask them to repeat. Don't forget, they think that they are saying it correctly! You won't be supporting them and you might well be damaging their confidence.

- Recast what the child has said. See 'Some activities and strategies to support speaking' below.

Non fluency – I can't say it fast enough!

Some children will go through a period of non-fluency at around three or four years of age where they develop a stammer. This is quite common and is often linked to children thinking faster than they are able to speak. This may resolve itself but if it is causing a concern to the parent or carer or if it is not improving you should consider a referral to Speech and Language Therapy with the agreement of the parent or carer.

Reluctant communicators – too shy to speak

There are children who find speaking in the setting very hard indeed. Some children may be happy to talk with their peers but choose not to speak in adult led activities. Parents and carers may tell you that they are talking confidently at home. So what can you do?

- Take the pressure off in the setting. Don't expect the child to speak in adult led activities if this is where they are anxious. Let them 'pass' in circle activities and don't make anything of it. Look out for joining in with parts of group time where they feel confident e.g. actions to familiar rhymes and songs.
- Give the child opportunities to join in or make choices without speaking using symbols and photographs to support them.
- If the child is speaking at home, ask parents and carers to video them playing so that you can observe their stage of language development.
- When the child does speak to adults in the setting or at group time resist the temptation to praise them openly or in front of the group no matter how excited you feel! Drawing attention to the child speaking may make them less likely to join in next time.

Some activities and strategies to support speaking

The following activities and strategies can all be used within the free-flow play session by supporting whatever a child is interested in

Strategy	What does the communication partner need to do?	What resources/activities support this?
Recasting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The communication partner supports sound production by repeating back to the child clearly and correctly what they have said e.g. Child: "ilk please" Communication partner: "Milk please"• Recasting can also be used to support children's grammar e.g. Child: "I goed shop" Communication partner: "You went to the shop"• Do NOT ask the child to repeat a word back to you again. It is enough for them to hear you saying the word clearly and you may damage the child's confidence if you correct them in this way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No special resources required
Match Plus 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Count the number of words that the child uses and add a word to extend the	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No special resources required

	<p>language e.g. if the child says “cat” you could say “cat gone” or “cat running”. If the child says, “Mummy car” you could say “Mummy’s red car”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add verbs e.g. ‘running’, ‘eating’, ‘sleeping’ as these are essential language ‘building blocks’, from which children can later build longer, more complex sentences. 	
Descriptive commentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The communication partner provides a running commentary of what the child is doing as they do it • The communication partner keeps their language simple and repetitive • The communication partner adds sound effects to the play e.g. ‘moo’, ‘brum’. This is particularly important if the child is not yet using words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No special resources required

Resources to support Early Language:

- Collections of small world resources; farm animals, wild animals, under the sea, dinosaurs
- Collections of vehicles, images of vehicles and non-fiction books about transport
- Collections of open ended heuristic play/treasure basket resources; keys, chains, bath plugs, different types of containers, natural materials
- A collection of different sized boxes and containers with lids to put ‘surprises’ inside
- A collection of things that spin and go round; salad spinners, spinning tops, cogs, wind up torches
- Collections of old mobile phones and landline phones
- Puppets to support singing and rhyme sessions
www.puppetsbypost.com
- Images to represent songs and rhymes to support singing and rhyme sessions, laminated and put on a mat or board
www.twinkl.co.uk
- Musical instruments
- Guttering/tubing of different lengths to go alongside balls and wheeled toys inside and outside (ready, steady, go)
- A collection of picture books that are interactive with buttons, noises and textures to stimulate touch and exploration
- Picture books that encourage children to join in with and anticipate actions and noises e.g. ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’ by Michael Rosen, ‘Walking through the Jungle’ by Julie Lacome, ‘Noisy Farm’ by Rod Campbell, ‘Dear Zoo’ by Rod Campbell
- Mug trees and kitchen roll holders with resources that can be stacked e.g. napkin rings, hair scrunchies, bangles
- ‘Cause and effect’ toys that pop up, make noises, have lights that flash etc.

Further sources of professional support and guidance:

‘Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs’ is a free online CPD programme that provides further advice and examples of practitioners modelling the strategies outlined in this booklet.

www.idponline.org.uk

I-CAN is the national charity for speech, language and communication. Their website includes resources aimed at practitioners and parents/carers.

www.ican.org.uk

The National Literacy Trust has a suite of materials from their 'Talk to your baby' campaign with free resources for practitioners working with children under 3 and their parents/carers.

[www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk to your baby/resources](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/resources)