



The importance of developing and encouraging communication skills

In adults, the capability to communicate effectively will vary from person to person. It's a skill that is developed over time; and the more proficient we are at it, the better our quality of life will be.

As childcare practitioners, we must develop our own communication skills to enable us to work effectively with the children in our care - as well as parents/carers, colleagues and other professionals. Within our early years settings, it is vital that we use our own skills developed over years of time, to nurture the children's - to enable them to learn to express themselves in all aspects of their life.

Where does it all start?

Communication begins from the moment we are born - with our first cry, letting the world know we have arrived! As a child goes through the stages of development, their communication naturally improves - firstly they need to convey their basic needs to their parents and then as they get older, converse with siblings and friends, and then ultimately with early years practitioners and schoolteachers.

As we know, children will learn the basics of communication by watching and listening to their parents and those who care for them, mimicking their words and actions. The more a child is communicated with, the earlier they will start to develop these skills.

Reading to the children plays a big part in the day-to-day activity in an early years setting. It's such a great tool to help improve their ability to communicate. It develops their language and introduces them to a range of vocabulary that they wouldn't necessarily be exposed to in everyday life. As the children grow a little older, reading together provides an excellent opportunity for discussion - creating an environment where they can confidently get used to articulating and sharing their ideas.

Speech and language development

Speech and language are crucial to developing communication skills and included in this is the ability to listen, understand and communicate (both verbally and non-verbally).

Speech and language:

- Forms a good foundation for activities at school.
- Helps build confidence.
- Reduces frustration as it enables children to communicate their needs better.
- Aids friendships.
- Encourages children to understand the world around them.

One of the best ways in which we can support children with the development of speech and language is being a good role model, for example:

- Speak calmly and with clarity.
- Use only age-appropriate language.
- Make eye contact - get down to the child's level.
- Repeat sentences back to children, replacing mistakes with corrections and expanding on the words they've used.
- Describe and comment on what you and the children are doing.
- Label objects, actions and feelings.
- Listen carefully when the children are talking to you - be patient and give them plenty of time to find the right words to respond.

Because speech and language are so vital to communication, we must find ways of extending this further with 'effective questioning'.

A few examples of these effective challenges/questions could be:

- Can you tell me how you made that?
- Why is the ice melting?
- How could you make the tower even taller?
- What do you need to do to make the car go faster?
- What does the rabbit feel like?
- How is that person feeling?
- How could you make your friend feel happier?



Effective questioning can give you some particularly great insights to how the children are developing in the areas of Understanding the World and Communication and Language. When questioning the children, try not to limit their learning. You could encourage them to take it wherever they want to – this may not be exactly what you had in mind but if you trust the child to create their own learning path and then challenge them along the way – you could be pleasantly surprised by the outcome!

Literacy and its relationship to communication

When young children start to attempt mark-making, it means they are beginning to understand that writing is a form of communication. Children who are encouraged to do their own writing are more likely to see themselves as writers and develop a positive attitude to writing which is essential if they are to progress with their development in this area.

The children will start to understand that the writing they see around them at home or in their setting has all kinds of different meanings and purposes. They will try to reproduce this, copying what they see and as they progress, making their own marks without copying. When they do this, they are becoming writers - communicating their ideas on paper, not just verbally.

In its early stages, emergent writing may appear to be little more than scribbles on a page! But this example by a four-year-old girl, clearly shows that even at this stage, children are thinking about their marks and what they mean. In this example, the girl confidently told her key person that she was writing numbers and letters. In doing so, she knows that:

- marks on the paper can represent numbers and letters
- writing conveys information
- writing is meant to be read
- she is taking on the role of a writer.



As children develop, you will see a mixture of letters, numbers, figures and shapes in their writing. Letters and numbers may not be formed correctly, but this is a developmental step and usually corrects itself in time. Children will then begin to put whole words into drawings, as a way of labelling people ('Mum', 'Dad') or places ('my house'), or making characters speak ('No!') or indicating noises ('ZAP!')

As a process, writing development is characterised by stages: moving from playfully making marks on paper, through communicating messages on paper, to writing longer texts.

The EYFS and Communication and language

Within the changes to the EYFS (September 2021), the Literacy element of the Early Learning Goals (ELG) has increased from 2 items to 3; 'comprehension' being added. Before children learn to read, they must learn to communicate, which is why speech and language is so important. This in turn, will lead to better literacy and understanding.

It goes without saying that to encourage speech and language, you need to actually speak and communicate with children. This means actively talking to them and not just responding; try verbally pointing out as many physical things as you can including colours, shapes, numbers, letters, people and things, as well as more abstract things such as emotions and ideas; and asking questions that lead and extend their thought processes.

Use the 5 Ws – Who? What? Where? When? Why?

You can also use 'How?'. As we have discussed in the Effective Questioning section, these questions are great to use in stories to check a child's comprehension and understanding of what they have heard, and to develop conversation skills, but you can also use them in other situations too, such as exploring the garden, or looking at pictures of different scenes.

Repeat after me

Start encouraging children, especially babies, to make early sounds with their voice as a way of communicating. You can make different sounds with your voice whilst changing a nappy, or sing a nursery rhyme or go through different rhyming sounds with slightly older children, encouraging them to repeat the sounds they hear. Remember to keep your focus on the child or children so that they are drawn into the 'conversation' with you, even if it is at the pre-word stage.



Describe what you do more often and in more detail

This is a simple way to help children learn new words and is an important way to help decrease the word gap that is now developing in many of our children. All you need to do is describe what you are doing more often with the children. If you are going outside to play, instead of just opening the door and saying "Playtime", say "Let me open the door for you, it's playtime and the sun is shining" instead. The children will hear more words and make more meanings from them. Try to vary your words and vocabulary too, so next time you could say "Let's push open the door, and exit into the garden this way", or something similar. The wider vocabulary you use yourself, the wider will be the vocabulary of the children. If you are moving around the setting, then try doing it in different ways and use adjectives such as "Let's skip slowly", "walk proudly", or "run quickly". You could also sing it or make it into a rhyme such as, "We're getting off the floor, and marching out the door!"

Encourage conversations with peers



With older children, you can lead a 'pair and share' time where you actively encourage children to talk to each other or have some team word games where children have to come up with words that start with a particular letter, similar to I-spy or that rhyme with each other. Make it fun and physical by getting one child to hide an object and the other one has to ask questions to find out where it is.

Remember that you should be talking to the children as often as possible and using imaginative play, more formal educational sessions, playtimes, lunch breaks and transitions to engage the children in oral speech and language as much as possible.

Our top activities for this include:

Show and tell

Ask the children to bring in toys or other objects from home and talk about them. Prompt them to be descriptive with questions such as 'How does it work?' and 'Why do you like this toy?' and encourage the other children to ask their own questions too.



Sing songs



This is a particularly important activity to do with babies and younger children, as there is such a strong link between singing and early language development. Singing songs to/with very young children can help them learn to differentiate sounds and recognise rhymes, as well as extending their vocabulary and developing their memory.

Describing and guessing games

There are lots of games that involve describing and guessing but here are a couple of specific ideas:

1. Choose some objects with the children, put them in a bag and get the children to take turns feeling and describing them while the others guess what they are.
2. Play 'What am I?', in which you describe something, and the children work out what it is, e.g. "I'm red and made of metal, I stand on the pavement, and you put letters in me".



Role-play and pretending games

This can be as elaborate or simple as you like; you could get the children to dress up as characters and act out a play (using a made-up plot, or perhaps one from a book), or you could encourage them to use puppets to tell a story, or just stimulate some straightforward role-play, introducing a few props.

Explore rhythms and rhymes

As already mentioned, learning to recognise rhymes is a key part of language development for very young children. Exploring rhymes with older children helps to develop their phonological awareness skills and prepare them for learning to read. Play a game where you say a word and the children come up with as many rhymes for it as they can or make up a simple rhyming poem together. Awareness of rhythm is also linked to language skills – you could try sitting in a circle and beating out the syllables of each child's name.

Like any skill, communication can be improved with practice, but by having good communication skills and then helping develop those skills in a child from a young age, you are equipping them straight away with the tools to build a successful future.

In years to come, these children will need to communicate with future employers, no matter what industry or career they find themselves in, and good communication skills are listed amongst the most desirable skills on many job descriptions. So, helping the children in our care develop their communications skills mustn't be underestimated.

Sources and Useful Resources:

- [Kumon](#)
- [First Discoverers](#)

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