

Means, Reasons and Opportunities

Children and babies learn to communicate when they have a means of communication, opportunities and reasons to communicate. They also need adults that are responsive to how they communicate. Babies start to communicate at a very early stage in their life by using a non-verbal means e.g. crying, using facial expressions. Later they learn to become more verbal e.g. babbling.

Means to communicate

Communication can be verbal e.g. babbling, making noises or words/sentences or non-verbal e.g. crying, facial expressions, showing emotions, pointing, signs, gestures, pictures, symbols. It is important for all adults in the child's environment to be aware of the child's preferred method of communication whether it is verbal and/or non-verbal. If you are not sure please speak to your Speech and Language Therapist for advice. It is important that the child has access to an environment that supports their communication method e.g. staff that are trained in Makaton sign language, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECs) and/or symbols around the classroom.

Reasons to communicate

We all need a reason to communicate. Babies will communicate when they are hungry, tired, happy or feel poorly. Adults quickly tune into their needs by interpreting their type of cry or facial expressions. As babies and children get older they want to communicate to convey a range of intentions e.g. make requests, reject, comment, share an interest. This can be done non-verbally and verbally e.g. shaking his head or saying "No!" Adults can provide lots of reasons to communicate e.g. finding out the child's interests and then placing those toys out of reach, giving the child a paint brush but no paints, giving them half of an orange/biscuit, not filling the glass to the top with milk/water.

Opportunities to communicate

The child needs opportunities to communicate with others in order to develop their communication skills. It is important that adults give the child time to respond or times to initiate interaction e.g. ensure that others do not communicate for the child such as siblings or close peers. Peers may often interpret what a child wants and approach the adult and say 'he wants a drink' which then means that the child's opportunity to communicate has been taken away. Children need access to adults and peers who understand their method of communication and will respond at the correct level.



MacDonald's Steps to Communication

Children learn to develop their communication skills by having access to an environment that supports their communication method and also adults that are responsive to how they communicate. Children develop their language skills in stages. The adult needs to be aware of the child's stage of speech and language development and strategies to help the child make progress on to the next level. If you are not sure please speak to your Speech and Language Therapist.

When children are in the early stages of their speech and language development it is like learning a foreign language. Try and reflect on what you experience and what you find useful when you travel to a foreign country. It often sounds like the person is saying one long word and we find it difficult to hear all the different words in the sentence. It is much easier if the foreign person is saying a single word and points to what they are talking about. It is the same for young children developing their language skills. It helps by observing how they communicate and then use a similar means of communication but expand it slightly e.g. if the child is pointing to the biscuit then the adult models the word 'biscuit'.

Examples:

- Reason:** The child is thirsty and he has got his milk but not a straw.
Means: He communicates non-verbally by pointing.
Opportunities: The adult has placed the milk on the table but purposefully not given him a straw. The adult waits for the child's response. The child initiates interaction by pointing at the milk and the adult then gives the child a choice 'do you want a straw or a plate?' The child responds and the adult expands it by modelling single words "milk", "straw", "drinking".
- Reason:** The child wants to go on the slide.
Means: He communicates verbally by saying "up".
Opportunities: The adult is watching the child and says "do you want to go on the slide or swing?" The adult waits for the child's response. The child says "slide" and the adult models "climb up stairs", "down slide". If the adult says "do you want to play on the swing first and then go on the slide?" this sentence would be too long.
- Reason:** The child wants you to play with his train set.
Means: The child says 'choo choo' for train.
Opportunities: The adult listens and models "train choo choo". If the adult then modelled a sentence such as "the train is going fast on the train track" this sentence would be too long for the child to understand and attempt to copy.
- Reason:** The child wants to draw a picture.
Means: The child uses the Makaton sign for pencil and a vocalisation.
Opportunities: The adult understands Makaton sign language and they give the child a choice using Makaton signs alongside speech e.g. do you want paper or a car? The adult waits for the child to respond and then expand their response e.g. Child uses Makaton sign for paper and adult responds by saying "pencil and paper" and "drawing picture". The adult then comments on what the child is drawing using single words "Mummy", "Daddy" "home".

