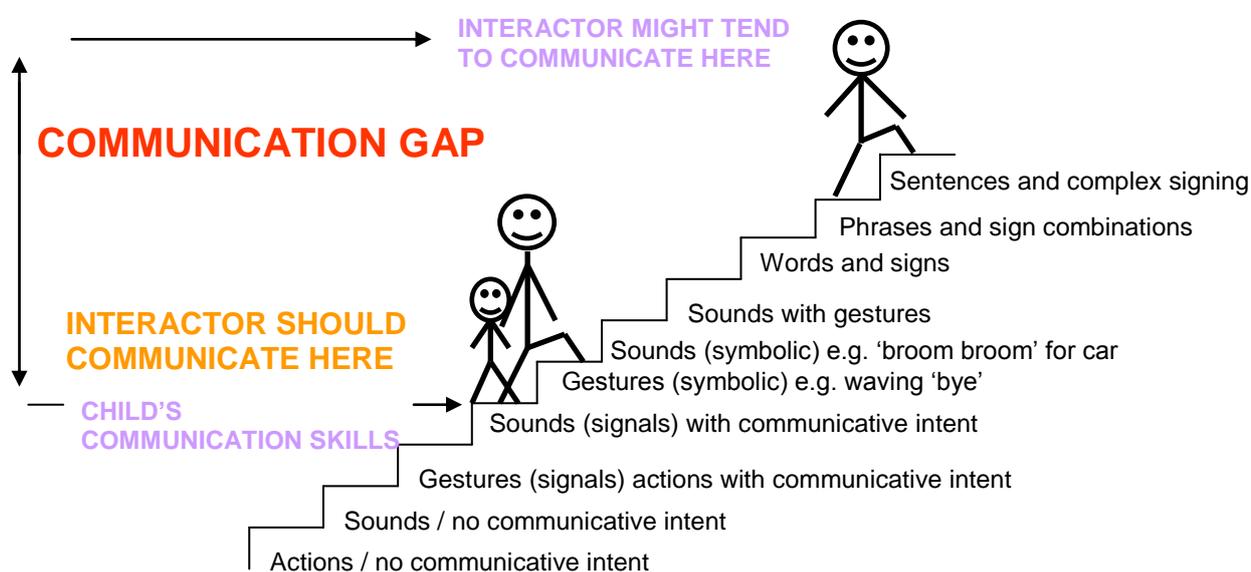


## James D. MacDonald's 'Steps to Communication'

Dr James MacDonald is a clinician, researcher and director of the 'Communicating Partners Centre' in Ohio. MacDonald's findings indicate that children learn more from adults who are their 'play and conversation *partners* rather than only caretakers or directors', and recent research supports this.<sup>1</sup>

Children develop their communication skills in stages or steps, by having access to an environment that supports their communication method and adults that are responsive to it. **The adult needs to be aware of the child's stage of development and of strategies which will keep the child motivated and eventually help him or her to move on to the next level.** It is useful to observe how and why a child communicates and then reflect back the same idea in a slightly more advanced way; for example, if the child is pointing to a bird, then the adult models the word 'bird'. You can look at this as steps to communication; if a child communicates mainly at the level of one step, the adult communicates mainly at the level of the next step up so that the child has a chance to understand and copy. If you are not sure, please speak to your speech and language therapist.

### MacDonald's steps to communication



From Dr James MacDonald: Communicating Partners



## Examples of how to use 'MacDonald's Steps' in your everyday communication

### 1. Interaction

Child: coughs (sound with no communicative intent)

Adult (models next step): coughs back and holds eye-contact (sound with intention of starting interaction)

Child: is amused and coughs again on purpose (this time with eye-contact) and waits for adult's response.

#### **What is the child learning?**

If I make a noise I might get a response. It's fun to copy each other and take turns.

### 2. Interaction

Child: reaches for beaker on table and opens and closes hand, while looking from object to adult and making a sound like 'er' (sound and gesture (signals) with communicative intent)

Adult (models next step): makes sign for drink, says '**Drink...** you want your **drink.**' and gives to child saying, 'Here's your **drink.**' (words and signs)

#### **What is the child learning?**

Every time I point at that beaker I see the same sign and hear the same set of sounds... 'dr-i-nk'. Next time I hear the word 'drink' I will have a look to see if my beaker is there and I might even have a go at signing it or saying it myself and see what happens.

### 3. Interaction

Child: uses Makaton sign for 'sit down' and says 'chair', using her own pronunciation. (words and signs)

Adult (models next step): copies sign for 'sit down' and then combines sign for 'sit down' and 'chair' saying, '**Sit down?**... You want to **sit down** on the **chair?**'

#### **What is the child learning?**

I could communicate two ideas together (action and place) using signs and words I already know.

### 4. Interaction

Child: says 'car go' (phrase)

Adult (models next step): says 'Yes, the car's **going fast!**' (sentence)

#### **What is the child learning?**

I could communicate even more ideas at the same time. Also, we sometimes add an -ing to 'go' to make 'going'. After a lot of examples I might notice the -ing ending on different words when we are talking about something happening now.

<sup>1</sup>Ruston, H. P. & Schwanenflugel, P. J. (2010). Effects of a Conversation Intervention on the Expressive Vocabulary Development of Prekindergarten Children. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 41, 303-313

