

Communication can only be built on a child's understanding of the world. The child needs experience of objects and events in the environment. This experience can be gained through interaction with people, with objects, and through play.

It is not enough, however, for the child to have such experience. The child must also want to communicate, have someone to communicate with, and something to communicate about. Children also need to learn that communication is enjoyable and brings results.

We need to present opportunities where the child is in a position to control or affect the environment and the people in it. In this way, the child can initiate, and respond to, communication.

Ideas for Establishing Early Communicative Signals

Movement

- Rock to music
- Play ride-a-horse
- Swing the child in a sheet swing
- Twirl the child in a swivel chair
- Bounce the child on a trampoline
- Roll the child in a barrel
- Swing the child upside down

Vision

- Play peek-a-boo
- Blow bubbles
- Show the child a slinky going downstairs
- Activate a jack-in-the-box
- Use wind-up toys
- Spin tops and discs for the child to watch

Touch

- Play pattycake
- Engage in tickling games
- Rub the child's head
- Scratch the child's back
- Blow air on the child with a fan, piece of paper, or hair drier
- Place the child's hands in warm water or cold water
- Use vibration on the child's hands, arms, and legs

Hearing

- Play music
- Play musical instruments

Determine the child's preferred activities from the options above. Then, engage the child in a pleasurable activity, pausing occasionally and observe the child's behaviour during these pauses.

Does the child seem to be aware that the activity has stopped and show some anticipation that it might start again?

If not, the child is not yet ready to signal a request for you to resume the activity. In this case, frequently engage the child in repetitive pleasurable activities, inserted with many pauses. Over time, the child will learn to anticipate.

If the child is already showing some anticipation, it is an opportunity to focus on setting up a behaviour that the child can use to ask for the activity, or more of the activity. This can be done by using hand-on-hand assistance to have the child touch a toy or a photograph or Compic of the desired activity. This is a great way to teach a child the power of communication to influence the behaviour of others in the environment to get something that s/he wants.

Other Strategies for Promoting Communication

The following suggestions are various ways in which we can set up situations which will tempt the child to communicate. When the child makes such an attempt, we can help him/her to communicate the message in a socially appropriate way.

Requesting a Food or Toy

- Eat a desired food item in front of the child without offering any to him/her. Have a photo or Compic of the desired food, and when the child indicates that s/he wants the food, use hand-on-hand assistance to make the child touch the photo or Compic. Say, "You want X" and **immediately** give the food to the child.
- While the child is watching, place a desired food item or toy in a clear container that the child cannot open. Put the container in front of the child and wait. Have a photo or Compic of the desired food or toy, and when the child tries to open the container or hands it to you to open, use hand-on-hand assistance to make the child touch the photo or Compic. Say, "You want X" and **immediately** open the container and give the food or toy to the child.

Requesting Help

- Activate a wind-up toy, let it deactivate, and hand it to the child. Have the Compic for "help" available, and when the child tries unsuccessfully to wind up the toy, or hands it back to you, use hand-on-hand assistance to have the child touch the Compic. Say, "You want help" and **immediately** wind up the toy.
- Open a jar of bubbles; blow bubbles, then close the jar tightly. Hand the closed jar to the child. Have the Compic for "help" available, and when the child tries unsuccessfully to open the bottle, or hands it back to you, use hand-on-hand assistance to have the child touch the Compic. Say, "You want help" and **immediately** open the bottle and blow more bubbles.

Requesting More

- Initiate a familiar social game with the child until s/he expresses pleasure, and then stop the game. Have the Compic for "more" available, and when the child indicates in some way that s/he wants the game to continue, use hand-on-hand assistance to have the child touch the Compic. Say, "You want more" and **immediately** resume the game.

Rejecting a Food, Toy or Activity

- Hold a food item or toy that the child dislikes out near the child to offer it. Have the Compic for "no" and when the child turns away, or pushes the food or toy away, use hand-on-hand assistance to have the child touch the Compic. Say, "You don't want it" and **immediately** remove the food or toy.
- Place the child's hands in a cold, wet, or sticky substance, such as jelly, pudding or paste. Have the Compic for "no" and when the child begins to fuss, use hand-on-hand assistance to have the child touch the Compic. Say, "You don't want it" and **immediately** remove the substance.

General Stimulation of Communication

In addition to setting up situations which will encourage the child to communicate, we want to make the whole environment a place which helps communication development. The kinds of things we can do are:

- Put photographs and/or Compics up around the house, child care centre, or kindergarten. In the early stages, these will just be there to get the child used to having these visual symbols around. Later, you can begin the symbols with the objects they represent, showing the child the photo/Compic when talking about a particular object or activity. Finally, work towards having the child use the visual symbols to communicate needs and desires and to make choices.
- Look through books with the child. Talk about what is happening. Use Compics and/or manual signs, as well as speech, when labelling objects and activities in the books.
- Talk to the child while you are carrying out daily routines such as changing his/her nappy, giving him/her a bath, or getting ready to go out. Again, you can use Compics and/or manual signing to talk about the various stages of these routines. Sometimes a visual sequence of a routine can really help the child to understand the process and make it much less stressful.
- Be consistent in the phrases you use when talking to the child. At bedtime, for example, always say "Time for bed" rather than saying "Bed time", then "Time for bed", then "Go to bed now" etc. The consistency will help the child to understand what is being said. Using a visual symbol to back up your speech is also helpful.