NCSE

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

Promoting Learning and Positive Behaviour at Home

A Total Communication Approach for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 5

Contents

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The Importance of Communication

Communication is an essential part of everyday life. It is also a fundamental human right. It is our primary means of accessing and conveying information and expressing our needs and wants. It is how we explain our thoughts and emotions and interpret those of others, make choices, express feelings and build relationships. It forms the basis of how we interact socially with others.

It is not uncommon for children and young people with additional needs to have communication difficulties. These difficulties may include children and young people who communicate verbally most of the time or some of the time and those whose communication is mostly non-verbal. These children and young people often struggle to communicate their needs, wants and/or opinions and as a result use behaviour as their voice. By supporting children and young people to use alternative and augmentative (AAC) ways to communicate, we can increase their positive interactions and provide them with opportunities to understand and express themselves fully. We call this a total communication approach.

Total Communication Approach and Your Child

A Total Communication Approach involves using and accepting all types of communication, not just speech, equally. This approach includes facial expression, body language, gesture, sign, sounds, symbols, written language, pictures, objects of reference and electronic aids. An example of this might be a child using gestures to access a toy, using a sign to indicate that he or she needs to go to the toilet or exchanging a picture to ask for a snack. For a total communication approach to be effective, the following three components need to be included in the approach:

- Identifying and supporting your child's means or mode of communication.
- Motivating your child by providing a reason for him/her to communicate.
- Practising and creating many opportunities for your child to communicate.

'What We Need to Communicate Effectively

Reasons / Motivation
Without reasons to communicate, there is no point or need to communicate

Opportunities / Practice
Without opportunities for communication, there can be no communication

Means / Mode
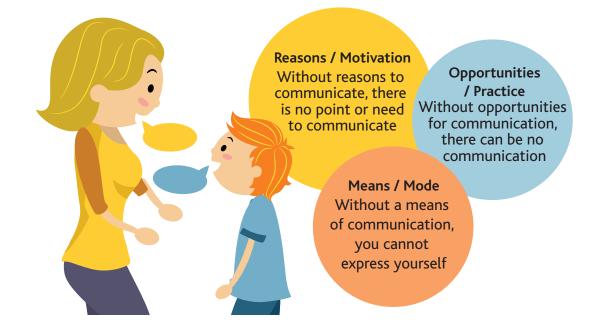Without a means of communication, you cannot express yourself

Figure 1

Communication is a two-way process that will only be successful if the two people communicating can use and understand the same means of communication (see figure 1). Children and young people who have difficulty communicating can become frustrated, angry, confused, sad and overwhelmed which can lead to acting out or withdrawn behaviour.

For some children and young people, their primary means of communicating in school and at home are not always the same. For example, your child may be using Lámh, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) or an electronic aid to communicate in school and gestures as the communication approach at home. However, to maximise the benefit of any communication approach it is best that these approaches are practised across as many environments as possible. Now is a great time to start this practice.

The communication approach used by your child in school is based on your child's communication preference. Support from your child's school during this period of school closure will enable you as a parent to continue to practise this communication approach(s) with your child. Your child's speech and language therapist, if applicable can also assist you.

In the next section we discuss in more detail some of the communication approaches that children commonly use to express basic needs and wants. The most basic form of communication exchange that your child needs support with at this time is requesting.

Communication Approaches

Using Gestures and Signs

We all communicate using gestures and sign in everyday life. Examples include waving to say hello, raising your hand to answer a question or shaking your head to indicate no. These are useful ways of getting our message across.

Children and young people with additional needs also use gestures to communicate. Take a minute to think about your own child and what gestures they are currently using e.g., has your child ever used their hands to push away something that they didn't want, covered their ears to tell you something is too noisy or brought you by the hand to get something. These gestures are extremely effective ways of communicating that require only your child's hands, without necessarily using speech.

Some communication approaches are based on sign language. One such approach is Lámh. This approach has been designed for children and young people with communication difficulties. Different signs are used by the child or young person to ask for various things they want, show you something or answer a simple question. If your child is already using Lámh at school, you should contact the school to get more information about his/her signs so that they can also be used at home. You can also visit www.lamh.org for more information.

Using Objects

Objects of reference are any object which can be used to represent an item, activity, place, or person.

We all use objects of reference in everyday life as quick, simple yet effective ways to communicate. Examples include waving a coffee cup in the air to indicate you would like a refill, holding an empty carton of milk to signal to someone that they need to buy more or showing someone a key as a reminder to lock a door.

Introducing objects of reference as a communication system with your child can be a very effective, low cost and powerful tool for him/her to have their needs met. This leads to reduced levels of frustration and an increase in communicative interactions between you and your child.

Your child might already use this approach. Has your child ever handed you a sweet wrapper as a means of getting a treat, a spoon to access a yogurt or the remote control to find their favourite channel? If so, these are examples of using objects of reference to communicate and it might be a good idea to build on these.
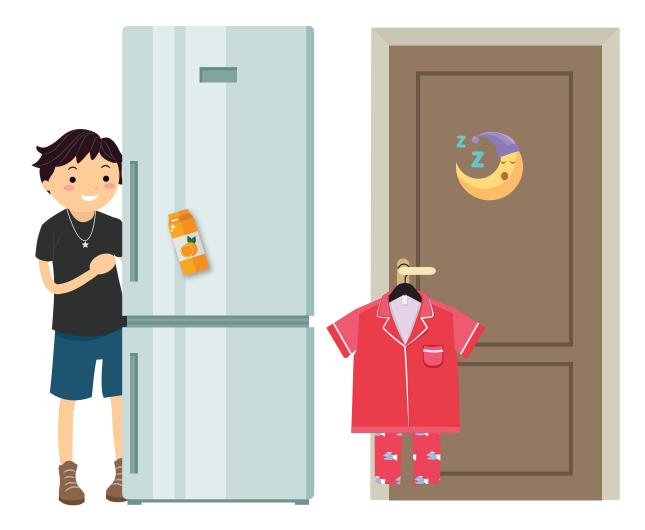
When using objects of reference, it is important that the objects used symbolise the real items as much as possible. In some instances, real items can be used such as a key to ask to open a door or a cup to communicate a drink. However, often real items can be inconvenient and it might be easier to use parts of these items, such as a label from a favourite treat or snack.

Other options include using miniature items such as toys, e.g., using a miniature toilet from a dolls house to indicate the bathroom, a toy swing to indicate a preference to go to the garden, or a fork to indicate dinner.

It is important to set up the home environment to support using objects of reference as much as possible. For example, keep all the objects together by sticking them to a board with velcro, glue or tape.

Another option is to place items where they are likely to be reference e.g. objects of reference for clothes might be on a wall or door in the kitchen for during the day and in the bedroom for morning and night time. Make sure these items are easy to see and use.

Objects of reference are in 3D format so they may be a suitable option for a child or young person who has difficulty discriminating and attending. They may not have yet developed the fine motor skills required to use sign and picture.

For further information on using objects of reference, please refer to the booklets on Home Routines and Transitioning for Children and Young People with Additional Needs.
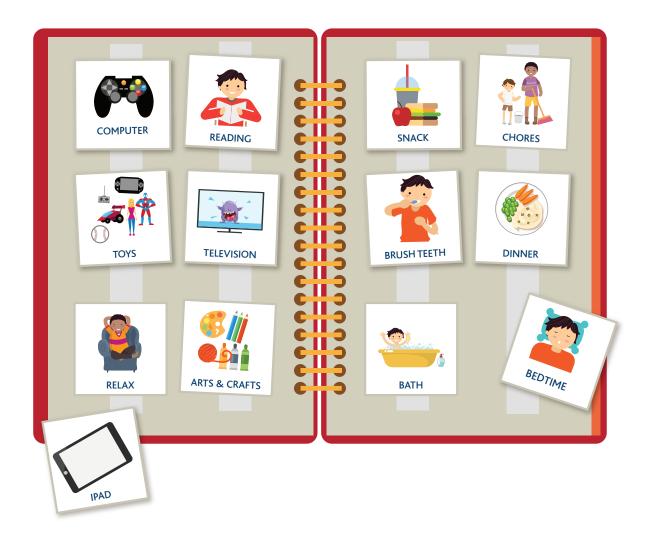
Using Pictures

Pictures can be used in many ways to help your child communicate. These pictures can be printed out or they can be used on a phone or on another device. There are many different picture approaches available. It is important that you contact your child's school to find out which approach your child is most comfortable using. It is not uncommon for children with additional needs to use more than one picture approach. For example, a child may use a combination of a communication book and a phone or tablet. This will depend on what is available to them at home and at school.

Choice Boards

Another picture approach is the use of Choice Boards. For example, your child might have a collection of pictures on a board that represent their favourite things at home (activities, food, toys, etc.).

If your child has already learned to make choices, a choice board can be used to show your child what is available and to help him or her choose what they want. Contact your child's school for further information.

Communication Books

Pictures can also be presented in a book. This is probably the most common means of using pictures to communicate. Communication books, much like a choice board, contain a collection of your child's most used and favourite items. For example; your child's book might include one page with all of his or her food items, another page with favourite activities (swings, trampoline, bike, scooter, etc.) and another page with items that they need during the day (headphones, spoon, fork, cup, shoes, etc.).

Your child can use this book to select the picture which represents what he or she needs and wants to make a request or choose an option. Your child can also use this book across different settings and environments.

PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)

PECS is most widely used picture system. The approach consists of six phases and begins by teaching a child to give a single picture of a desired item or action to a partner who immediately gives him or her the item requested. The system also teaches discrimination of pictures and how to put them together in sentences. Please use the following link to get more information on the 6 different phases of PECS https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/download/PECS-Brief%20Description-2020-UK.pdf.

Picture Devices

Pictures can also be used on technology devices such as smart phones and tablets. There are many applications (apps) available that use pictures for communicating. See 'Useful video links and websites'.
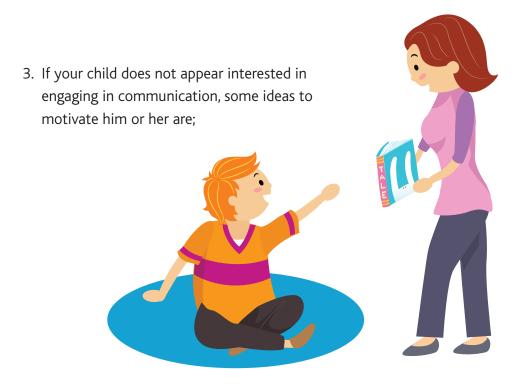
The Picture Approach is used with children and young people with varying additional needs including, but not limited to autism, Down Syndrome, cognitive impairments, speech and language delays and selective mutism.

For further information on using pictures, please refer to the booklets on Home Routines and Using Reward Systems for Children and Young People with Additional Needs.

Using a Total Communication Approach

Supporting Your Child to Request

1. Use the mode of communication that best supports your child e.g. signs, pictures, photos, objects. If unsure, check what communication approach(s) your child is using and what stage or level your child is at in school.

2. Be prepared – e.g. if your child's approach includes signs, learn the signs; if your child's approach includes a communication book with pictures, have the pictures ready. If you require materials to do this, contact your child's school.

3. If your child does not appear interested in engaging in communication, some ideas to motivate him or her are;

a. Put a selection of your child's favourite things in a box

b. Make sure favourite items are in view

c. Place items temporarily out of reach, e.g., hand him or her the yogurt without the spoon, or the juice box without the straw. See booklet on Using Reward Systems for Children and Young People with Additional Needs.

4. Some children may be able to choose from a wide variety of items and others may have difficulty choosing. It is extremely important to check with your child's school for advice.

5. When your child indicates that he/she wants something, help them to use the appropriate mode of communication to ask for the item. You should accept all forms of communication approaches such as a gesture, handing over a picture or object or using a sign or word/sound.

6. Always say the word for your child, it gives him/her the opportunity to hear the word and try the word, if he or she can.

7. Provide the item immediately.

8. Be consistent.

9. Practice, practice, practice.

Communicating should be a good experience for your child. All efforts should be encouraged, praised and rewarded. If your child makes an approximation or attempt at saying a word, follow up with the model of the full word, give the item immediately and let them know how pleased you are.

This booklet describes one element of communication only – requesting. It is designed to help parents during this difficult time. The information in this booklet can be used together with other booklets in the series to build other skills at home like transitioning, following schedules, understanding rules and developing life skills. Please see all other booklets in the series, listed on the contents page.

Top Tips!

- Consistency is key.
- Provide many opportunities to communicate.
- If your child is having difficulty, help. This might be giving hand over hand assistance, gesturing to a device or picture or modelling a sign.
- Allow your child to practise communication with all members of your family.
- Encourage your child to say the word, but this is **not** essential.
- Continue to support your child's communication throughout the day.
- If you find communicating with your child is causing acting out or withdrawn behaviour, take a break and come back to it later.
- **It is easy to slip into the "guessing game". Rather than deciding what your child wants, use a total communication approach.**

Useful video links and websites

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hs-412lhXb0
- https://www.abaresources.com/free2/
- http://www.graceapp.com/
- https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/
- https://www.twinkl.ie/
- www.lamh.org

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- National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2015), Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools – NCSE Policy Advice Paper No. 5. Accessed at https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf
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- https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/PECS_Steps.pdf
- https://www.leedscommunityhealthcare.nhs.uk/seecmsfile/?id=3269
- https://www.sensationalkids.ie/supporting-non-verbal-children-with-a-total-communication-approach/
- https://integratedtreatmentservices.co.uk/our-approaches/speech-therapy-approaches/objectsofreference/
- https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/download/PECS-Brief%20Description-2020-UK.pdf