

Building Communication Skills Tip Sheet

What is communication?

Communication is an exchange between a speaker and a listener. Communication includes both vocal speech and non-vocal means.

How does your child communicate?

Communication can include but is not limited to:

- Talking
- Sign language
- Pointing
- Reaching for objects or people
- Exchanging pictures
- Choosing from a choice board
- Pulling another person to a desired item
- Eye gaze towards specific or desired objects or activities
- Facial expressions
- Behavioural outbursts

Why do children communicate?

People communicate for many reasons, supporting the idea that all communication serves a function or that people communicate to meet certain needs. Some reasons that people communicate include:

- Because they want something. Examples may include: a child giving a picture of a ball to her teacher when she wants to play with the ball, or asking “where did my mom go,” when his or her mom leaves the room.
- Because they want to comment or something they see, smell, or hear in their environment. Examples may include: saying “it’s a train,” upon hearing a train engine sound, or saying “look, it’s a doggy!” when seeing a dog walk by.
- To engage in conversations with others. Conversational skills include asking and answering questions and commenting about what others say. Examples may include: a youth saying “12” when asked “how old are you?” or a child saying “I like dogs”, when someone makes a comment about dogs.

How can I encourage communication?

- Repeat vocalizations and words and pair them with the actual objects to make connections. For example: if the child says, “book” repeat the word while showing a book.
- Follow your child’s lead during play and preferred activities and comment on various aspects of the play activity. For example: when playing with trains, talk about the parts of the train and what the train is doing, or the characters in a preferred book or game, and talk about what they do.
- Label items in the environment. For example: when at the park, point out the sounds, animals, and feelings that come with being outside, or when at the grocery store, talk about the different food items and how you can prepare them.
- Withhold items that are needed to complete certain activities and say the word that you want your child to say. Wait for a response. For example: provide the child with a car ramp and withhold the cars, or provide bread and butter but withhold the knife.
- Be face to face when communicating, so your child can share smiles and watch your face as you speak and show expressions.
- Encourage turn taking by waiting for a response between your comments and questions.

Barbera, M. L. (2007). *The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children with Autism and Related Disorders*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Cooper, J. O., Heron, & T. E., Heward, W. L. (2007). *Applied Behavior Analysis* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Patel, N.M., Ledford, J.R., & Maupin, T.N. (2016). Responsive play interactions. In *Evidence-based instructional practices for young children with autism and other disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/ebip/responsive-play-interactions>