



USING

NON VERBAL FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

In Early Years Settings



Barnet Early Years SEND Advisory Team is committed to supporting early year's settings to move to more inclusive environments for children with a variety of special educational needs and disabilities. This document has been produced by Barnet Early Years SEND Advisory Team

Using Non-Verbal Forms of Communication in Early Years Settings

Introduction: Why use alternatives to verbal forms of communication?

For one reason or another some children find it easier to communicate using a non-verbal form i.e. communicating through means other than just using speech.

This may be for a wide variety of reasons e.g. expressive language (the way we use speech and language to communicate a message) delay or disorder, receptive language (the way we understand a message that has been given to us) difficulties, motor difficulties affecting the muscles in and around the mouth involved in producing speech and so on.

Many children who use non-verbal forms of communication, either with or without using speech as well, have shown that they can be effective communicators.

In other cases, where children are not yet communicating effectively it is important that they are shown that they can be effective communicators.

For many children, simply the fact of having another 'cue' to understand what has been said or another way to express what s/he wants to say can really aid communication and relieve some frustration.



Some ideas to encourage turn non-verbal communication

Most of the approaches outlined below are in common usage amongst professionals working with children with speech and language difficulties. The ideas include a variety of activities or methods of communicating with children or encouraging them to communicate with you. Many will depend on the abilities of the child as to whether they are appropriate or not. Be sure to discuss them with the child's parent, speech and language therapist or other involved professional (if appropriate) first in order to ascertain which would be appropriate.

(N.B. The word 'adult' has been used in this guidance as the person to whom the child is communicating as a way of making the text somewhat easier to read. It may be that the child might be communicating with another child or several children or adults.)

- **Eye-pointing**

This involves encouraging the child to look at objects in order to communicate desire, answer a question etc.

The adult must be sensitive to changes in the object/person that the child is looking at. In addition it would be desirable for the adult to narrate what the child is looking at and why e.g.

Adult: "What would you like to play with today, Sam?"

Sam looks at teddy.

Adult: "Oh, you'd like to play with teddy, would you?" etc.



- **Forced choice**

This involves the adult encouraging the child to communicate a desired object or activity (even though the adult may know what the child wants!)

For example, if it is time for the child to have a drink the adult could hold up some milk and some juice and say "Do you want milk or juice?" Depending on the child's level of communication some children may eye-point, some may touch or

finger-point, others may sign (see below). In any case, encourage the child to be active and to have some effect on her/his environment by being able to make a choice. This is a useful technique to use at many points during the day e.g. to choose a toy to play with, a video to watch etc.

Obviously there are some times of the day where it is not appropriate to offer a choice e.g. going home time!

- **Objects of reference**

These tend to be used to give the child another aid to understanding what is being said to her/him. It helps children with a degree of comprehension difficulties to understand and anticipate what is going to happen next.

Children are shown an object before an activity is about to happen e.g. a spoon maybe shown as the adult says "It's dinner time!" The object itself does not really matter as long as it is relevant to the activity and the child and that it is the same object that is always used for that activity.



For example, for children with visual difficulties the objects of reference may be based on tactile or aroma in order to be relevant for the child.

The objects may also be used to encourage the child to make a choice in order to indicate what they are wanting to express e.g. if the child reaches/looks at an object from a choice of two (each object representing a particular event/activity) then the adult may assume that the child has made a choice.

If the child is regularly in two settings (e.g. home and early years setting) it will be important for there to be some liaison between settings in order to standardise the objects being used.

- **Photographs**

These may be used in a similar way to the objects of reference. The child is shown a photograph before a particular event happens in order to prepare the child for the change of activity.

A 'photographic/visual timetable' can be used for a child where a number of photographs are pinned to a board in order that they can see what the series of activities will be over the next hour/morning/day (see guidance document 'Using Photographs to Support Language and Communication in Early Years Settings' produced by Barnet Early Years SEND Advisory Team).

In the same way as the objects of reference, two photographs can be presented to the child in order for the child to make a choice of what they would like to do next e.g. play with the sand or do a puzzle etc.

- **Signing (with particular reference to Makaton Sign Supported Language)**

Babies use gesture to communicate before they talk and they usually continue to use gesture with words when they begin to talk. For a child with speech and language difficulties signs can often be a helpful tool in deciphering what is being said to them and an aid to helping the adult understand what the child is trying to communicate.



When you speak and sign to a child you generally speak slower, are careful that the child is looking at you and, through the signs, are giving the child very good clues to the meanings of the words that you are saying. For the child who may be beginning to speak but has unclear speech or diction it helps the adult to understand what the child is trying to say and thus encourages the child further. In addition, for children whose language difficulties may be due to emotional difficulties it initially takes the pressure off using speech.

The Makaton Vocabulary is a system that is in very common usage by professionals working with children with speech, language and communication difficulties. It is based on British Sign Language but only key words are signed in order to convey meaning.

MAKATON SIGNS ARE ALWAYS ACCOMPANIED BY SPEECH and are used to help the child to understand and use speech - they are an aid to speech and are not an alternative. Once children start to use speech themselves they tend to drop the signs. For more information speak to your SEND Advisor.

- **Visual Labels**

These may be in the form of symbols or letters and words themselves. Many children learn to 'read' and understand common logos long before they can actually read the letters that make up the word. A common example of this is the "Macdonald's" food-chain logo or a supermarket name.

This can be useful in communicating to children with language difficulties where they are going next and is a sophisticated version of the objects of reference (see above).

If children have started to notice signs/logos around them, the adult could build on this and use other sight words or logos to encourage both reading and communication. Reading has been found to be an aid to verbal language acquisition particularly with children with Down's syndrome (for example, the 'See n Learn' programme).

Where Makaton Signing has been used (see above), there is a system of Makaton symbols or Bliss symbols that can be used in conjunction with the signing.

For further information about using non-verbal communication with children in settings, your SEND

early years please contact Advisor

