



Communication and Language Disorders

About communication and language disorders

'Communication' is the exchange of both verbal and nonverbal information. It includes talking, as well as understanding words, visual information, body language, facial expressions, and gestures (e.g. pointing, waving hello, nodding your head to mean "yes").

Young children will vary considerably in the development of their communication skills. Some children will seem to show delays but then 'catch up'. Individual differences in language ability before the age of around 4 years are not predictive of later outcomes.

Some children may experience difficulty producing sounds and words (e.g. stuttering or mutism), and they may use visual aspects of communication instead (e.g. gestures, eye contact or picture cards). Other children may find understanding the visual parts of communication challenging.

Some children may need support with using and understanding spoken language. A child's ability to understand spoken language may be different from their ability to use spoken language. For example, a child might be able to talk and express themselves clearly, but they may find it harder to understand instructions, especially if they are long or complex.

Some children may also need support with using verbal and nonverbal communication in social situations. For example, some children may have trouble understanding the meaning behind greetings (e.g. saying hello, shaking hands) or taking turns in conversations. Other children may not understand humour and jokes, or metaphors.

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Some children may have good visual perceptual skills. They may be good at visual searches and recognition.
- Some children can participate successfully when given clear and specific instructions.



Where you might provide support?

- Some children may have difficulty understanding or giving verbal instructions.
- Some children may have trouble expressing how they feel. This can cause frustration and challenging behaviours.
- Children may need support with interacting with others and building relationships.
- Some children may be easily distracted. They may be unable to focus on learning activities or may have trouble shifting their attention from one activity to another.

Evidence-based strategies

Work collaboratively

- **Build a relationship with other professionals involved in supporting the child.** Working together can lead to a shared understanding of the child, and consistent strategies across the early childhood education and care setting and other environments like home and the community.
- **Set learning and development goals.** Consider working with the child's parents as well as the professionals that support the child (e.g. speech pathologist) to set specific and measurable goals. Aim for goals that focus on the child's strengths but are also challenging enough to support a child's learning and social development.

Consider how you give instructions and communicate

- **Give simple, specific and direct instructions.** This might allow the child to be a bit clearer about the learning tasks. It can also help to demonstrate/model the task or behaviour, or have another child demonstrate.
- **Use different modes of communication.** Visual aids, such as picture cards, can be used in addition to verbal instructions to show a task sequence or a key learning concept.
- **Provide frequent reminders.** Verbal and physical prompts can keep children on track with learning tasks.

Provide feedback

- **Give encouragement immediately after a child speaks.** Encouragement can support children's communication.



- **Give corrective feedback promptly.** Immediate verbal correction if the child mispronounces words or sentences can help a child learn. Consider repeating what the child has said, with the correct word or sentence structure, in a question format. Take care not to push the child to repeat the correct word or sentence.
- **Acknowledge efforts using interests.** Acknowledging a child's efforts may increase their motivation to learn positive social behaviours. Acknowledgement of efforts using the child's interests may be particularly motivating.

Best practice tips

Get the child's full attention

- Check you have their attention before giving instructions or speaking to them. This can be done with a gesture, touch, holding eye contact or verbal prompts.

Consider using slower speech

- This can help a child listen to and process instructions.

Be patient

- Try not to rush or interrupt a child when they are trying to speak or communicate. Instead, allow extra time for them to speak and respond. Supporting a child with a communication disorder can at times be difficult, and you may feel frustrated. Being aware of your feelings and thoughts is important for a calm and supportive relationship with a child.

Encourage positive role-models

- Praising other children for positive behaviours (e.g. hands up before speaking, sharing) helps a child to see what is expected. This may encourage them to imitate these behaviours.

Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Educators can help support children's learning and participation by creating a secure and positive social environment where children can build relationships with educators and other children.



- Educators can help children develop confident self-identities and the ability to interact to others with empathy and respect. Remind children to use social behaviours, and acknowledge their efforts.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Role playing and other play-based learning activities may help children with communication disorders interact with others and build relationships. Verbal prompts may also be helpful.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Educators can help support children’s wellbeing by creating a secure and positive social environment where children can build relationships with educators and other children.
- A teaching tip that may be relevant is work collaboratively.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Reading stories multiple times can help children with communication challenges understand how to pronounce words. It can be helpful to ask the child questions and explaining the meanings of words.
- It can be helpful to combine learning with hands-on activities that are meaningful for the child. For example, read a storybook that focuses on everyday experiences (e.g. brushing your teeth, making friends) and follow it with related role playing or arts and crafts activities.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Discussing with the child, their family and support team how they communicate and the best ways to use any communication aids can support effective communication.
- Teach other children, educators and professionals to understand and use the child’s communication method. For example, if a child uses pictures and symbols, it might be helpful to include a few of these during play.
- Encouraging children to play with others, especially during free play, may result in spontaneous conversations.
- Consider how you give instructions. Start with simple concepts (e.g. how to pronounce a single letter) and as the child becomes more confident and capable, you can introduce more complex ideas (e.g. making full phrases and sentences).



- Children may need extra support with language and might use pictures, gestures or technology such as tablets and speech devices. Encourage the child to use technology that best supports their play and learning, and that best fits their bodily needs.
- Consider how you give instructions and communicate.

Other considerations

Safety

- Some children with communication disorders may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency or emergency drill. Consider making time to demonstrate and practise what to do, or provide them with a non-verbal or simple way to communicate an emergency.
- Consider how you give instructions and communicate.

Behaviour

- Stories about social situations can highlight positive behaviours and routines in the early childhood education and care setting.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Toileting

- Some children with communication disorders may have trouble communicating with an adult about their toileting needs. If this is the case discuss with a child's family and support team about strategies that can help the child in this area. For example, some basic gestures can be developed for the child to use.

Other educators and early childhood professionals

- Consider documenting the strengths and abilities of a child. This can then be provided to other early childhood educators and professionals that may be involved in supporting the child.



Transitions

- Children may find moving from the early childhood education and care setting to another setting (i.e. another early childhood education and care setting or primary school) challenging.
- For more information about supporting children with disabilities when transitioning to a different education setting, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

Peer mediation

- Read more about how peer mediation can support peers with learning social and communication skills that facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Other co-occurring conditions

- Communication disorders can often co-occur with other developmental delays such as [autism](#), and [developmental delay](#). They can also co-occur in children who experience [d/Deaf and hard of hearing](#), or [blind or low vision](#).

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for children with communication disorders include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Stay play talk poster
- Being different poster (A3)
- AllPlay Learn Story - Making friends
- AllPlay Learn Story - Sharing