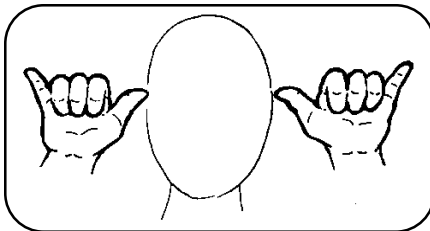


## Communication Basics



"cow"

The term "communication" describes the many different ways that people relate ideas, feelings, and concepts. It is easy to take communication for granted. As an early childhood professional, you have probably encountered young children with some sort of communication challenge: difficulty forming words, immature development, a lisp, stuttering, or inability to speak. Some children may have difficulty expressing themselves; others may have difficulty understanding what is said to them. In order to respond to children's needs, you must understand children's current skills and the typical milestones for language development.

Both parents and providers anxiously await a child's first words and are delighted by these early attempts to communicate wants and needs. Long before those first words, however, children are able to express themselves. Very early communication is sometimes subtle, but it is every bit as exciting as those first words. When a toddler cries and grabs your leg, you usually have an idea of what the child is trying to communicate—even though the child did not use any words. This incident is one example of the many ways children communicate without words. Other examples include hand gestures, facial expressions, actions, body position, laughing, crying, cooing, screaming, movement, and tone of voice as well as spoken language.

Spoken language is only one form of formal communication. Gestures are another, sign language is another, and written words are yet another. As with other skills that young children acquire, the ability to communicate in different ways develops as young children grow and expand their field of experience. For young children, especially children with disabilities, it is important to try to identify and encourage early attempts at communicating.

Most communication is nonverbal. The way you hold your body, how close you stand to others, your use of gestures, and your facial expressions constantly give "messages" to those around you. It is not unusual for an early childhood professional to be able to distinguish between the cries and gestures of different children, as well as to correctly interpret what these communications mean. These sounds and actions are very important signals to the provider, who can learn to understand and respond as if real words have been spoken.

Every child communicates. Whether it is with eye contact, pointing, or a five-word sentence, these expressions communicate children's interests and needs. Children who have developmental delays or disabilities frequently need assistance to develop effective communication skills. By taking advantage of the opportunities that exist in early childhood settings to encourage children to develop and practice communication skills, typical play and routines can become rich communication opportunities.

All children benefit from an environment rich in both nonverbal and verbal communication. Putting a picture of a doll on the doll shelf helps the toddler understand what you mean when you say, Put the dolls away, and encourages sorting skills. The use of puppets, dramatizations, finger-plays, and felt/flannel board stories gives children many opportunities to use both nonverbal and language-based information to understand, enjoy, and learn from you and your program.

## Try It Out



“cookie”

**Facial expressions** are perhaps one of the earliest expressions of a child's needs. A grimace, smile, frown, pout, or stare communicate important messages. A child may look at a desired object as a way to indicate she wants it or make eye contact with an adult as a way to initiate interaction. Children with disabilities that interfere with their ability to use spoken language may rely heavily on facial expressions and other forms of nonverbal communication to initiate social interaction with others and to get their needs met.

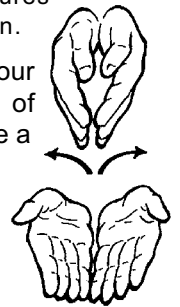
A child's **position** in relationship to a particular object, event, or person is another communication signal. Children who *back away* from an activity or pull away from an adult are essentially expressing discomfort.

Frequently, when a child who becomes frustrated or anxious will *move toward* a familiar adult in an attempt to gain consolation and comfort. When children feel secure and comfortable in the setting, they are more likely to join into play activities; physically avoiding participation, on the other hand, may mean that a child is worried or uncomfortable.

Young children use **gestures** to express themselves. Gestures may be easier to interpret than other forms of nonverbal communication. When a child points to a toy, raises both arms toward a familiar adult, or shakes his head from side to side, the intent is relatively clear. Children and adults are basically using gestures when they use their hands to form individual signs (as in American Sign Language or Signing Essential English) to communicate with each other. Although gestures may be the easiest to interpret, all of the messages children give us are important elements of communication.

Your use of sign language to accompany common words like *cookie* and *book* (whether or not any children in your program are primarily communicating with sign language) lets children know there are many ways of communicating. Using sign language in natural ways gives powerful information to young children who have a good understanding of what they hear—but still do not have the ability to say the words.

Frequent use of facial expressions, head and hand gestures, positive touch, pictures, play props, eye contact, word or picture labels on objects, sign language, and other nonverbal strategies provides multiple ways for children to understand and communicate with you and with each other.



“book”

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *I have several very quiet children in my group. How do I encourage their communication?*

**ANSWER:** When a young child initiates communication with you (a baby cries, a toddler grabs your hand, or a child says, *Teacher, can I have more juice?*), your response helps children learn about communication. They learn that 1) their communication is important, 2) that you want to take the time to listen to them, and 3) that communication is often a circular process (you communicate, I respond with a communication, you respond back, etc.). It makes sense to think about responding when someone talks to you, but sometimes a child's attempt to communicate can be very subtle.

For example, Diana was seated next to the teacher during an art activity. She was pasting colored paper on a paper plate and ran out of pink paper. She asked for more, gesturing with both hands, but got no response from the teacher. Several minutes later, she pointed to the container of pink paper, but no one noticed. Moments later, she pounded on the table and was told to “stop pounding or she would have to leave the table.”

Having had no positive response to her many requests, Diana left the art table. This example illustrates the effect of failing to respond to a child's initiation. Had Diana had more sophisticated communication skills, perhaps she could have used words to ask for or demand pink paper. When she used the communication skills she had and they

did not work, she gave up.

In groups of young children, it may be difficult to respond to each child's request or attempt to communicate. Picture a lively discussion with several four-year-olds, and you can see how hard it might be to respond to each child's contribution. Still, it is important for every child to feel that their contribution is welcome and encouraged.

Acknowledge each child regularly, including the child who may be quieter or less competent. Watch for a comment or a gesture from children who are less able to contribute during the group activity. Be careful that you are not so “busy” in group situations that you miss these wonderful opportunities to model and encourage good communication skills with each child.

