

# Child Care plus+

## + Communication Basics

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.

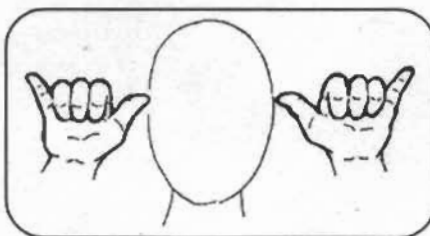
Most communication is nonverbal. The way you hold your body, how close you stand to others, your use of gestures,

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. +

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"cow"

### + In This Issue

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## + IN FOCUS

Some children enrolled in your program may have specific communication needs. In addition to the strategies already described, you may need additional and more intensive strategies. The child's parents, early intervention specialist, special education teacher, or therapist may have individualized suggestions. A child who uses sign language to communicate, for example, needs to be surrounded by individuals who know sign language. A child who uses a communication or picture board needs continuous access to this tool. Parents and professionals can help you learn what you need to know to provide opportunities for this child to communicate in the context of your program.

You can find out about the specific communication needs of children who are experiencing communication

delays by talking to parents and communication specialists. Ask them what the child's current skills are and what the child is learning. Children with identified speech and communication delays often have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that identifies current learning goals and objectives. These plans can provide specific and detailed information you can use to individualize your setting to meet the child's needs.

Including a child with special communication needs in your program does not mean that you must change your routines and activities. It simply means that you must find out what modifications need to be made so that the child can fully participate in each one. + CC+

## + TRY IT OUT

**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.

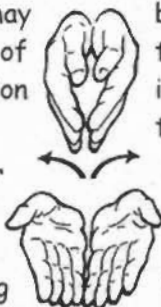
Young children use **gestures** to express themselves. Gestures may be easier to interpret than other forms of nonverbal communication. When a child points to a toy, raises both arms toward a familiar adult, or shakes his head from side to side, the intent is relatively clear.

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 that 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. + CC+



"cookie"



"book"

## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

The typical ways in which children develop spoken language are measured in "milestones." These are markers that let you know whether or not a child is developing along developmental timelines. To understand the types of encouragement children might need in order to practice developing communication skills, here is a brief review of how spoken language develops from first sounds to first sentences.

**First Sounds** Very early in life, an infant discovers that he is capable of making noise. For example, infants cry to express hunger, restlessness, discomfort, or simply the need for security and attention. Gradually, infants make different cries to express different needs. With input from parents and experience over time, you too can become able to interpret the meaning of these different crying patterns.

Another early vocalization is a cooing or gurgling sound that usually means the child is content and feeling happy. Infants often use these sounds to initiate interactions with adults and express interest in continuing an enjoyable activity. Infants also experiment with sounds made with the lips and tongue to produce "raspberries." These sounds form the building blocks for later language development.

**Babbling** Typically, first babbling attempts include vowel sounds like *ah*, *ooh*, *ee*, and *a*. Later the child adds consonant sounds that include the *b*, *d*, *m*, and *n* sounds. As children gain experience making these sounds, they begin to string sounds together to make vocalizations like *bababa* and *dadada*. Children appear to enjoy practicing making sounds and may babble when playing alone as well as when interacting with another person. Often, adults react to children's babbling as though the child has spoken actual words, such as a father's encouraging smile when his daughter says *dada*. Attention and encouragement play a big role in a child's ability to assign meaning to these early vocalizations.

**First Words** A child's first words are an exciting milestone. They represent the beginning of a learning process during which children recognize that certain combinations of sounds represent objects, people, and actions. When a child begins to use a particular word, it may be used to communicate several different things. The word *shoe* may mean *there's a shoe*, *mommy's shoe*, or *I want my shoes on*. Children's early words may sound

very similar. A child may use *ma* for Mama and a slightly different-sounding *ma* for milk or the toy monkey. Children typically understand words and their meanings before they are actually able to say the words themselves. A young child may, for example, lift his arms up when asked if he wants to *go bye-bye*; you know that he understands what *go bye-bye* means even though he cannot say the words yet.

**More New Words** As children learn that objects, people, and actions have names, they begin to ask questions. Children often develop a word, phrase, or gesture that is their equivalent of *what's that?* Children are clearly asking you to give them words and labels for things in the environment. During this stage, children often try to imitate words they hear. They may imitate a word immediately after it is spoken, or it may take several attempts over time before a close imitation is produced. Learning more words motivates children to communicate more. This stage is often characterized by almost continuous communication.

**First Sentences** By the time children's vocabularies have grown to between 30 and 50 words, they are ready to put two or three words together in simple sentences. These word combinations often describe people, objects, or actions children are currently experiencing. Children's first word combinations will likely be words they are already using, such as combining *more* and *apple* for *more apple*. As children continue to put words together, they start to learn the rules of language—the way words are combined to make sentences. Through this attention to language, most children eventually learn that *my ball is red* is more understandable than *red ball is my*.

All children need and deserve to be in an environment that nurtures their ability to communicate. How children communicate can vary and includes spoken words in English or another language, sign language, or an individualized communication system. Your role is a crucial one in making sure that the early childhood environment is full of opportunities for children to express themselves and to be listened to as they develop the important skills needed to communicate. When children in your program have specific communication needs, it is critical that you take advantage of every opportunity to teach them to communicate effectively. +

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## + 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, she 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. + CC+

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

The following web sites include lists of developmental milestones for language/communication development in young children. The American Speech-Language Hearing Association has a list at [www.asha.org/public/speech/development/child\\_hear\\_talk.htm](http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/child_hear_talk.htm). This list can also be requested from ASHA by calling 1-800-638-8255. The National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders has a list at [www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/speechandlanguage.asp](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/speechandlanguage.asp). And at the following web site is a Communication Checklist for children from birth to age 5: [www.beyond-words.org/communication\\_checklist.htm](http://www.beyond-words.org/communication_checklist.htm).

*CHILD CARE plus+* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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