

Communication Skills

Communication is of prime importance in the curriculum. It is inherent in every activity undertaken and an essential prerequisite for teaching and learning. Communication is vital for the personal development of all pupils as it enables them to express and to satisfy their emotional and physical needs, their need for social interaction and their need for competence in understanding and engaging with their surroundings. These needs create the motivation for pupils to acquire and use an effective system of communication.

Pupils with complex needs must be taught the basic strategies to interact and communicate and must be given motivation and opportunities to make relationships or to interact with other people. Their difficulties will:

- Limit interaction
- Limit understanding of the world beyond their immediate physical and sensory surroundings
- Limit shared attention
- Limit understanding of language

Pupils with complex needs may develop a limited or extensive repertoire of communicative behaviours and responses. They may only show obvious responses as a reaction to events within the immediate sensations of their own body, they may show anxiety or distress when brought into contact with the wider world or new events. They may be less aware of other people and their responses to them and have fewer opportunities to interact with people and objects. Conversely they may have an understanding of events and language around them and have great difficulty in accessing a means of initiating and expressing their intentional communications.

Reduced or absent visual or auditory input reduces ability to anticipate events from certain environmental cues. This inability to anticipate changes can make new experiences frightening and can have an adverse effect on the pupil's motivation to develop communication skills. Without motivation or means to communicate effectively with the world around them, the pupil is likely to become passive or frustrated and as a result may develop emotional and behavioural difficulties. Communicative behaviours may develop as a method to control and influence their environment. When provided with an environment that they can understand, predict and control, these frustrations should be significantly reduced. We must provide an environment in which each individual is treated with respect, listened to, and encouraged to communicate their ideas and become a contributing member of the group. Challenging behaviours arising from lack of effective communication methods should be viewed as communication, their function evaluated and alternative methods of expressing that need should be identified and taught to the pupil within a structured learning environment.

Effective learning cannot take place in conditions of stress and neither can real communication take place in a sterile environment where the pupil is expected to perform communication tasks with no intrinsic meaning or motivation. Language develops most effectively in a setting where the pupil feels secure and comfortable and with people who give a high level of attention, modelling and immediate meaningful responses to their communications.

In order to develop effective communication the pupil with complex needs has:

- To want or need something ie. a reason to communicate
- To engage in meaningful and motivating experiences in a responsive environment that they can understand
- To know that someone will 'hear' them and respond to their message, ie. An opportunity to communicate

We can make a significant difference to the effectiveness of pupils' communication by the quality of our intervention and interaction with them, particularly as we are committed to giving pupils a significant degree of autonomy and control.

Every experience must be part of a planned framework to promote development of communication skills. Planned activities must be:

- Appropriate to the pupil's level of functioning
- Lead to the accomplishment of specified learning goals
- Provide opportunities for the pupil to interact with their environment, solve problems, communicate, utilise their senses and exercise control over their environment by making choices.

Early communication is based on emotional bonding and the need for the pupil to control their environment. It is important to create a responsive environment in which the adult follows the pupil's lead, assumes attempts to communicate and responds appropriately. Intensive Interaction and 'Total Communication' methods should run through all activities. Any pupil with a more advanced communication system should be encouraged to use this within a range of settings and activities, and have access to use it as required. We must ensure that there is someone to provide appropriate means of communication, to receive all attempts at communication, and respond appropriately, whatever method is used.

The educational aims which underpin this area are:

- To encourage pupils' responsiveness to others and to establish reciprocal interaction patterns
- To promote consistent behaviours in relation to people and objects
- To establish the pupils' understanding and systematic use of communicative behaviours
- To build a repertoire of signs, symbols, gestures or objects related to needs, preferences, interests, ideas and feelings
- To establish a means of communication which will enable pupils to exchange information with others and exert some degree of control over their surroundings and experiences.

Range of Activities (some suggestions)

- Intensive interaction
- Total Communication environments
- Anticipation games
- 'Yes' / 'no' activities
- Choice making
- Cause and effect activities
- Sensory stories
- Listening activities
- Switches and communication aids
- Objects of reference
- Environmental cues
- Soundbeam
- iMUSE
- Touch screens or eye gaze
- Resonance board activities

Some students who are at a more advanced stage will also have individual programmes which teach and extend symbol use through:

- Symbol play
- Core Vocabulary
- Creative writing
- Sequencing
- Comprehension
- Descriptive writing

Phonics and other reading skills can be taught through:

- Reading schemes
- Games
- Whole word recognition