



# Communication Guidance

Creating emotionally supportive  
environments to develop children's language  
and communication

Tower Hamlets Early Years Service



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The use of 'parents' in this guidance refers to parents and carers. The use of the plural does not imply that a child will necessarily have more than one parent.



# Introduction

Every Child a Talker (ECaT) is a national programme to support practitioners in developing children's early language and communication skills. This guidance was developed from the ECaT support materials, effective practice within settings involved and current research in the area of communication. The focus of this guidance is creating emotionally supportive environments to build children's well-being and confidence, which is fundamental to the development of children's communication and language.

Communication, including non-verbal communication, is of vital importance to development and learning throughout life. Communication involves much more than talking or listening. Listening to the spoken word and uttering words and sounds are of course involved but gesture, facial expression, a search for meaning and wanting to know what is being communicated are all part of communicating with others. For babies and young children, whose speech is delayed or impaired in some way, or for those who are unable to hear, signing can provide a helpful means of communication with others. Signing can also be used successfully with very young children who have not yet developed speech (see contacts and resources section for information on Signalong courses).

Communication provides the basis of thinking and interaction with others. It enables us to:

- represent ideas and feelings
- learn about other people's ideas and feelings
- negotiate
- consider things that have happened in the past
- look forward to and plan future events
- explore possibilities
- develop imaginative ideas

The central role of communication in young children's development places a huge responsibility on early childhood practitioners, together with the parents and carers of young children, to ensure that children are given support and encouragement to become powerful and effective communicators. Communication can only be said to occur if it is a two-way process; no matter how hard you listen or how much you talk, if there is no interaction with others communication does not occur. This is particularly true when we are working with young children who have less experience and less expertise than adults. Adults have to take responsibility for ensuring that their interactions with children are two-way, ensure that children understand what is being said or signed and that adults really understand, or tune into, what children are trying to convey.



## Born communicators

Human beings are born communicators:

- we are born sociable beings, imitators, curious explorers and problem-solvers (patterns and connections)
- our brains are hard-wired for communication – we have a range of abilities which draw children into interaction with us

However, in some situations or with some people it is all too easy to feel awkward and inarticulate, and for children and some

parents, this can be a real barrier. It is up to all practitioners to ensure that all early years settings and schools work to facilitate communication in supportive partnerships with families. This guidance is designed to support that process. It seeks to emphasise the need for a comfortable climate or ethos that will provide the emotional reassurance needed to help children and

adults communicate effectively. The guidance is divided into the following sections:

1. Working with parents and families
2. Celebrating multilingualism
3. Making children comfortable
4. Practitioners communicating effectively with children
5. The physical environment, experiences and resources
6. Further reading, resources and contacts



# 1. Working with parents and families

## Helping parents to feel comfortable



Children will feel comfortable in environments where their parents feel welcomed and valued. Practitioners therefore need to make this a priority. Consistency is key to this process and parents are more likely to have trust in practitioners where policies and values are clear and transparent. Making sure that all members of staff demonstrate the same approach and expectations, and the same warm and welcoming attitude is important. Developing policy in this aspect of provision and sticking to policy decisions reassures parents and offers protection for staff. Below are questions for consideration to support staff teams in reflecting on practice:

### Does your environment make it clear that parents are welcome?

- Are there notices and displays clearly addressed to parents?
- Do members of staff sound warm and welcoming when talking to parents? Are family members treated with respect?
- Would a new visitor be able to tell that yours is an inclusive environment, with provision for disabled parents, an indication of the range of languages spoken there, and visible signs that you value the diverse community you are catering for?
- How are parents who can't read, or perhaps speak English, made to feel welcome?
- Are there comfy chairs for parents to use while they wait and a designated place to put buggies?
- Is it clear to mothers who are breastfeeding that they are welcome? Is there a comfortable space where they can sit or talk with some privacy if they wish?

### Do your communication skills take account of cultural differences?

Interactions with parents can all too easily be misconstrued, particularly where different cultural and communicative practices are involved. In order to take account of different customs consider:

- **personal space:** some people feel uncomfortable when others stand too close to them when they are talking. On the other hand, the actions of a person who is trying to back away from someone they think of as standing too close, may be interpreted as coldness
- **smiling:** cultural practices in relation to smiling vary and it is important to realise that the meaning of the smile (or its absence) may have a different meaning than that which you attribute to it
- **eye contact:** some people regard it as disrespectful to look another person in the eye, particularly if the gaze is extended. Others regard eye contact as a sign that you are listening

- **touch:** touch that is considered appropriate in one culture may seem over familiar and inappropriate to others. Touching someone on the head, for example, may be interpreted as robbing them of their soul
- **silence:** people from western cultures often enjoy quick fire conversations; but to some people, failure to pause between turns may make it seem as though you have not listened or reflected on what has been said. This aspect of communication is also linked to differences in the way conversations should be conducted

Are all members of staff aware of possible different cultural practices? In a diverse community there are unlikely to be hard and fast rules about what is acceptable and unacceptable to different cultural groups. However, staff can do a great deal to aid effective communication if they observe and ask questions. Above all, practitioners should be aware of their own discomfort and that of the people with whom they are communicating. If parents appear not to be making eye contact or seem to be standing too close, practitioners should check their own reactions to ensure that they are not reading these differences negatively. The attitude of staff can make a world of difference; being aware and being tolerant leads to greater respect, builds relationships and improves communication.

### Do you provide a range of activities in which parents can engage?

Some parents like helping by reading stories or gardening. Others prefer to help away from the children, by mending dressing up clothes or covering books. Some are attracted to social events, others prefer more formal events, perhaps with a speaker or a curriculum focus.

### Do parents have sufficient opportunities to get to know their child's key person?

This will involve pre-arranged times for discussion as well as the vital informal chats about what children have been doing and how they have been while they've been with you. It will also mean that parents have to know when the key person will be around and when they will be away due to holiday, sickness, working on a different shift and who to go to when their key person is absent.



- Does the key person have opportunities to share information with other agencies or professionals involved with the family (with the family's consent)?
- Do the opportunities provided for meeting take account of the needs of working parents or the difficulties faced by those with younger or older children?
- Are you able to offer a choice of times so that any appointments are mutually convenient?



## Keeping parents informed and enthused

### How do you keep parents interested in what you are doing to support children's development as communicators?

- Do you let them know what activities and experiences you will be offering children?
- Some settings do this by sending home a newsletter; others have a display board letting parents know what's coming up. If you display your plans, are you sure that they are meaningful to parents?
- Consider a range of ways of sharing information with parents
- Do you let parents know that you are enthusiastic about children's language development? They'll be excited if you are excited about new words or gestures, or new developments in the way children are communicating
- Do you respond with enthusiasm when parents talk to you about their children's communication?

### How do you help parents to develop their understanding and knowledge of language development?

This may involve prominently displaying booklets and posters which provide details of what they can look out for or do at home. You may want to offer a 'Tip of the Week'. If you are working with babies and toddlers, you could include a section on some of the things they have been saying (or gesturing) in their home books. This has the advantage of letting parents know what you think is important about the way in which language develops. It may also encourage parents to let you know about communication that has been going on at home.

In families where the main language spoken at home is not English, do you encourage parents to maintain communication in a language in which they can provide a good language model? This will include using a rich vocabulary and being clear and consistent and is likely to be the parents' first language. (See the section below entitled Celebrating Multilingualism.)



### Effective practice example

(i) A childminder displayed the handouts she had received as part of ECaT training in order to let parents know what she had been learning. This provided an excellent opportunity to talk to parents about the range of strategies she was developing and encouraged them to do the same.

## Ensuring that parents feel consulted and valued

Practitioners can help parents to feel valued by ensuring that they are made aware of developments in practice and in their own child's progress. Diaries are a very useful way of communicating with parents. They can feature aspects of children's language development and photographs that will enable children to talk at home about what they have been engaged in (see Look at Me! Early Years Assessment for guidance on using diaries). In addition, video footage of events or simply children playing in the setting is another helpful way of sharing information. Parents can be asked to contribute to a list of 'words my child knows'. For children having comprehension difficulties, or with language delay or impairment, staff, parents and any relevant agencies involved can work together on guidance helping all staff to communicate more effectively with a particular child. This might be entitled simply 'what helps my child to understand'.

Regular feedback from parents about the setting may be provided by means of a questionnaire. Informal discussion can also provide invaluable feedback as can evaluation forms from training sessions. The Self Evaluation Form (SEF) required by Ofsted asks settings to give examples of feedback or suggestions from parents that they have acted on as well as those that they have not, so consultation and feedback will be useful on many levels. For example, parents may also have good ideas about resources, books or games that they have successfully shared at home.

## Engaging with parents as partners

Partnership is very much a buzz word. Although it is easy to say, it is far from easy to achieve. Strategies which help to create mutual trust and partnership include:

- encouraging parents to contribute to children's records/diaries with observations and photographs, always remembering that parents know their children better than anyone else
- offering training to develop parents' confidence and giving them access to research and new initiatives. ECaT's focus on 'dialogic book reading' is a good example of a skill that parents could usefully develop. BT's DVD, 'Chatter Matters', is an excellent resource and could form the basis of training and discussion with groups of parents. (See further reading, resources and contacts section for further details). Training could also highlight the role of communication in brain development in the first year of life; the importance of early attachment with parents and carers; the importance of vocal play and the impact of transitions which some parents may underestimate
- building up resources for a toy library; promoting swap shops of books or puzzles; and creating a bank of story sacks all require the involvement of parents and have strong potential to promote language development
- sharing expertise and asking parents to contribute favourite recipes, songs and stories

It is the role of practitioners to be clear about what services they are being offered and why, to ensure that parents can make informed decisions about their child's involvement in them. Settings that explain why playing with water or playing outdoors are of importance to a child's development are less likely to come into conflict with parents refusing to let children get dirty or wet.

### Effective practice example

(i) In one setting, where a number of parents had complained about their children playing with water, a variety of items of protective clothing were purchased. A display about the value of wet and messy play was prepared and staff demonstrated the full range of different kinds of aprons and all-weather suits to parents. Staff and parents managed to get a large collection of wellington boots from cast offs, car boot sales and charity shops. One grandmother offered to make several sets of plastic sleeves which would go over children's coats when they were playing outside, which were useful for children who dislike wearing aprons. They were also useful for supplementing tabard style aprons when children are engaged in messy play.

## Engaging parents who seem reluctant to become involved

Settings and schools can sometimes help parents to feel comfortable simply by being consistently friendly and open; courteous and welcoming. But sometimes, despite your best efforts, parents may still feel uncomfortable. There are many possible explanations for this; a poor previous experience with school, poverty, family conflict or illness are just a few that may lead parents to appear uncooperative or challenging. Whatever the reason for difficulties in making contact with parents and families, it is important that practitioners do what they can to support parents, so that they in turn can support their children in becoming effective communicators. Each child and family is allocated a key person who will play a leading role in supporting families.

### Effective practice example

(i) Once children have been offered a place at a small day nursery, parents are offered a home visit which, almost without exception, is accepted. Two members of staff visit, one being the family's allocated key person at the nursery, taking a toy which they feel may be interesting to the child. One member of staff focuses on getting to know the child while the other focuses on talking to the parents. The toy is left for the child to bring to the setting on the first day they attend. Settling in arrangements are discussed with parents so that everyone is clear about expectations. Children talk about these visits for months and sometimes years after they have started at the nursery.



(ii) Every day, an administrator prints off a selection of photos which are displayed in the reception area. This means that parents can see what children have been doing and talk to their children about their activities and experiences during the day. Another centre has adopted a similar practice but, rather than printing off the photograph, they use a large digital photo frame, which displays photographs as a continuous slideshow.

See the NCB publication *Principles for engaging with families* for further information.

## 2. Celebrating multilingualism and bilingualism

Tower Hamlets has a vibrant and diverse population. Inclusion is a strength of early years provision and is at the heart of the borough's work. Practitioners within settings and school reflect this diversity and help to ensure a strong knowledge base of the languages spoken by children and families across Tower Hamlets. There are great benefits to children who learn more than one language in terms of their understanding of language concepts and development of thinking skills, therefore it is important for practitioners to value and support children in developing all of their languages.



In order to monitor the extent to which you are supporting and celebrating multilingualism and bilingualism, consider the following questions:

- do you have information about the languages spoken by all the children with whom you work
- do you encourage children to know the names of the languages which they and others speak
- have you developed a small vocabulary of useful words and phrases in the languages of the children in your care
- do you use language posters and maps to highlight children's interest in the diversity within the group
- have you learned basic words used by children in their homes

Are you aware of the pattern of development of children who speak more than one language (see further reading, resources and contacts section for reference to Supporting children learning English as an additional language). Key aspects for children acquiring English as a second language include:

- the two (or more) languages spoken by the child are likely to be mixed at first
- there may be a silent period, when the child may be developing their understanding of English, but could be unwilling or unready to speak it
- there may be a period of not wanting to use the home language. Throughout any such period do you continue to promote linguistic diversity?



Learning to speak and understand English is of vital importance, but this cannot be achieved at the expense of the child's home language. To what extent do you support the development of English by:

- using gestures and visual cues
- talking about the here and now
- using simple language and clear pronunciation
- repeating key words and phrases
- giving children sufficient time to respond
- stressing key words and information whilst maintaining a natural flow in your speech
- working in small groups
- reassuring parents of the value of being able to speak more than one language fluently

If children don't seem to be making progress in English, it is helpful to have an early discussion with parents in order to ensure that you maintain and develop positive relationships. Have you discussed with parents whether:

- the child is having difficulties in his or her first language
- the apparent lack of progress has been a concern for more than three months
- the child or family have a history of hearing difficulties
- the child is able to communicate using gesture or actions. If not this will need to be addressed as all types of communication are important in learning a language

### Effective practice example

(i) The staff team in a children's centre developed a policy to support multilingual and bilingual learners. The policy included the following strategies:

- signs in different languages around the centre
- an emphasis on employing staff where possible who speak more than one language
- teaching all staff a bank of key words and phrases in a number of languages
- children's books in a range of languages, together with training for parents in dialogic book sharing, to encourage all parents to enjoy books with their children
- reassurance for parents that using a language at home which they speak fluently and in which they converse in comfortably is the best preparation for their child learning English



### 3. Helping children to feel comfortable



For both children and adults, feeling comfortable is key to communicating successfully. All of us have encountered situations where we feel uncomfortable about speaking or where we find it hard to listen to what someone else is saying. This can happen when we feel that others are being overly critical or are not really interested in what we are saying. It can also happen in formal situations, such as interviews where many of the normal conversational strategies which we use are missing or muted. Simply being under stress or uncomfortable can cause children to freeze, or draw inwards so that communication becomes difficult.

Everyday communication relies on nods and gestures and encouraging smiles, and if these are not apparent we try to figure out what is happening. Children are even more aware of such conversational strategies, because the meaning of much of what we say to young children is not always readily understood by them, and they rely heavily on the way we say things in order to sort out what we are trying to communicate.

Do you:

- give children (and their families) a warm welcome?
- make home visits?
- encourage parents and carers to talk about your setting before children arrive?
- ensure there are flexible settling in procedures, taking account of children and parent's needs?
- have clearly labelled coat pegs and trays so that the children know there is a place for them?
- ensure there is a warm, friendly and welcoming approach to families?
- use and respond to non-verbal as well as verbal communication? Smiles, gestures and facial expressions are key to feeling in touch with others?

Do you help children to feel comfortable by:

- using an effective range of communicative strategies (see next section)?
- ensuring that parents and other significant people in children's lives feel comfortable and relaxed in the setting (see previous section)?

- encouraging children to bring familiar things which help children to connect home and the setting. These are called transitional objects and might be a favourite toy, a photo of mum/dad, or something which the child takes to bed at night
- providing books, stories and play materials which reflect events and experiences in children's lives
- providing familiar, secure routines with just enough variation or a few surprises to prevent each day being too predictable
- planning supportive strategies to help children deal with transitions. The change from being at home with a known and loved adult to being in a new context (whether that be a childminder's home or a group setting with new routines and new people) takes some adjustment
- discussing with parents feeding, sleeping and changing routines so that continuity can be provided. This may include familiar lullabies or rhymes
- helping them to feel emotionally secure, through physical reassurance and adult support in dealing with strong emotions

### Effective practice examples

(i) A children's centre ensures that photographs of all key people are clearly displayed. In addition to the child's own key person, each family is allocated a key person to link with when shifts or holidays mean that the regular key person is unavailable. Details of shifts and absences are highlighted on the notice board so that parents can predict times when children may need additional support to settle in the morning. Each child has a coat peg and basket for shoes, toys and important items clearly labelled with a photograph and the child's name. Staff ensure that these are prepared before children come to the setting for the first time so that it is clear that they are expected and welcomed. Parents using a home language, which is normally written in anything other than Latin script are encouraged to write the child's name in that script. Thus the label with the child's name written in the script used at home also has their name written underneath in standard English.

(ii) Several children in a group had new siblings and were, as a result, experiencing some emotional difficulties. A member of staff set up an area with a large size baby doll, together with feeding bottles, nappies, clothes and blankets. While other dolls could be played with in the usual ways, children in the designated area were encouraged to treat the doll like a baby. In fact, it was referred to as 'baby doll'. A number of conversations grew out of this activity and interest in it lasted for several months.

## Transition

All children are particularly vulnerable at points of transition, whether from home, to a childminder or group setting; or from one setting to another. Children may need additional support and there should be clear procedures to make it a smooth process. However change can also bring advantages. 'Going to big school' holds a lot of promise for children and opportunities to develop independence and a sense of their own development. Well developed transition procedures also make it possible for children to sometimes go back to nursery settings, thereby creating an emotional link between past and present (see further reading, resources and contacts section for reference to *Moving On: Supporting Children's Transitions in the Early Years*).



### Effective practice example

(i) Children entering an early years unit in a Tower Hamlets primary school will usually already have had a home visit. In the term prior to entry they will have visited a setting on three or four occasions with a parent or carer, and (where appropriate) with a small group from any previous setting they may have been attending. Unit staff members visit children in these settings.

Within the unit, transition between nursery and reception classes is eased by shared outdoor space and periods of each day when children can move freely between nursery and reception classrooms. This allows nursery children to get a taste of life in the reception class and reception children to relive the pleasures of being in the nursery. Older children frequently spend time with nursery and reception children and this helps all children by giving insight into the process of development and change.



## 4. Effective communication with children



Practitioners' interactions with parents and children are vital in creating an emotionally supportive environment for communication. This section focuses on the supportive practices which staff working with young children should adopt. The strategies are recommended by speech and language therapists and are important for the contribution they make to an emotionally supportive environment for communication.

Like many learning processes, the more you communicate the better you get, so it is vital to encourage talk. Researchers suggest that we all need 10,000 hours of practice to become expert at anything (Michael Howe 1999). The ways in which you listen to children, play and interact with them can help ensure that children are interested in communicating and excited by their conversations with adults, making them want to talk.

Key strategies	Commentary	Effective practice example
Making eye contact	From babies' earliest days, eye contact is of vital importance. Babies focus on faces from an early age and eye contact helps to keep attention during interaction. Therefore eye contact is important for maintaining attention, showing that you are listening, and reading facial expressions and mouth movements	Usaf watched Shamari as she echoed the sounds made by baby Usaf and she extended the shared gaze as he carefully watched and imitated her mouth movements
Communication first!	Communication is both verbal and nonverbal. Therefore, adults need to respond to children's eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures, as well as what they say. It should also involve having fun; enjoyable interactions are rewarding so children will want to communicate more	While Agata was changing 10 month old Tyrone's nappy, she sang to him. He turned away when she sang songs he didn't want but waved his arms when she sang his favourites. Agata responded to his communications, respecting his choices

Key strategies	Commentary	Effective practice example
Follow a child's lead	Children are more likely to learn language relating to things they are interested in. Remember to watch and listen to children so you know what they are interested in. Children are also likely to play more imaginatively and with greater concentration when you are following their lead	Nazma was watching 2 year old Hanif as he built with Mobilo. He moved his model around the table making brrrrring noises. He said "car. Hanif make car." Nazma responded by saying, "I can see you've made a car. It's got wheels." Hanif sat down beside Nazma and began to make another car
Get to a child's level and join in with their activities	Playing alongside a child, on the floor or on a sofa, crouching down if they are standing enables the adult to make eye contact and signals interest in what they are doing. This makes it easier for children to interact with adults. These kinds of interactions do not always need words but are important to communication	Mark got down on the carpet where 15 month old Priti was playing with an assortment of objects. Priti pressed the ball she was holding against the one that Mark was holding, vocalising as she did so. Mark imitated the sound and Priti responded. Similar actions were repeated over several minutes
Give children time to respond	The connections in the brain which we use when we speak are not fully established in young children so it takes them longer to respond. Practitioners often feel that they want to help children by jumping in with words or sentences, but waiting is much more effective. Giving children time also signals that their contribution to the conversation is important and expected. If after silently counting to five (or ideally ten), no response is forthcoming, simply offer a commentary on what is happening, for example 'you wanted the apple'	Maya was serving lunches to two and three year olds. She offered choices, one piece of potato or two; bread with butter or without. Although children often took some time to respond, given the opportunity most of them did answer. She identified the fact that Stephan (who had complex learning needs) would point if she offered the choices by displaying one in each hand

Key strategies	Commentary	Effective practice example
Use simple words and sentences at the right level for each child	Children go through stages in their language development. In the early years it is particularly important to provide language at the right level. This may involve repeating back what children say, matching the length of the practitioner's utterances to the length of the child's, and using vocabulary that can be understood by the child	Hilba (1:11) still spoke in single words. Boston (2.6) used three and four word utterances. Their childminder varied her language as she spoke to them, emphasising key words as she spoke to Hilba such as "a ball. Yes it's a ball". But to Boston she said "Boston, throw me the big ball. Throw me the ball"
Use all the senses and a wide range of experiences to help children learn new words	Be expressive and include gestures, facial expressions, and a lively voice when communicating with young children. Animal sounds, pictures and models will reinforce learning. Songs and actions also support learning. A wide range of stimulating experiences help children learn new words as they are exposed to language in a variety of contexts. This is because each sensory input creates new channels in the brain which interact with each other supporting learning	In order to reinforce learning about transport, Shahida had put together an interactive display of models of different kinds of transport. A small group of children took a ride on the DLR and on the Woolwich Ferry. Another group went on a bus and a tube train. The class made up songs and rhymes about their travels. They also re-played their experiences by using blocks, boxes, wheels and planks to build boats, buses and trains
Use 'here and now' talk	Understanding of time develops slowly. The sensory input available when talking about immediate events supports learning	Nadia reinforced children's ability to think about time sequences by creating a time line of daily events. This helped children to understand the passage of time and helped staff and children to begin to communicate about events that had happened or were going to happen
Support children in turn-taking	Turn-taking is an important part of communication. Adults support its development early in children's lives by playing peek-a-boo games. But as children develop, adults need to continue to support turn-taking by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ making sure that they don't take up too much of the available time for conversation</li> <li>■ ensuring that they allow plenty of waiting time while children consider their contributions to the conversation</li> </ul>	With a group of three year olds, Shakeria supported a group of three year olds to take turns, by introducing games which involved taking turns. Initially they needed a lot of adult support, but over time they began to enjoy the fairness and the pattern, and were able to regulate the games themselves. This process was supported by repeating the name of the person whose turn it was

Key strategies	Commentary	Effective practice example
Make comments	<p>Making comments, rather than asking questions, about what a child is doing provides a model for their own conversations. It also allows them to extend what you say and does not close down the conversation</p>	<p>Peter sat down beside Jake who was drawing a picture. Peter commented that he liked the curly shapes that Jake was making. Jake continued in silence. After silently counting to ten (to ensure a sufficient pause), Peter commented that Jake was making a very long line. After another pause, Jake replied “the line is long ‘cause the car’s going a long long way. It bends round corners and goes up hills”. As he spoke he emphasised the words with hand gestures. He went to get a car and moved it along the line he had made</p>
Be careful with questions	<p>Questions are all too frequently closed. Closed questions have only one correct answer, for example ‘how many’, ‘what colour’. Open-ended questions to which adults do not have a defined answer may be useful but often comments are more effective</p> <p>Practitioners sometimes suggest that it is only through closed questions that they can assess children, but in fact direct questions may often give an incorrect view of children’s understanding</p> <p>A rule of thumb should be that you only ask questions when you really want to know something. Research has demonstrated that there is a difference in communication styles for children between home and settings. At home, nearly all the questions come from children to adults; in early years settings and schools, this is often reversed with children asking very few questions</p>	<p>Sayed and Mandy were asking a small group of children at snack time how many eyes or noses or hands they had. The children responded but conversation became much more animated when the adults switched from asking questions to making humorous comments, such as “you’ve got three eyes”. Children began to respond by saying things like “you’ve got four eyes, two at the front and two at the back” or “you’ve got three mouths so you can eat more dinner”</p>



Key strategies	Commentary	Effective practice example
Imitate the child's language	<p>This is something which begins early in life. Carers imitate the sounds that babies make and extend them, perhaps saying them more slowly or more quickly. By doing this, adults are establishing the foundations of communication. When adults imitate children they demonstrate their interest and invite children to imitate them. In this way rhyming games and games which require different kinds of sound production can be explored. Imitating actions or facial expressions can also be helpful to communication</p> <p>Adults may also repeat what a child has said in order to be certain that they have understood what the child has said. In addition, children often learn new words and phrases by repeating what an adult says before they are able to say the independently</p>	<p>After reading Elephant Wellyphant (by Nick Sharratt) to a small group, Amy noticed that children were attempting all sorts of rhymes. She encouraged them by picking out key words from the text that the children were using; nellyphant, tellyphant, doorbelliphant and so on. The children spent much of the day enjoying new combinations of sounds.</p> <p>While looking at books with a small group of children, Mike was having difficulty in understanding Henry's comments. In order to clarify what Henry was trying to communicate, he repeated what he thought Henry had said. Noticing Henry's crestfallen response, Ali, who was sitting beside Henry, responded and said what he thought had been said, at which Henry nodded vigorously. This enabled the conversation to continue</p>
Build on what the child says by recasting and expanding	<p>As children become more confident and proficient in their use of language, adults support communication most effectively when they build on what children say. Adults may model a correct form of words, signs or grammar without criticising what the child has said or done. They may also expand what a child says by imitating and adding another word or action. By focusing on the child's utterances and interests, adults can expand what the child has said, introduce new vocabulary and new ways of saying what the child has communicated</p>	<p>Hugh (2.6) was in the street when he saw a digger. From his buggy he held up his hand so that his mother would stop. She waited as he observed carefully. When he said "dig dig" she responded by saying "it is a digger, it's a big yellow digger". Hugh pointed to the tyres and said "going". Again his mother built on what he had said by adding "The tyres go round and round. They make the digger go."</p> <p>When the digger began scooping soil Hugh moved his arm and his eyes followed the movement of the scoop. His mother commented "The big scoop is going up. It's full of soil, it's full of mud"</p>

Key strategies	Commentary	Effective practice example
Say the correct form rather than criticise or correct	Trying to correct or get children to say the correct form gets in the way of communication. As the example here suggests, sometimes children simply can't hear that they've got it wrong. Reluctant talkers may be put off trying if they think they are going to be criticised. The most effective strategy is simply to repeat what the child has said, using the correct grammar or word. A common example is a child using the word 'goed'. An adult may respond simply by rephrasing the child's sentence for example "you saw a dog when you went to your gran's"	Emily had received a card on her third birthday from a family friend called Chris, but whom the child always addressed as 'Fris'. Several times during the day she looked at her cards pointing out which one was from her grandmother, mother and father and so on. Whenever she came to Chris' card she would ask again who had sent it. Her mother kept on repeating "it came from Fris". Eventually her puzzled mother said "It came from Chris, you know Chris", to which the child responded "Oh! Fris. I know Fris"
Strive to be positive	<p>In the first two years of life children learn or comprehend "guidelines for action" first. It takes longer for them to understand "prohibitions". That's why when you ask toddlers to stop doing something the chances are that they will keep on doing it!</p> <p>It is also important to be specific in the use of praise. Simply saying "well done!" does not tell children what is good about what they are doing. However, commenting on how well they have swept the sand or built a house helps them to know what expectations are and what they should do again</p>	<p>A children's centre established a policy of using only positive comments. They agreed to avoid "prohibitions" and to focus on positive statements. George began to paint the floor under the easel. A member of staff moved towards him and said "paint on the easel George, you've got some good colours there. You can help me mop the floor"</p> <p>A toddler wanted to stand up at lunchtime. A comment of "don't stand up" had no impact and in fact others began to stand up too. As soon as a practitioner said "Louis is sitting down so well" the others joined him</p>

## In summary

### Engaging in interesting and enjoyable conversations

Interesting and enjoyable conversations (for both children and adults) is an effective way to promote language development. Michael Rosen (ECaT Guidance) suggests that these will occur where practitioners are willing to:

- answer questions rather than posing them
- point out things that interest us
- involve children in planning and helping
- join in play with sounds and rhythms
- strive to be positive and start with what children are allowed to do rather than what they are not
- show respect for children's drive to communicate. Adults help children to communicate by assuming that they have ideas and feelings to communicate and by making every effort to understand what these are.



### Demonstrating respect in your conversations with children

When children are given opportunities to engage in interesting and enjoyable conversations they can often surprise us with their insights and thoughtful (and thought-provoking) comments. This is most likely to happen when:

- their interest and imagination have been captured
- opportunities for discussion include supported as well as private interactions with peers
- use of the home language is encouraged, alongside the development of English
- they are in very small groups

### Effective practice examples

(i) The staff team at a children centre's drop in session were aware of research which suggests that group size should not be greater than twice the age of the children involved. They were however also keen to ensure that they both modelled book sharing for children's parents and carers and gave young children access to books and stories. The team took the bold step of reorganising the session so that shared songs and rhymes took place at the end of the session and book sharing became a more individualised event. This was particularly important as the children involved covered a very wide age range and included a significant number of children who had delayed and impaired language development.

(ii) A large and comfy chair was placed in a prominent but corner position in the room. Books and props were selected on the basis of children's observed interests were placed invitingly in the revamped book area. Books were also included in all other areas of the setting so that children could not help but become aware of their presence. Throughout the session, small groups of children and some individuals gathered for stories and book sharing with adults or with peers. Some children sat on the sidelines watching others for significant amounts of time before becoming closely involved. Overall, the level of interest increased both from children and their parents and carers.

### Feeling confident about helping children's language

This may seem an odd thing to include when focusing on children's language development, but your confidence and interest will strengthen children's confidence. The more you understand about children's language development, the more rewarding you will find the conversations. Research indicates that children who are more proficient in language use, spend more time in conversation with adults. Having a better understanding of the process of language development can help to change this as you become more engaged in thinking about children's individual progress and approach.



### Are you promoting positive communication and relationships between adults and children?



#### Questions for reflecting on practice. Do you:

- encourage children to talk about their interests?
- try to interpret babies' intentions or wishes?
- use physical care routines as opportunities to interact?
- explain what will happen before physical care tasks, for example "let's get you a dry jumper", "let's change that wet nappy"
- sometimes support children's play in silence, watching and learning from what they do and the way they go about things?
- ensure that all children have some opportunity to engage with an adult on their own without having to compete with other children for attention?
- use positive language and behaviour with and in front of children at all times? (It is useful to talk to colleagues and spend some time monitoring one another)
- let children know about changes in routine and use a visual timetable to help them predict what is going to happen next?



- create plenty of opportunities for sharing books? (see ECaT Guidance section on dialogic book reading)
- ensure that children are encouraged and supported in using their first language?
- make sure that you have children's attention before giving any instruction?
- respond positively to children's errors when they are talking?
- use open questions, which mean that children can't simply respond with yes or no but need to elaborate?
- ensure that you allow plenty of time for children to respond before jumping in with another question or comment? You could ask a colleague to monitor your interactions
- ensure you support children in resolving conflict in a positive and effective way?





## Top Tips for Supporting Communication

Be **FACE-TO-FACE** when talking with a child. You may need to get down to their physical level or bring them up to yours.

**TAKE TURNS** of equal length so that no one is dominating the conversation. Give the child time and space to have their turn, which may be verbal or nonverbal, in conversations.

**FOLLOW THE CHILD'S LEAD** by watching and listening so you know what they are interested in and what they want to communicate about.

**COMMENT** on or describe what the child is focused on (rather than ask questions or give instructions).

Use **"HERE AND NOW" TALKING** about what is happening right here, right now. Try to keep talk about yesterday or tomorrow to a minimum, and use visual cues to make it easier to understand.

Use **SIMPLE WORDS AND SENTENCES** when talking to the child. As a rule, try to use the same number of words (or one more) as the child is using.

**COPY** the child's communication, whether they use words, sounds, actions, or facial expressions. If they say words/sentences incorrectly, repeat them back correctly.

**MODEL** (say) a correct word or sound to the child rather than asking them to say it themselves. **EXPAND** the child's utterance by repeating it and adding one word.

To help the child understand, try to **SLOW DOWN, STRESS KEY WORDS, & BREAK INSTRUCTIONS INTO MANAGEABLE CHUNKS.**

Use **VISUAL SUPPORTS** (e.g., signs, gestures, pictures) to help the child learn words and understand.

Give **CHOICES** by naming the options and giving the child time to indicate their preference in any way (e.g. pointing, looking, naming).

If you do ask questions, ask **OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS** which require more than one-word answers. Be aware that all questions are difficult for children with delayed language.

Give **SPECIFIC PRAISE** to show you noticed the child tried something new or to congratulate them for doing something well, naming what it is the child did well.

## 5. The physical environment, experiences and resources



If the environment is right and relationships with adults and children are positive then communication will happen naturally, as children are usually sociable. Staff need to have confidence in moving that forward, making informed changes. [Communication Friendly Spaces page 11]

Ferre Laevers' rating scales for well-being and involvement include personal qualities such as openness, flexibility, self-confidence, assertiveness, vitality and energy, enjoyment, concentration and persistence. These have been considered alongside a range of dispositions for learning and, in this section, five aspects of personal

development are explored as vital elements of an emotionally supportive environment. Each of these aspects will be considered and applied to provision both indoors and out. The elements are:

	Why is this important?	Finding out more
<b>Independence</b>	Children's emotional development involves a process of becoming increasingly independent. This needs to be supported. At the same time, children will sometimes want to be less independent, perhaps when they are tired or anxious. Practitioners need to be sensitive to children's needs as they move between greater independence or more dependency	With one or more colleagues, review your environment to see whether there are aspects of provision which could be developed in order to promote greater independence. Talk to colleagues to check whether there are children who don't seem to be becoming more independent. Develop some strategies to support them
<b>Responsibility</b>	Having a sense of responsibility supports independence, which in turn encourages a sense of growing maturity	Check whether all staff members give credit to children for showing a sense of responsibility. Sometimes it is easier and quicker for an adult to mop up spilt water or sweep the floor, however encouraging children to participate in these activities is important in helping children to develop a sense of responsibility

	Why is this important?	Finding out more
<b>Making choices</b>	<p>Children need to be able to choose between playing indoors and outdoors for as much of the day as possible. The length of time is important because this allows children to become deeply involved in their play. If time outside is too restricted, the quality of play suffers. It is important to offer outdoor experiences as part of the continuous provision</p> <p>High quality play is important to communication because it often:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ involves social interaction</li> <li>■ relies on imagination</li> </ul>	<p>Try to ensure that, wherever possible, activities and experiences encourage children to make choices and decisions. Would you like one or two fish fingers? What story would you like?</p>
<b>Developing concentration</b>	<p>High quality play requires extended periods of time. The imagining and negotiating required takes time so make sure children have adequate time for these important thinking processes to take place. Children are likely to concentrate better when they can choose periods of action or calm, rest or play</p> <p>It is not only adults who may need space to think or places to be alone. Dens, screened areas where just one or two children can work and play may support concentration</p> <p>Concentration often depends on feeling comfortable. Many settings are considerably larger and more complex than most children's homes. Consider the emotional difficulties which this can pose for some children in terms of finding their way around and feeling comfortable</p>	<p>Discuss the organisation of your day or session to see whether it would be possible to create some longer stretches of uninterrupted time</p> <p>Review policy on the use of outdoors to maximise opportunities for children to decide whether they would like to be indoors or out</p> <p>Review the organisation of the environment to see whether it is possible to create some small, secluded spaces</p> <p>Refer back to the section in this guidance on Helping Children to Feel Comfortable</p>

	Why is this important?	Finding out more
<b>Promoting social interaction</b>	Communication relies on social interaction. It begins in the close and intimate attachment which is usually formed between mother and baby. It has been suggested that all problem-solving is concerned with good social interaction and that language arose out of humans' need to cooperate and collaborate	<p>Monitor children's social interactions. Some children like to stand back and observe. However, adults need to check whether children are standing back because they don't know how to join in and therefore need support with strategies for joining a group</p> <p>Where do conflicts occur? Could these conflicts be minimised by providing additional resources or by rearranging the furniture to create a different kind of space?</p> <p>Are there opportunities for children to develop skills involved in successful interactions with others, for example understanding the views and needs of others, sharing, turn taking, negotiating?</p>

In the sections that follow, aspects of everyday provision will be examined and the ways in which adults can ensure that they support children's growing independence, their sense of responsibility, their ability to make choices, to concentrate and interact with others will be explored. There is a more detailed guidance on planning and provision in Planning for Progress in the Early Years (3rd edition) which is available from Tower Hamlets Early Years Service. The questions in each section are not exhaustive but are intended to help staff teams to review provision. It is intended that provision both indoors and outdoors is given equal value. The sections are as follows:

- routines
- sand and water
- construction
- social and imaginative play
- book area
- creative workshop
- mark-making
- malleable materials
- investigation
- music and dance
- movement



## The indoor environment

The indoor environment can provide emotional support for communication by:

- reflecting children's home-life in artefacts, pictures and everyday resources
- including some homely items of furniture
- creating visually quiet areas which are clean, uncluttered and calm colours
- cutting down on visual clutter
  - put away things that are not being used
  - keep workshop areas tidy; create a place for everything
  - some creative mess is unavoidable but the environment is a shared one so children and adults need to learn to be aware of the needs of others
  - do whatever you can to ensure a low level of background noise
  - create quiet areas
  - controlling any echoing sounds such as heavy shoes on wooden floors, chairs banging
  - use background music with care for a purpose, and not simply leaving it on all the time
- managing lighting to create a mixture of natural light, low level lighting and bright light in order to meet individual preferences and moods
- taking account of the influence of colour on mood, for example, lavenders and pastels are generally relaxing and calming, yellow is said to signify communication and to evoke optimism, red on the other hand invites impulsiveness and may result in agitation, black and white contrasts are helpful in stimulating the brain in young babies (see further reading, resources and contacts section for further information)



## The outdoor environment

The outdoor environment can provide emotional support for communication by:

- offering space
- making it possible to make loud noise
- enabling children to make a mess (mud, water, paint)
- connecting children with the natural world – fresh air and living things, rain, sun, wind and snow
- supporting risk-taking: Learning to deal with hazards gives children a sense of confidence and independence which is essential to their well-being
- making children's excitement and exuberance manageable. Excitement is an essential element of learning. These emotions change the chemistry of the brain, making learning more effective. But they are more manageable outdoors where loud noises and big movements have less impact on other people



## Interactions surrounding routines

Daily routines offer great opportunities for communication in an emotionally supportive context. From a baby's earliest days, the intimate contact of being fed and changed ensures that adult and baby are able to make good eye contact, and exchange sounds and gestures. Throughout the early years, the physical closeness and sensory pleasure that come from daily routines make communicative interactions pleasurable for everyone involved, and provide an environment in which children can feel secure. Babies have an opportunity to study the adult's face as he or she sings, talks or babbles.

Interactions surrounding routines can support independence

- do adults tune in and respond to children's needs when they are signalling that they are tired or thirsty or need a clean nappy?
- are children encouraged to be as independent as possible in, for example, feeding themselves or managing clothing?

Interactions surrounding routines can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are children supported to think of others? This may be in sharing food, perhaps by not taking more than a fair share of fruit or by being thoughtful when others are asleep

Interactions surrounding routines can support children in making choices

- does your setting routinely offer more than one kind of snack?
- when clothes need changing, do adults offer a choice of socks or T-shirts where possible?

Interactions surrounding routines can promote concentration

- do adults allow children to finish something they are doing before taking them off to change their nappy or put them down for a sleep?
- do adults take care not to try to divert children's attention when they are focused on something?
- do adults give children notice of a change in activity or routine? Do they, for example, say "It's nearly time for lunch" or "Mummy's going when we've done this"

Interactions surrounding routines provide great opportunities for social contact with others

- do practitioners take the opportunity to talk and sing to babies when they are changing their nappies?
- do key people feed babies at meal times and change nappies whenever possible?
- are meal times and nappy changing times sufficiently leisurely for adults to engage children in social interactions, in a friendly and calm manner?



### Effective practice examples

(i) In the baby room of a day nursery, each child's key person changes and feeds their own key children whenever possible. This ensures that each child's preferences are known and acted upon. This may involve simple things, such as remembering that they like to be fed quickly with few pauses or they like to feed themselves as far as possible. It may be that they have favourite songs when being changed or a particular procedure when preparing for their nap. The importance of an adult who really knows these parts of each child's routine is recognised and valued, as it ensures that the child knows what to expect. Each family is also assigned an assistant key person so that with different shifts and holidays, information can be readily shared and the child (and parents) are helped to feel secure.

(ii) Three year old Shiva has complex learning needs. A visual timetable is used in the setting and as each part of the daily routine is completed her key person removes the relevant card from its hook. This helps to make it clear which event comes next. This process is supported by props – she is shown a nappy when it is time to be changed; a feeding cup at snack times and a spoon at meal times. Her comforter is the cue for suggesting a nap. Adults in the nursery all use signed support for their interactions, not just with Shiva, but with other children – since they believe that she should, as far as possible, have the same opportunity to 'eavesdrop' on other conversations as other children have. These visual supports are also helpful for all children.



## Sand and water

Sand and water can offer emotional support for communication. The tactile qualities of dry sand and water have a soothing impact as they flow and move between the fingers. Wet and dry sand and water encourages exploration and imagination where language is at its most powerful.

Sand and water can present problems for some children. It may be necessary to discuss with parents, carers and health professionals, ways of ensuring that these or similar sensory experiences are available to:

- children with eczema or other skin conditions which would be irritated by contact with sand or water
- children for whom cold can be dangerous (such as those suffering from Raynaud's disease or syndrome)
- children with sensitivities to specific sensory experiences

Sand and water can support independence

- are resources stored so that children can easily make choices and decisions about what they want to use?

Sand and water can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are mops, cloths, dustpans and brushes provided and easily accessible so that children remember to clear up after spills?

Sand and water can support children in making choices

- are the sand and water areas sometimes the focus of adult-led activities, ensuring a balance of adult and child initiated activity?
- what's your policy on moving resources from area to area? Mixing resources where appropriate can encourage imagination and creativity



Sand and water can promote concentration

- do you offer sand and water in different ways, for example trays on the floor, large areas, small trays on tables? This enables children to find ways of engaging that are comfortable and accessible
- are there exciting resources to extend play and are they regularly renewed and maintained?

Sand and water can help children to make social contact with others

- is there enough space around the sand or water trays for everyone who wants to be involved?
- are there enough resources so that younger children aren't always expected to share?

### Effective practice examples

(i) A group of children were dressed in outdoor protective clothing and were splashing in puddles and were fully engrossed in their fun and physical exertion. When they went indoors, they described their activities in detail to the adults and other children. Extended conversations followed with their excitement shining through, as they used words and actions to replicate the experience.

(ii) Children were using long lengths of guttering between two water trays. Initially members of staff had set up the configuration and were keen to maintain it. However as they saw the children's interest and enthusiasm develop, they encouraged children to place the materials as they wanted. This had the advantage of enabling children to explore the science of the activity, and negotiate how the pieces should be placed for maximum effect. Play was maintained through the morning and children enjoyed both short and more involved periods of involved play.

(iii) 18 month old Sara was sitting on the floor pouring dry sand through a yellow funnel and watching it trickle out of the base and into the large black tray. She moved the funnel around leaving a trail of sand. When the sand stopped, she turned the funnel over and said "all gone!" Her key person who was watching said "Yes, the sand has all gone. You can put more in. Put more in". To demonstrate whilst saying this, the key person selected another funnel and scooped some sand into it. Sara imitated the action, saying "more, more in".



## Construction materials

Construction materials offer emotional support for communication because they create different challenges that require skill and creativity to solve them. Children learn from one another as they discuss what they are doing. Large construction materials require shared efforts and build gross motor competence. Smaller scale construction materials may require negotiation about sharing and can enable children to develop a variety of manipulative skills as some click into place, others need a rotating action and some demand good hand and eye co-ordination as, for example, rods are fitted into holes.



Construction materials can support independence

- can children make decisions about which construction materials to use?
- is there appropriate space and time for them to build complex constructions?
- is there a wide range of materials for children to access, which reflects their varying physical skills and development?

Construction materials can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are storage areas clearly labelled with words and pictures so that children know where to return items they have been using?
- do staff members have a clear and consistent approach to what needs to be done with completed models and how long they can be kept before other children have an opportunity to build with them?

Construction materials can support children in making choices

- do you provide photographs of models or constructions that other children have made?
- Construction materials can promote concentration
- can children use resources from other areas to extend their play, for example dressing up clothes, toy cars or animals

Construction materials can help children to make social contact with others

- are there large scale materials that promote co-operation (tyres, crates, planks or blankets)?
- are there enough resources to enable a group of children to work together? It may be better to have large amounts of a few construction sets or blocks, rather than small amounts of many different types

### Effective practice examples

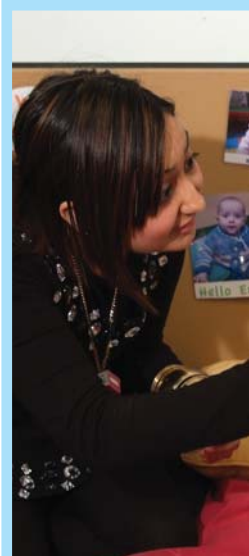
(i) Staff noticed that children often became angry and frustrated when their block constructions were knocked down, sometimes inadvertently but sometimes deliberately. The area was moved to a corner of the room which didn't have any through traffic and this ensured that there were fewer accidents; children who were building did not have their concentration broken to the same extent. However, two year olds were still enjoying the sight of tumbling blocks, so staff made a concerted effort to station themselves near the block area. When younger children came along, they created an area where younger children could build and knock down without disturbing older children. They emphasised the positive "let's build here; we can knock this one down". They avoided saying "don't" and gave specific praise such as "Good building, now you can knock it down!". The older children learned to use similar strategies.



(ii) A group of four year olds used planks and crates to create a den. They put blankets over the top and crept inside. The construction play evolved into a lengthy imaginary game that involved frightening bears and brave fighters, pretend fires to cook, pretend food and bedtime. Staff members were able to extend the play next day by providing rucksacks and torches as well as some related books.

## Social and imaginative play

Engaging with other children and adults in social play offers rich opportunities to develop confidence and communicative competence. In the early stages, babies require adults to engage fully with them, responding to the sounds, movement and gestures that they make. This is particularly true of children with complex learning needs, who need adults to be sensitive to small signs of a wish to communicate. Long before the onset of spoken language, communication may be conveyed by very small movements of eye or hand, gestures or facial expressions. This responsiveness is the way in which adults encourage children to communicate, by showing that they have understood what the child is trying to communicate.

A photograph showing a woman with dark hair, wearing a black top with a floral pattern, looking down and interacting with a child. The child is partially visible in the foreground, wearing a red garment. The background is a light-colored wall with some papers or photos pinned to it.

When a child is two, they often begin to make use of symbolic representation in their social play. This often involves pretending to eat or sleep or rock a baby. As imaginative play develops it can offer emotional support for communication. In imaginary play children reflect, dream, ponder and wonder. They explore ideas and feelings, stepping into other people's shoes, exploring fears and anxieties and considering 'what if' scenarios. Imagination can be triggered by role play situations such as a home corner or organised hospital play area, but it also occurs with small world figures and frequently in construction activities. Amongst groups of children, no props may be required as their social interactions support their imagination.

Children who have needs in this area will require additional planning to provide appropriate opportunities to build social and imaginative play.



Social play can support the development of independence

- are children encouraged to try to do things by watching others and learning how they do things or by asking other children to help them? Peer group role models have a strong impact
- are there opportunities for older and younger children to collaborate and help each other as they play?

Social play can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- do staff members notice when children are pretending to feed a baby doll, or showing awareness of how to look after a pet?
- do staff encourage children to share ideas about role play activities they would like to be developed in the setting?



Social play can support children's ability to make choices

- are children encouraged to decide between two pieces of equipment where appropriate so that another child can play too?
- when sharing musical instruments in a group, are children given the opportunity to choose between different ones?

Social play can promote concentration

- are there small, cosy and secluded areas where children can engage with one or two others without distractions or interference?

Social play can help children to make social contact with others

- do you provide resource areas in order to support children's interests? It's often the case that when you provide resources to support a particular interest such as cars, the play attracts other children who may not have demonstrated a particular interest in that area but who are drawn into the game that develops
- do staff provide models of interaction for children and supported opportunities to build interaction skills such as listening to others, sharing and turn taking

Imaginative play can support independence

- are resources sufficiently open-ended (for example lengths of fabric or boxes) to allow children to use their imagination flexibly and creatively?

Imaginative play can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- is there sufficient space for children to develop play without intruding on other areas?
- is there clear and accessible storage to enable children to take responsibility for keeping the areas tidy?

- do you (where appropriate) include some breakable dishes and some less robust items that require care and responsibility?
- do you include irons, mirrors, cameras etc. which children can explore through play? Play allows children to explore risk and having everyday equipment such as this (which does not plug in or pose any risk in itself) may contribute to their ability to act responsibly

Imaginative play can support children in making choices

- do you provide resources that reflect children's interests from which they can choose? This may include seasonal interests (such as growing plants or discussion about the weather); festivals and celebrations; topics or themes of particular interest to a group or schemas. Many interests are initiated by the children so you may need to be flexible and responsive.



Imaginative play can promote concentration

- are resources available so that children can:
  - revisit and rehearse favourite themes or experiences
  - choose materials that interest or challenge them and will therefore maintain their concentration
  - find space (and time) for uninterrupted engagement in the game

Imaginative play can help children to make social contact with others:

- is discussion encouraged about stories, books, songs, rhymes, postcards, posters and photographs that relate to children's imaginative play?
- do adults engage in children's imaginative play, sometimes inviting children who have not developed strategies for joining in? This might involve asking them to be a nurse to dress your wound or to help you find some socks to fit the baby



### Effective practice examples

(i) A basket of sensory materials placed on the floor attracted Harry (eight months) and Abdul (nine months). Both were interested in shiny things and Harry tried to grasp a shiny spring-like egg cup which Abdul was holding. The practitioner found another similar egg cup and a shiny canister. She showed both of these to Harry who dropped what he had and grasped the egg cup. The two babies then began to look from one to the other, smiling and gurgling.

(ii) Two year old Charlie found a quiet corner and sat on the floor with a wooden car with four wooden people in it. He told himself a story about going out in the car involving mummy, daddy, big sister and Charlie. He told the practitioner nearby that he needed another person as he didn't have a doll to represent his little sister. She reminded him where he could find one and he returned to carry on with his story. He then asked the practitioner to be granny as the family were going to visit her. The game continued with the practitioner responding to Charlie's conversational openings.



(iii) A group of children were running between some lengths of sari material that had been suspended from a tree. The wind was blowing and there was constant change and movement. They decided that they were in a palace. They got dressing up clothes and found some large leaves for plates. When the plates kept blowing away, they decided to use stones to keep them in place. Play continued over an extended period with a great deal of communication, including verbal interaction.

(iv) A small group of children were keen to climb some low and sturdy cherry trees in the garden. They were working hard at getting a little bit higher each time. Seni, who had mobility difficulties, was keen to join in with the game they were playing, pretending to climb a mountain. Staff rigged up a swing which meant that he could talk to and make eye contact with children. Seni thus became involved in the social interactions and the imaginative play which accompanied it.

## Book area

Books and stories are a vital aspect of children's communicative development. Understanding of narrative is particularly important for helping children to develop thinking skills. It is the way we make sense of things (see Story Proof K. Haven (2007) for more evidence of this). The cosiness of sitting on a sofa or a large armchair sharing a book provides great emotional support and motivation for communication. It is vital to remember that children have varied amounts of experience and quality of experience with books, so this often means searching out books which will attract particular children.



Working and playing in the book area can support independence

- can all children access books independently?
- are shelves at a suitable height?
- are books grouped and displayed so that children can independently find the books they want or need?

Working and playing in the book area can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- do adults act as good role models in tidying books away carefully and thoughtfully?
- is there enough space to ensure that children can replace books?
- are there clear systems for storing books?
- are well-loved favourites always included in the selection available? Children need to learn to treasure books

Working and playing in the book area can support children in making choices

- are books organised in such a way that children can easily make choices? This might include small baskets offering a selection of favourite books or display areas where front covers of books can easily be seen
- do adults review the books available on a regular basis to ensure that the books offered match children's interests and needs?
- do adults ensure that there is a wide variety of books available (stories, songs, poems, non-fiction and dual language literature)? Do the books include rhyme and repetition? Do they have a variety of styles of illustration? It is important to include some novelty books, but remember that books with flaps and pop-ups are often fragile so may only be suitable for adult-led sessions.

Working and playing in the book area can promote concentration

- do you have a variety of chairs, cushions and bean bags so that children can feel physically comfortable in their own individual ways?
- are there interesting materials such as story props, mobiles and pictures to help children to sustain their interest?
- are books available in other areas of the room in order to sustain concentration in, for example, the block area or the role play area?
- do adults share books with children throughout the session?



Working and playing in the book area can help children to make social contact with others

- is there sufficient space for children to share their enjoyment of books?
- are there multiple copies of favourite books so that children can discuss them?
- are there some different versions of well-known stories (for example Jack and the Beanstalk and Jim and the Beanstalk) for children to compare and discuss?

### Effective practice examples

(i) In a nursery with a large and comfortable book area, staff noticed that children weren't making much use of the books. The books were stored in a large and attractive bookcase, but this meant that children often found it difficult to make choices. Books were reorganised into small baskets and onto a small shelf that enabled staff to display the front covers of books. Children not only made deliberate choices from the books available, but also used the book area much more frequently. The inclusion of some related props for favourite stories also encouraged children to talk about the books, improving concentration. The provision of a special transport basket supported the interest of a child with autism. He was delighted and was able to share his enthusiasm with other children.

## Sharing books

Adults can share books with children in a number of ways, including one to one conversations about books that interest the child.

The organised and more formal story time can work well if groups are not too large and if adults recognise that they 'perform' the stories, and maintain the children's attention through effective use of:

- voice
- facial expression
- high energy levels
- interesting rhythm and intonation
- the use of rhyme and song
- repetition



Group sessions of this sort need to be monitored to ensure that children are enjoying them. The following questions can be used to help you to review story sessions:

- are children engaged, interested, involved and showing enjoyment?
- is the group too big for children to feel part of it? As a rule of thumb, the younger the children, the smaller the group should be
- are children (and adults) comfortable?
- are props being used to support children's interest?
- are pictures big enough?
- do you introduce the book, giving it a build-up and awaken children's enthusiasm?

In order to supplement this more formal book experience and children's independent use of a books, practitioners and parents should support children's interests and communication by sharing books informally. Sometimes, of course, this simply involves reading the text. But sharing a book with children, even very young ones, can involve more dialogue and discussion. In order to do this successfully adults should:

- prepare; be familiar with the books before sharing them with children
- listen and wait, take a cue from children's interests
- make comments, ask open-ended questions about the story, book or picture that the child is focusing on
- recast and extend what children say
- relate the story to children's experiences
- take opportunities to extend the children's vocabulary

Where an interest in a particular book is long-lasting or persistent, a range of follow-up activities can be devised. This may include singing songs based on the story, providing some role play or props.



## Creative workshop

The creative workshop is a vital part of any early years setting for supporting communication. Given access to a wide range of materials, including different kinds of paper and collage materials, children develop creative skills and are able to express a range of different ideas and feelings.

Working and playing in the creative workshop can support independence

- are resources organised in such a way as to ensure that children can make independent decisions about what to use and how to use the materials selected?



Working and playing in the creative workshop can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are trays etc clearly labelled so that children can tidy up after themselves?
- are there places to put finished work or work in progress safely?

Working and playing in the creative workshop can support children in making choices

- are resources regularly topped up so that children can make informed choices about, for example, using shiny paper or fabric?

Working and playing in the creative workshop can promote concentration

- are materials set out in such a way that children can focus on what they are doing as independently as possible?

Working and playing in the creative workshop can help children to make social contact with others

- is the area laid out in such a way as to promote interaction?
- is there space for children to move around without interfering with other children's work?
- is the table big enough for a small group of children to work together? If it's too large too many children may crowd around and opportunities for conversation may be lost. If too small, disagreements and frustrations may occur

### Effective practice example

(i) A children's centre developed policy to ensure that children at every stage of development had access to creative materials. For babies a 'messy' activity was provided each day. Sometimes it involved surrounding them with paper and encouraging them to paint while sitting on the floor. This usually led to babies painting their arms and hands, enjoying the soft cool touch of the brush. Sometimes it was an opportunity to explore interesting materials such as shiny papers, cotton wool, cooked pasta and so on. From time to time, adults offered a commentary on what was happening, describing what the babies were doing and encouraging them. Although many of these experiences could be described as mark-making or involving malleable materials, they were regarded as providing essential sensory experiences.



As children grew older, they began to describe what they had drawn or painted in symbolic terms, saying things like "that's my mummy" or "car goes fast". Gradually a wider range of materials and scissors were introduced. Policy suggested communication strategies for staff, commenting on what the child was doing, rather than asking questions, pausing so that children who were engrossed in an expressive activity were not distracted. It was also recognised as important to support concentration by watching for points where children needed help in order to avoid a breakdown in play due to frustration.

## Mark-making

Mark-making is a basic human drive. It offers a way of exploring non-verbal communication, although children's mark-making, whether in gravy, paint, glue, pen or water is often accompanied by verbalisations. It also enables the child to explore who they are and as such has an emotional component. The scribbling that occurs in the early stages of mark-making has been likened to the babbling that occurs in the early stages of learning to talk (Matthews 2003 and Mark Making Matters see Further reading, resources and contacts section).



Mark-making can support independence

- are a range of mark-making materials readily available indoors and out?
- are babies allowed to explore food (making marks with gravy or custard)?

Mark-making can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are there clear rules about putting lids on pens, picking up pens and papers, leaving materials ready for use by someone else?
- do adults and children stick to the rules?
- is it clear how materials are to be stored and tidied away, for example clearly labelled pots and trays?

Mark-making can support children in making choices

- are the mark-making resources ready for use and attractive, for example sharpened pencils, pens that have not run out, paper that is readily accessible?
- can everyone access the materials they would wish to use? A single large table with pencils, crayons etc. in the middle can make it difficult for small or less mobile children to access everything

Mark-making can promote concentration

- do you regularly review the use of graphics materials? Sometimes children who are exploring mark-making need some more intimate space such as a small table facing the wall



Mark-making can help children to make social contact with others

- does role play provision incorporate mark-making materials, for example appointment books or clipboards thus encouraging interaction?
- is there a system for graphic communication with others, for example pigeon holes, trays or notice boards?

### Effective practice example

(i) Inspired by practice in Reggio Emilia, staff in a children's centre documented the mark-making of very young children. This included pushing buggies through puddles and watching the tracks; watching the streaks made as cooked spaghetti was pulled across the table; and making chalk marks on a variety of surfaces in the garden. Conversations with older children were recorded as they described their mark-making activities.





## Malleable materials

Malleable materials such as dough, clay, cornflour, cooked pasta and wet sand provide an outlet for emotions. They have the potential to be soothing or to be the butt of frustration, giving children the opportunity to bang, and squeeze materials. In addition, these materials provide opportunities for communication, allowing children to talk about what they are doing or what they are feeling or indeed, talking about something completely different as they are absorbed in the physical activity.



Malleable materials can support independence

- are a range of resources available for children to select?
- are there clear procedures to enable children to clean themselves up (as far as possible) after messy play?



Malleable materials can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are aprons, boots or other appropriate items of protective clothing readily available?

Malleable materials can support children in making choices

- do adults ensure that an adequate range of resources are available for children to choose from?

Malleable materials can promote concentration

- interesting conversations often occur while children are engaged with clay and dough
- do adults avoid asking too many questions, but concentrate instead on responding to children's talk or making relevant comments of their own?
- are novel resources introduced to build on children's interests, for example moon cake moulds around the time of the moon festival or glitter to reflect snowy weather?

Malleable materials can help children to make social contact with others

- is the table or tray being used big enough to accommodate a group of children?
- is the digging area big enough for children to work together?

### Effective practice examples

(i) A group of babies up to the age of 15 months happily played standing around a table with a large amount of cooked spaghetti. Inevitably they ate some of it but also put it in and out of a variety of cooking pots, stirred it with spoons and threw it up in the air. As they explored, adults observed and talked about what they were doing. When the babies responded, usually by echoing the last or main word that had been uttered by adults, the adults repeated what had been said stressing the word or words that the baby had said.



(ii) A small group of two and three year olds were rolling dough, cutting shapes and placing them on a baking tray. A bowl of small wooden sticks on the table became birthday cake candles. Children sang and talked about how old they were. The adult sitting with them joined in and was able to extend the conversation. They talked about favourite foods and birthday parties they had been to.



## Investigation

Investigation and exploration are vital foundations for all sorts of thinking and communication. Settings need more than a simple science area. In order to build on and extend children's interests, provision for investigations needs to include:

- things to look at, for example pretty shells, buttons and stones
- things to listen to, such as musical instruments and sound-makers
- things to feel, for example objects made of different materials; wood, stone, clay, silk or fur
- things to smell, such as flowers or herbs
- things to talk about (anything that children are interested in, books, collections of postcards, visits to interesting places or exciting experiences)
- things that change, for example tadpoles, cooking ingredients, the weather



Investigating can support independence

- can children move in and out independently? The outdoor area is of enormous value to support children in investigating and exploring
- are everyday experiences, such as cooking and gardening used to stimulate children's enquiring minds?

Investigating can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are children shown how to use computers, voice recorders and cameras effectively and safely?
- are they shown how to treat items such as magnifying glasses or timers with care?
- above all, are they shown how to treat living things (plants and animals, including insects) with respect?

Investigating can support children in making choices. Are materials to support investigation stored centrally so that children know where to access them?

- can they take resources from area to area? Being only allowed to use a magnifying glass in the science area can limit potential for finding out



Investigating can promote concentration

- are children's ideas taken seriously? Do adults respond to questions and comments with interest and respect?
- do adults provide resources such as books that enable children to take their interests further?

Investigating can help children to make social contact with others

- are there enough timers, magnifying glasses, tape measures etc to promote cooperation without having to wait too long for a turn?



### Effective practice example

(i) Staff at a unit for children with profound hearing impairment employed some drummers to come in to the setting. Children were encouraged to explore the sound they could feel through vibration. Adults also used words and gestures to describe the different sounds.





## Music and dance

Music and dance are important expressive media for young children. They inevitably go hand in hand. Dance is important in learning to listen as children are, in effect, listening with their bodies when they move rhythmically. An important function of music is to support communication where it would otherwise be difficult. This includes difficulties associated with:

- distance – the sound of yodelling, whistling and drumming carries much further than merely talking and has often been used to communicate over long distances
- emotions – music has been said to allow humans to express what they cannot say
- language itself – we use musical elements to draw babies into the language we use



This also works when children have language delay or impairment or when learning a second or subsequent language. For the latter two aspects, it is clear that music is a vital part of early childhood provision

Music and dance can support independence

- are children given sufficient time, space and access to resources to use instruments and recorded music without having to wait for adult organised sessions?

Music and dance can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are instruments and CDs (where appropriate) clearly labelled and easy to put away responsibly?
- can children (where age appropriate) use the audio equipment safely and responsibly?

Music and dance can support children in making choices

- are children introduced to a wide range of music so that they can make informed choices?

Music and dance can promote concentration

- is there a quiet, 'traffic-free' area where children can listen to music without too much interruption?
- are instruments sometimes available in areas other than the music area?
- is recorded music used sensitively to provide or reflect a particular mood or is it played indiscriminately throughout the session?

Music and dance can help children to make social contact with others

- are there enough resources so that children aren't always expected to share?
- is there sufficient space within or near to the music area to enable groups of children to move and dance spontaneously? Is there a mirror in this area which will allow children to compare and discuss the movements they are making with those that other children make?

### Effective practice example

(1) The songs that young children make up were carefully noted by staff and, with the child's

permission, sung at group times. Songs were sometimes accompanied by instruments. Members of staff also made up impromptu songs. Children particularly liked ones that referred to them by name. On Tia's birthday, for example, to the tune of "Here we go round the mulberry bush", everyone sang "Tia's got a doll today, a doll today, a doll today..."



# Movement

Movement is the basis of all thought and is an important element in the development of young children's view of their world and the people in it. As babies' movements develop, their independence grows. Neuroscience is only beginning to highlight the complex relationships between physical action and the development of the brain, but children's urge to move about is a clear signal of its importance to development. For example, rocking, swaying and hanging upside down provide an important stimulus to the brain, vital to its development.

Movement opportunities can support independence

- is there sufficient space and equipment for children to move?
- are they encouraged to move in new and interesting ways? Or do the rules limit such opportunities?
- many children enjoy the challenge of climbing up a slide. Is this allowed in your setting? What would you need to change to make such exploration possible?
- are all opportunities accessible for children and is appropriate support provided for children's physical needs?

Movement opportunities can support children's growing sense of responsibility

- are adults clear and consistent about safety rules? Children can, for example, be taught that they can wear dressing up clothes outdoors but may not climb in long skirts or big shoes
- are children taught simple safety rules about the use of wheeled toys, bats and balls?
- where children are in mixed age groups, or in settings where there are children with mobility needs, are more mobile children taught to ensure that they are not endangering less mobile members of the group?

Movement opportunities can support children in making choices

- are babies (and older children) who are unable to walk given opportunities to climb? Being able to look at the surroundings from a different perspective is exciting
- do all children have opportunities to:
  - climb; push and pull; jump; crawl; ride, run, skip; hop; swing; dangle; get into; get over; hide under; clamber through?





Movement opportunities can promote concentration

- do children have opportunities to engage in physical activity at their own pace and at a time of their choosing?
- do staff members review children's use of equipment to ensure that there is sufficient challenge – modifying provision where appropriate to provide new challenges?
- is there a variety of seating options so that children can choose the most comfortable position? Discomfort disrupts everyone's concentration



Movement opportunities can help children to make social contact with others

- are there sufficient resources to ensure that pairs and groups of children can share in an activity?
- is there enough space for children to collaborate in their movement activities?



### Effective practice example

(i) The introduction of a small nursery gym for the baby room of a community nursery transformed babies' experience. Even those who could not walk could clamber on the slide or the ramp. Some babies managed to climb up the steps. Once, on the low platform, they could peer out and look down on the babies below, making better eye contact with standing adults and generally gaining a sense of independence. (See JABADAO Developmental Movement Play for further ideas).





# Further reading, resources and contacts

- Arnold, C. (2001) "Persistence Pays off: working with 'hard to reach' parents" In Whalley, M. (and the Pen Green Centre Team) (eds) *Involving Parents in their Children's Learning* London: Paul Chapman Publishing  
This is a useful book overall but this chapter in particular looks at involving parents who may seem reluctant to be involved.
- Emde, R., Johnson, W. and Easterbrooks, M. (1990) 'The dos and donts of early moral development: psychoanalytic tradition and current research' In Kagan, J. and Lamb, S. (eds) *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children* Chicago University Press  
This interesting chapter (look it up on Google Scholar, available on line in full) discusses the importance of stressing the positive in our communications with young children.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2005) *Diversity in Early Care and Education: honouring differences* New York: McGraw-Hill  
Practical ideas for communicating across cultural divides. Some thought-provoking scenarios about areas of potential conflict with parents such as messy eating.
- Haven, K. (2007) *Story Proof* Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited  
This book highlights the many ways in which story, through play, talk and literature, impacts on learning and development, throughout life.
- Jarman, E. (2007) *Communication Friendly Spaces* Nottingham: The Basic Skills Agency  
This useful guidance includes a toolkit for auditing early years settings.
- Matthews, J. (2003) *Drawing and painting* London: Paul Chapman Publishing Co.  
This seminal work looks at the development of expression and communication through creative arts, drawing on the development of Matthews' own child.
- NCB National Quality Improvement Network (2010) *Principles for engaging with families: A framework for local authorities and national organisations to evaluate and improve engaging with families*
- Paley, V. G. (2001) *In Mrs. Tully's Room: a childcare portrait* London: Harvard University Press  
Paley's work never fails to focus the reader's mind on the importance of reflective practice. She is particularly persuasive in drawing attention to the role of story and play in children's development. In this one of her many books she highlights the use of her story-telling/ story-acting approach (known by practitioners in Tower Hamlets as the helicopter technique) with two year olds.

Information on the following 3 publications available through:  
[www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications)  
[www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk)

Primary National Strategy (2007) Supporting children learning English as an additional language:  
Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage  
DCSF publications

The National Strategies Early Years (2008) Mark Making Matters Young children making meaning in all areas of their learning and development  
DCSF publications

The National Strategies Early Years (2008) Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Early Language Lead Practitioners

Look at Me! Assessing Learning and Development in the Early Years Foundation Stage  
Tower Hamlets Early Years Service

Moving on: Supporting Transitions in the Early Years  
Tower Hamlets Early Years Service

Planning for Progress in the Early Years (3rd edition)  
Tower Hamlets Early Years Service

Community Playthings, Robertsbridge, East Sussex TN32 5DR  
[www.communityplaythings.co.uk](http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk)  
Tel: 0800 387 457

The nursery gym described above was purchased from Community Playthings. They also have a wide range of furniture, blocks and wheeled toys – all of good quality and long-lasting.

Letterbox Library, 71-73 Allen Road, London N16 8RY  
[www.letterboxlibrary.com](http://www.letterboxlibrary.com)  
Tel: 020 7503 4801

Letterbox Library has a list of themed books. Many of the themes include books that can help children to communicate about emotional issues.

ICAN, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE  
[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)  
Tel: 0845 225 4071

This national organisation provides publications, support and training on issues related to speech, language and communication.

JABADAO  
[www.jabadao.org](http://www.jabadao.org)

Chatters Matters  
[www.btbetterworld.com/freeresources](http://www.btbetterworld.com/freeresources)

Talk to your Baby  
[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk\\_to\\_your\\_baby/resources/418\\_quick\\_tips\\_available\\_bilingually\\_in\\_13\\_languages](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/resources/418_quick_tips_available_bilingually_in_13_languages)

Signalong courses - contact Language and Communication Team 020 7364 6490  
or Early Years Inclusion Team 020 7364 4142 (for day nurseries and play groups)

For information on colour and brain development:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2008/sep/26/art.children#/?picture=337978469&index=1>

<http://www.righto.com/sydney/babyart.html>

[www.colour-affects.co.uk](http://www.colour-affects.co.uk)

