Communication and Language Disorders

About communication and language disorders

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

Some students may need support with communication. Each child will have their own profile which may change over development. Some children may have difficulty producing sounds and words (e.g. stuttering or mutism), and they may use visual aspects of communication instead (e.g. gestures, eye contact or picture cards). Other students may find understanding visual communication challenging.

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

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

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Some students with communication disorders participate successfully in learning when given clear and specific instructions.
- Some children may have good visual perceptual skills. They may be good at visual searches and recognition.

Where you might provide support?

- Some students may be reluctant to participate in classroom activities and discussions where language is used.
- Some may have difficulties with interacting with other students and making friends.
- Some children may find it hard to express how they feel. This can cause frustration and challenging behaviours.
- Some students may be easily distracted and find it challenging to focus on activities.

Evidence-based strategies

Work Collaboratively

- **Get more information.** Talk to the student, their family and support team to find the best methods of communication and support. They can help you understand the student's unique strengths, preferences, and the areas they may require support.
- **Build a relationship with other professionals involved.** Working together can lead to a shared understanding of the student and consistent goals and strategies used across school and other environments like home and the community.

Consider how you give instructions and communicate

- **Give simple, specific and direct instructions.** This might allow the child to be a bit clearer about the learning tasks. It can also help to demonstrate/model the task or behaviour, or ask another student to demonstrate.
- **Use different modes to give instructions and communicate.** Visual aids, such as picture cards, can be used in addition to verbal instructions to show a task sequence or a key learning concept. Other options include captioned videos to teach a skill or play activity, or using gestures while giving instructions.

Provide feedback

- **Give corrective feedback.** Immediate verbal correction if the child mispronounces words or sentences can help a child with language if this is done in a way that does not cause embarrassment. Consider repeating what the child has said, with the correct word or sentence structure, in a question format. Another option is to give the student choices between the incorrect and correct variations to help them process what is being said.

Best practice tips

Create a safe and supportive environment

- You can help support student learning and participation by creating a secure and positive social environment where they can build friendships with staff and other students.

Set clear rules and expectations

- This will allow the student to know what is expected from them in the classroom.

Remove distractions

- Some students might be easily distracted by lights, sounds and objects both inside and outside the classroom environment. Consider sitting the student away from, or with their back to, the windows. Small group work may also help with reducing distractions, as may keeping desks uncluttered.

Consider using slower speech

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

Be patient

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

Encourage positive role-models

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

Consider pairing the student with a buddy

- Consider sitting the student with another student who can help keep them on track with tasks.

Curriculum considerations

The Arts

- Some students may need support with maintaining focus and may be overwhelmed by various materials and sounds. Consider sitting the student next to another child who can help keep them on track.
- Provide feedback.

English

- Some students may need support with reading and writing. Consider spending more time explaining new tasks or learning so that students have plenty of opportunities to learn.
- It may be helpful to sound out or blend sounds with a student. Some students might need to repeat these many times. Check with a child's speech pathologist or support team for how best to help them.
- Consider a variety of methods when teaching literacy skills. For example, combine verbal instructions with visual aids such as key cards, flip charts or videos, or display posters and pictures on walls for students to refer to.
- Start with simple literacy concepts (e.g. how to pronounce a single letter) and as the student becomes more confident, introduce more complex ideas (e.g. making full phrases and sentences).
- Consider identifying what specific areas the student needs help with. For more specific strategies for literacy, refer to tips for teaching students with a specific learning disability.

Health and Physical Education

- Consider pairing the student with another student who can guide and support them during activities.
- Clear rules and expectations can be helpful.
- A visual schedule that students can see at all times can help students transition from one activity to the next.
- Consider giving the student active roles to encourage participation.
- Repeating instructions lots of times helps students process and understand what is being said.
- Consider how you give instructions and communicate.

The Humanities

- Consider pairing the student with another student who can guide and support them during activities.
- Clear rules and expectations can be helpful.
- A visual schedule that students can see at all times can help students transition from one activity to the next.
- Consider giving the student active roles to encourage participation.
- Repeating instructions lots of times helps students process and understand what is being said.
- Consider how you give instructions and communicate.

Languages

- Assess whether learning a language will be of advantage to students, on a case-by-case basis.
- If they are learning a language, focus on their areas of strength and build from there.
- Some students might need more time and multiple repetitions. Work collaboratively.

Mathematics

- Some students with communication disorders may find maths questions that use words challenging (e.g. Jenny had five apples and ate one). Some may need more time to remember mathematical patterns (such as patterns in times tables).
- Consider using simple words for maths questions and reducing the amount of written material within a question.

- Visual aids such as picture cards, flip charts or posters that students can refer to quickly and easily, may be helpful. Graphic organisers can help students understand the questions being asked, organise their thoughts, and visualise mathematical patterns.

Science

- Some students with communications disorders may need more time to learn abstract scientific concepts. They may also take some metaphors literally.
- Hands-on activities that use multiple senses (e.g. touch and smell) may support a student's learning
- Consider pairing the student with another student to give guidance and support.
- Picture books may help students understand key concepts.
- It can be helpful to check in with the student to see if they understand what they need to do.
- Consider allowing more time for students to complete tasks.
- Another consideration that may be relevant is: Safety.

Technologies

- Some students might benefit from computer software or modified keyboards.

Other considerations

Safety

- Some students may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency. Consider making time to demonstrate and practise what to do, or provide them with a non-verbal or simple way to communicate an emergency.
- Role plays can help students learn safety behaviours.

Behaviour

- Consider reading stories about social situations that the student may come across in the classroom. This might help them learn expected behaviours and classroom routines. When reading the stories, encourage active participation and ask questions to check student's understanding.

- A teaching tip that may be relevant is provide feedback.
- Refer to the ABC approach for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our emotions page for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Additional staff members
- Consider documenting the strengths and abilities of the child for other staff members that may be involved in supporting the child at school.

Homework
- Check that the language used in workbooks is brief and simple.
- Visual aids such as pictures and icons may help a student have a better understanding of the information being presented.
- Consider working with the students' parents to develop an effective and consistent homework routine at home. This may include discussing and demonstrating some teaching strategies used in the classroom or reducing the amount of work that needs to be completed at home.

Transitions
- Some students with communication disorders may benefit from supports when moving across education settings.
- It can help to tell students what will be the same so they know they already have some of the skills they will need.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a primary or secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's transition page.
- For children transitioning to primary school access AllPlay Learn's Story A school day, and for children transitioning to secondary school access Access AllPlay Learn's story How to be Organised How to be organised

Other co-occurring conditions
- Communication disorders can often co-occur with other developmental delays such as autism, intellectual disability, and specific learning disability. They can also co-occur in children who experience deaf and hard of hearing, or blind or low vision.

- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.

Relevant resources

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

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Class schedule
- Stay play talk poster
- Peer mediation steps poster
- Peer mediation communication prompts poster (for older children)
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Student self-monitoring form
- AllPlay Learn Story - Waiting my turn
- AllPlay Learn Story - What happens at play time