

# Communication Strategies for Complex Learners

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WHAT CAN I DO AT HOME - DEVELOPING INTENTIONAL  
COMMUNICATION



# Steps to Communication

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| Level of Communication | WHAT is communication  | HOW is it communicated   | Interaction skills   | Play skills   |
|------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| Intentional            | Purposeful 'messages' without words e.g.<br>It's gone (disappearance)<br>More (recurrence)<br>Stop (rejection)<br>Mine (possession)<br>I want to.... (agent)<br>It's nice/horrid (comment) | Wide range of non-verbal communication e.g. vocalisation, facial expression, hand gestures, whole body movements | Is dependent on the other person responding to their message as if it has real meaning. Likes turn-taking and repetitive games. Develops joint attention | Further exploration leads to understanding of and playing with everyday objects |

[Encouraging interaction \(2\) - Amber - YouTube](#)



# Intentional Communication – what to look for

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- Communicates simple messages without words e.g. I want more, I want that
- May respond to simple requests in routine and familiar situations e.g. finds shoes (looks/points/touches) when told it's time to go outside
- May show interest in other children
- Imitates sounds, actions and gestures
- Your child might point or look at what they want, they might make a certain sound/movement when you say the name of a favourite item/activity or person
- Your child might be able to indicate a choice between 2 objects by reaching for what they want
- Explore what happens when a favourite item is stopped, how do they let you know they want it back. If you give them something they don't want/like what do they do?

# Intentional Communication – key points

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- Allow your child time to respond and react to interactions and activities
- Be responsive and consistent to their communication, this how your child knows you are listening and their actions are meaningful
- Try to provide lots of opportunities throughout the day for your child to communicate, and be successful in delivering their message. This can be in relation to what they like and don't like.
- Don't worry if you can't honour their request but make sure you acknowledge what they have communicated e.g. they want a particular toy and it's broken/needs batteries; show them the problem and offer an alternative that has similar feedback.

[Early communication \(1\): Making choices - YouTube](#)



# Visual activities

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- Mobiles or activity centres
- Mirrors
- Shiny paper or material
- Light-up toys
- Revolving night lights
- Bubbles
- Balloons
- Torches through coloured material/paper
- Things that glitter
- Place object where it can be seen and/or reached
- Give your child time to reach for/explore item
- Respond to whether they indicate preference, displeasure, or disinterest
- Say something about the activity using a few simple words or repetitive phrases. Be consistent
- Move objects side-to-side or up and down to develop tracking skills

# Touch activities

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- Rhymes – e.g. Round the garden
- Tickles – remember to change where you tickle and how long they have to wait for the tickle
- Touch mats and sensory exploration boards
- Vibration activities – e.g. massagers, vibrating cushions or snake
- Massage
  - You can use oil or cream to add additional aroma to experience
  - Vary pressure i.e. light/firm – watch for any preferences
  - Vary speed – watch for any preferences
  - Introduce materials with a light touch e.g. feathers, silks and move them over different parts of the body



# Touch activities

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- Water play

- Bath-time is a winner but you can also use a paddling pool or bowl, remember to supervise at all times.
- Explore temperatures and responses to warm/cold
- Explore reactions e.g. add a bath bomb
- Explore textures e.g. use gelli baffle to change consistency
- Use bath toys e.g. watering cans to trickle water at different speeds on different parts of the body
- Use your bath bubbles (make sure you have plenty) to blow them or clap/splat them in your hands or your child's

[Intensive interaction: Callum - WITH COMMENTARY - YouTube](#)



# People play – intensive interaction

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- Watching
  - Peepo – cover your face with your hands or material, will your child reach to remove the covering
  - Looking in a mirror and changing your facial expression
- Movement
  - Rocking e.g. row your boat – vary speed to look for changes in reactions
  - Bouncing e.g. horsey horsey – vary speed/force to look for changes in reaction
  - Dancing
  - Swinging, this can be in your arms if your child is light enough or on a large sheet with another person
- Turn-taking
  - Copy their actions and wait for a response

NB: always make sure you are at eye level with your child, use their name to gain their attention.

[Intensive interaction: Jordan - WITH COMMENTARY - YouTube](#)



# Hearing activities

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- Music
  - Play different styles of music and watch for responses
  - Explore different volumes and speeds when playing instruments
  - Support exploration and demonstration of different musical instruments
  - Sing different action songs e.g. baby shark, hokey cokey, happy and you know it
  - For older students use party action songs e.g. superman song, Macarena
- Explore noisy toys e.g. spinners, laughing balls, music boxes

# Simple choice-making

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Offer your child a choice of 2 objects, a preferred and non-preferred.

Give choices within a range of different scenarios e.g.

- Snacks
- Toys
- Activities (water, sand, book corner)

Show them what is being offered, providing verbal cue and allowing them to touch the object if possible.

- Encourage them to look at both options before making a choice
- Initially this 'choice' may be interpreted from the response when their attention was drawn to each item. In this situation bring object close to your eyes to gain their attention and respond e.g. "you want the chimes, here's the chimes"
- Watch closely as they may glance fleetingly at the 'preferred' item and this needs to be reinforced as a choice.
- As their skills develop they will ideally maintain gaze on item of desire or start to reach

[Promoting choice for pupils with PMLD \(2\) - YouTube](#)



# Making Choices

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## ACTIVITIES TO TRY:

Present two items to which your child will respond

- for example, brightly coloured or noisy toys, a smell, a taste of drink, etc.
- Observe them to determine if the response to one item has a longer duration, or whether there is an obvious change in activity level.

Offer one preferred versus one non-preferred item to be certain which they will want.

As soon as your child chooses one remove the other to make it clear this was the choice.

Continue till they are able to choose between 2 preferred activities.

## THINGS TO LOOK FOR:

increased eye contact with one item

a greater change in facial expression in response to one item when two are presented in an alternating pattern. Leave enough time for any responses

an increased level of activity (e.g. arm or leg movements)



# Help available

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If you need additional help or support to develop your young person's communication at home please contact your class teacher or myself:

- Shelley Soni (Speech and Language Therapist)

Good luck 😊