



# **The Early Years Communication Handbook**

A practical guide to creating a communication friendly setting

**Janet Cooper BSC (hons), Reg. MRCSLT**

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# Introduction

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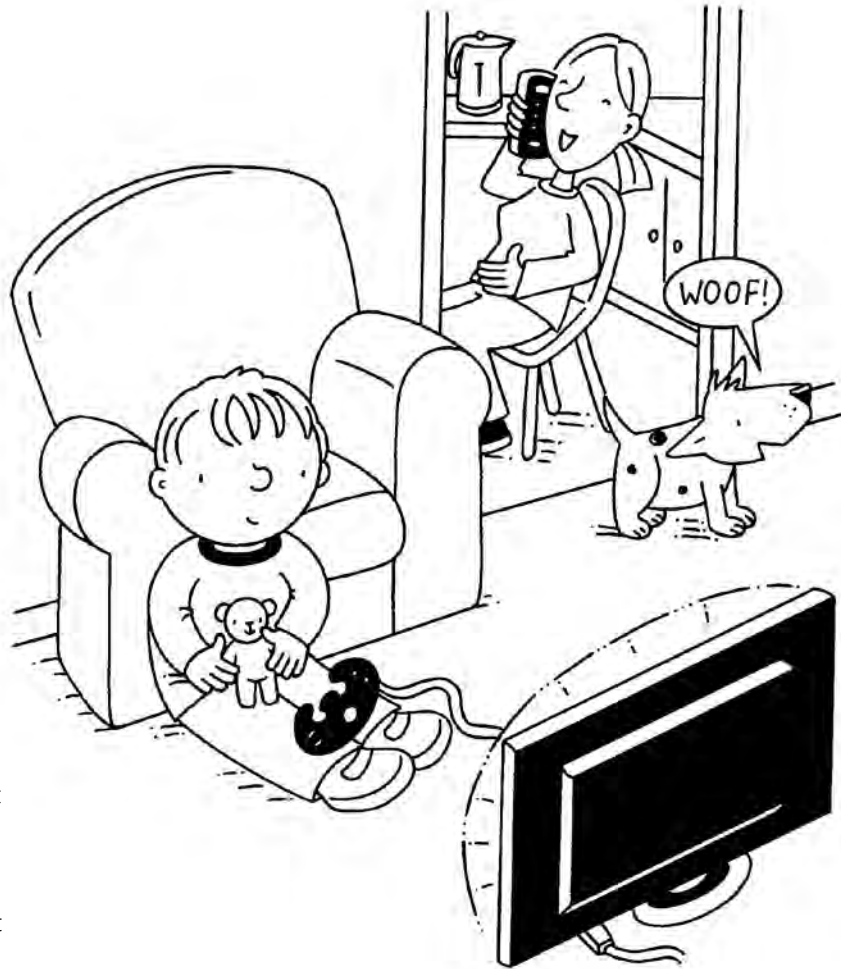
This book is for all early years practitioners and aims to help children develop their listening, understanding, speaking and communication skills. It is particularly useful for staff working in children's centres, nurseries, childminder settings, schools and any other environment implementing the *Every Child a Talker* National Strategy.

Many handbooks and textbooks have made language learning seem much too theoretical and mysterious. There is no mystery to communication development, just good common sense. This guide is designed to support anyone working with children in the early years to develop confidence in early communication development. There is no major cost or piece of equipment needed; the only requirement is your time.

## Why is communication important?

All strands of the *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* (2007) highlight the importance of communication development. A recent review commissioned by the Government identified that 'the ability to communicate is an essential life skill for all children and young people and it underpins a child's social, emotional and educational development' (Bercow, 2008). This review highlighted that any difficulties with communication development can have an impact on all areas of development. *The Rose Review* (2005) states that 'language skills are a foundation for the development of literacy skills' and that 'listening and speaking are the roots of reading and writing.' Until we develop children's communication skills fully, they are unable to reach their full potential in reading and writing. This can only be achieved through a nurturing and stimulating environment which responds to the child's needs. Children are like seeds for beautiful flowers. They are pre-programmed to grow but need all the right conditions to flourish to their full potential.

Communication difficulties are the most common developmental difficulties in children. It is estimated that around 10% of children nationally have significant difficulty with speech and language development (Lyndsay and Dockrell, 2002). These children may require ongoing specialist help. There are also many more children who start school with delayed language skills because of lack of quality stimulation or consistent responsive parenting. The charity ICAN estimates that around half of children entering nursery may have 'transient' speech and language difficulties. 'Transient' speech and language difficulties are when children appear to



be progressing slowly against developmental norms but then 'catch up' eventually. This sometimes happens when children have had an illness or family event, which temporarily affects their developmental progress.

## What difference does it make?

Children who have difficulty developing communication skills may have difficulty in all areas of learning but especially social and emotional development. The child who is struggling with communication development may withdraw from communication opportunities or may behave in an aggressive manner to avoid the feeling of inadequacy that communication difficulties can bring. This insecurity puts a child in a state of high anxiety and while in this state the child's emotions are hijacked by a stress response which obstructs listening, attention and learning.



## Why do children have communication difficulties?

There are many reasons for delayed communication skills. It is thought that around 5 to 10% of children nationally have medical, neurological or genetic difficulties which require specialist intervention. These children will always need additional help no matter how good the parents or the setting are. However there are a high proportion of children who are born with the potential to develop normally but never reach their full potential. The ICAN *Cost to the Nation* report (2007) describes these children as having 'impoverished language'.

There are also many influences in society that can hinder children's development. Children are bombarded with background noise from stereos, television, computer games and many other gadgets. This has been described as 'toxic childhood' (Palmer, 2007). In isolation, these things may not have a detrimental effect, but when combined, can have significant consequences on children's development. There is also a culture of speaking less to children, for example babies and children who are quiet are often described as 'good children', which reinforces this myth. Many parents still believe that a baby will be 'spoiled' if picked up too much. In fact current research indicates that the more love, touch and affection shown to a baby the more settled and independent he/she will become.

## What is the role of the early years practitioner and the setting?

While children are in an early years setting the practitioners take on the role of 'carers'. The way in which staff respond to and engage with children has a major impact on children's development. An EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-School Education) study, conducted in 2003, highlighted that better trained and skilled early years practitioners led to better outcomes for children. The study found that good quality pre-school experiences support children's social and emotional development, going on to support communication development. Children hold memories of their earliest experiences for life and these shape the brain's growth and development, particularly in the first three years of life.

The role of the early years professional is absolutely crucial to help children reach their full potential. This handbook has been developed to support this role and make communication 'everybody's business'.

### Did you know?

Up to 70% of total brain growth and development takes place in the first three years of life with around 90% of this in the first year!



# Are you communication friendly?

*This section will help practitioners recognise what to look for when conducting an audit of whether or not a setting is communication friendly. Chapter 3 links with this section to provide ideas to help meet some of the criteria.*

All practitioners working with young children have a role to play in developing children's communication skills. Whether they work with children and families in a playgroup, toddler group or pre-school setting, practitioners have a unique opportunity to help children develop their full potential. Communication affects feelings and behaviour and so it is vital for an early years setting to be communication friendly.

## The communication environment

The 'communication environment' describes the methods, reasons and opportunities children have to communicate within a setting environment and whether these are maximized. Opportunities to communicate do not rely on expensive equipment or planned sessions. Children communicate in response to stimulus, such as something they see, hear, taste, smell or feel; children also communicate when they have needs that they want to express. Practitioners need to be aware of children's experiences and follow their interests. There is no point ploughing on with a colouring task if a child has just heard

## The general environment

It is essential for parents and children to feel confident when they first enter a setting. The kind of welcome families receive makes all the difference to the relationship a practitioner will have with them. There are a number of simple basics for communication, which create a positive atmosphere for children and families. Is there a friendly face greeting families as they arrive? Is there consistency of staff on reception so that families can recognise and get to know them? How accessible is the building? Will parents and visitors be attended to quickly or will they be left hanging around for a while? If a parent has a poor experience on the first visit this may affect subsequent attendance. Many parents lack the confidence to attend new groups or go to new settings. Often, they are perceived as cliquy or uninviting. A simple way to overcome initial barriers is to offer an introduction session or a home visit to introduce staff and to give families a named person to liaise with. Named key-workers also demonstrate that a setting is approachable and friendly. This all aids transition both for parent and child. Often we underestimate the need for parents to have preparation for transitions and focus all our attention on the child's needs. The better prepared parents are for change the more they can discuss this with their children and prepare them, thus easing the transition.



a jet plane go overhead and is excited by it. Follow the child's lead. If the child wants to comment on the plane respond to the comments and ask further questions.

Settings need to ensure that stimulating experiences and materials are provided and that someone is available to respond. Sometimes the simplest objects can provide the stimulus for communication; provide materials such as tropical fruit, shells, a bag of dressing-up clothes or a treasure basket. There should be a range of interesting toys and activities within the setting. Use toys that stimulate the senses, but beware that many shop-bought toys restrict the amount of sensory stimulation they provide.

## Knowledge and skills

The knowledge and skills of practitioners working with pre-school children can have a major impact on children's development. It is essential that practitioners have extensive knowledge of child development so that they can identify what stages children are at and whether they are developing along normal lines. This knowledge will help indicate whether children need to be referred to other agencies or child care specialists to assist with their development.

The checklists on page 24 will help settings to identify areas for action or training needs. There are a range of resources available to support this (see further reading section page 62) and The Communication Trust (2009) have developed a competencies framework to support practitioners in their development of knowledge and skills. It is important that a setting does not rely on one person to develop knowledge and skills relating to the area of

## Top tip

Make sure you have a range of textures, colours, smells, tastes and sounds within the setting for the child to experience. Link these to any story or role-play themes you may have. Extend the children's interests by following up with other activities, e.g. if you are reading 'The Gingerbread Man' story follow up the story by making ginger bread men together and letting the children taste the biscuits.

Make the most of time with each child. Some of the best communication times are informal and unplanned. This may be when a child is arriving, having a snack, having their nappy changed or playing outside. Think about all the times in a day when you communicate with the children. Are you readily available to listen and respond to them? Do you make the most of every opportunity?

communication. Being communication friendly only works if there is shared responsibility and everyone understands that this is part of their role.

## Policy and procedure

Good communication practices need to be built into the policies and procedures of a setting. Putting such information into policy and procedure documents will emphasize the importance of developing communication. Policies should be determined by good practice. For example, practitioners should identify the procedures and activities that works, then turn these into setting policies. It may be worth identifying a policy for 'meet and greet' in the mornings; a policy for key workers or significant carers; a policy on supporting parents and so on. Policies do not need to be lengthy documents; they represent a shared acknowledgement of what works best for the children in a setting.

Use the checklist for policy and procedure on page 25. You may wish to add procedures that you value within your setting as these should be led by evidence-based practice.

## Parents as partners

Parents are a child's first educators and it is essential to work alongside them to help children achieve their full potential. It is useful for practitioners to investigate the experiences families and children receive when they attend a setting. Involving parents and children in these discussions is essential to see things from a user's perspective. Questionnaires, whilst giving chance for parents to contribute, can feel very threatening or





may only elicit responses from a vocal few. Coffee mornings may provide greater opportunities for parents to discuss their feelings in an informal atmosphere. The programme 'Stoke Speaks Out' has found that encouraging parents to stay on after a toddler session, over a cup of tea, has enabled parents to have their say. Some settings invite parents to attend a short nursery rhyme performance by their children and then stay for refreshments and a chat about their experiences of the setting.

The ethos of 'parents as partners' must be genuine. Research tells us that the parents have the most influence over child development and so practitioners will serve children better by working in partnership with the parents. Practitioners also need to be mindful of the parents' readiness to engage. If parents do not take part in events or respond to written notes, consider things from their point of view. Do they have time to meet up with you? Can they read? Can they speak English? Do they have any special needs? Are there family circumstances which make engagement difficult? (Such as a new baby, caring for a relative, domestic violence, health issues, unusual working patterns.) It is only by attempting to get to know parents and genuinely valuing their input that practitioners will be able to acknowledge their readiness to engage with the setting.



Positive relationships between staff, parents and children develop an atmosphere of trust. This is the best foundation for developing communication.

Working through the following checklists should help practitioners focus on the strengths and weaknesses of their setting. Settings need to provide a balance in each area to ensure children and their families get maximum benefit. Fostering good relationships with parents and carers will ensure that children are given the best possible start in life, with rich language opportunities. Some children may be getting additional support from agencies for their communication development. It is essential that practitioners work in partnership with these agencies to maximize the benefit for the child.

## Best practice

- Children's work is acknowledged and respected
- Children feel they belong to your setting
- Children develop a sense of identity in your setting
- Staff are approachable
- There is a consistency of staff
- Staff are responsive to the changing needs of both children and parents
- Staff know who the child's key relationships are with
- Staff make efforts to include key carers in conversations with the child
- Each child is seen as unique with their own unique characteristics
- Staff are able to observe which stages of development the child is at, and plan and respond accordingly

## What to do if a child is attending speech and language therapy

Children access speech and language therapy if they have a severe delay or disorder of voice, speech, language or fluency. Some children have speech and language therapy if they have feeding or swallowing problems. Practitioners should be aware of the local criteria for accessing these services. Some authorities only treat children with the most marked or profound difficulties, while some only offer the service to children of a particular age group; most speech and language therapy departments will have specific referral criteria. The majority of speech and language therapy services are commissioned through Health Trusts. Some departments will provide a service

# Involving parents and carers

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*This section covers why parents are important in their children's learning and provides ideas to get parents involved. The chapter includes photocopiable handouts and games for parents to try. For the purpose of this section, the definition of 'parent' will mean any person offering the key caring role for the child and may include foster carers, adoptive parents or any other adults with parental responsibility.*

Many studies have indicated that the influence of parents is paramount to a child's development. The Effective Provision for Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (2004) stated that it 'is not who parents are but what they do that makes the difference' in their child's development. Parents often feel unsure of how to fulfil their role. The majority of parents love their children and want to do their best for them but lack the knowledge and skills of how to develop children to their full potential.

The EPPE study highlighted a range of key ways in which parents could help their child's development. These included:

- Reading to and with children
- Singing songs and rhymes
- Going on visits
- Painting and drawing
- Creating opportunities to play with friends
- Going to the library
- Playing with letters and numbers

The extent to which practitioners work with and involve parents will depend on the setting's relationship with parents. Remember that parents also need support to prepare for separating from their child; involving them in their child's learning can help to ease this anxiety. Make sure the parents





## Did you know?

It is not who parents are but what they do that makes a difference to their children's learning (De Sylva, 2004).

know the setting's key routines including who their child will be handed over to, where they need to go and what they are expected to do. Many parents feel anxious about arriving at a new setting and about leaving their child. If they have had negative experiences themselves this will also raise their anxiety.

## Preparing parents for the setting

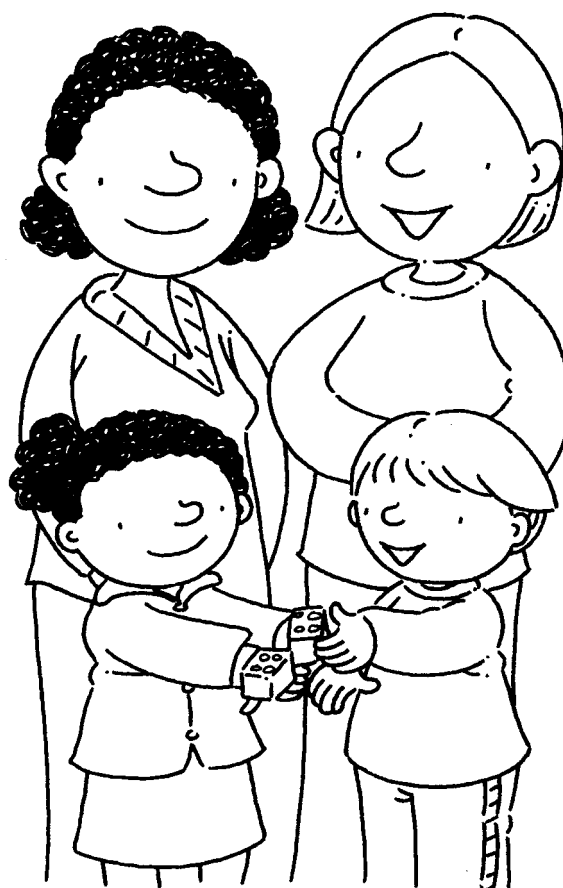
Offer parents and carers informal opportunities to look around the setting, this may include coffee mornings, chances to see children performing, family-learning workshops, creative sessions and fundraising events. It is helpful for parents to meet practitioners in an informal role for them to feel confident to share any concerns and to build up a relationship.

If possible, conduct a home visit (prior to a child attending the setting) to meet the parents or carers on their terms. Home visits reveal much more information about a child's background in five minutes than in a whole academic term in a setting. During a home visit a practitioner can see the opportunities a child has had prior to attending the setting; it can also help parents and carers feel more able to share information. Offer written information about what is expected of them, where they need to go, names of staff and so on (but be mindful of the parents and carers who cannot read English or have poor literacy levels). Make sure there is someone who can talk through this information if necessary. Some settings create a DVD of what the setting looks like and demonstrate a typical day in the setting. This is a great way to prepare both parents and children, and is a resource they can revisit again to develop discussion about the setting.

Some settings have purchased a plasma screen for their entrance hall to play footage of the children undertaking activities within the setting, showing parents and carers what the children have been doing. A photo album highlighting key staff, information about the activities and routines of the day are great ways to share information with parents.

## Involving parents

Create an area for parents so that they know where to go for information about the setting and other relevant useful information such as 'giving up the dummy'. This may be an accessible wall, noticeboard or even a room. Think about what this space tells parents about how they are valued.



Find out what information parents would find useful and monitor how effective the use of the information is. Judge this by putting ten leaflets in each plastic wallet and noting each week how many remain. Try personalising information boards, give each child their own post box for parents to check daily to see if they have any post. Ask parents to supply any relevant news that they would like to see on the notice-board, this may be celebrating the birth of a new child or community events that they wish to share.

Settings often report difficulty in getting parents to come in and be more involved. Many parents work full time and tight schedules mean that they do not have enough time to stay and chat about their children. In these instances, practitioners should review the types of communication strategies provided by the setting. These may range from leaflets; informal chats; telephone contact; home-setting diaries; performances; open days/evenings; parent evenings; fund-raising events; coffee

## Activity

Use the grid on page 55 to note all of the communication methods and opportunities your setting offers to parents. Note any barriers there might be for each of these. Think of how you might overcome these barriers. Are there any gaps in what you offer? What new opportunities might be developed to ensure all parents have chance to engage?