

# Prime Time

# Communication and Language

An active approach to developing communication skills

Jo Blank and Alice Bevan

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*'A child's experiences from birth to five have a major impact on their future life chances'* (EYFS Framework DfE, 2014). This is well illustrated by the I CAN Impact Report (2016),

*'A child's vocabulary at age 5 is recognised as being a strong predictor of literacy abilities, mental health and employment status later in life.'*

This speaks volumes for the role of the early years educator in promoting these critical skills. Communication and language is one of the three prime areas of learning and development in the EYFS Framework (2017). Along with Physical development and Personal social and emotional development, it underpins all other learning. These three areas *'are particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive'*.

## Children's experience of technology

Strong links have been made between the use of TV and other electronic devices and children's communication and language delay. With the growing use of mobile phones and tablets, children are growing up in a world where communication takes place more so on a screen rather than face to face with people in a real space.

Several recent studies suggest that increased exposure to technology could be having a negative impact on attention development in children. Evans Schmidt et al (in Spooner and Woodcock, 2010) found that background television significantly affected children's attention to play, even when they appeared not to be watching it.

## The impact of poor language and communication skills

Evidence and research from the Communication Trust between 2009 and 2016 reveals that the impact of language difficulty on children's lives can be devastating.

1. **In school:** Children who start school with communication difficulties are at a great disadvantage, because they are likely to struggle to understand what the staff and other children are saying, and have difficulty expressing their basic needs and feelings. They are likely to experience:

- **Literacy and numeracy difficulties**  
Children with poor early language at age five are four times more likely to struggle with reading at age 11. Between 50-90% of children with persistent speech, language and communication difficulties go on to experience reading difficulties.
- **Social isolation**  
Social play is about communicating thoughts and

ideas to others, which with young children can be through actions, expressions and body language. However, as children mature, their play becomes more dependent on spoken language to share ideas. It follows that children without these skills find it hard to join in and are likely to be left out of group play.

- **Low self-esteem**  
Young people with language difficulties are three times more likely to have mental health issues. Being aware of your own limitations in any aspect of life skills when everyone around you appears competent, can lead to a feeling of hopelessness, inadequacy and consequently a poor self-image.
- **Challenging behaviour**  
Two thirds of children aged 7 -14 years with serious behaviour problems also have language difficulties.

2. **Throughout life:** If these problems are not resolved, it is disturbing to learn that people with language and communication difficulties are at greater risk of:

- **Unemployment**  
More than 8 out of 10 long-term unemployed young men have been found to have speech, language and communication needs
- **Mental Health issues**  
Young people with language difficulties are three times more likely to have mental health issues
- **Committing crime**  
Between 60 and 90% of young offenders have speech, language and communication needs.

## About this book

The **central theme** in this book is how children can be helped to communicate and to use language through an **active** approach. This is primarily about a **physically active approach**, which is part of an overall **active learning approach**. Young children learn well through being physical, since being physical is an inbuilt urge for them. There is also a huge emphasis on the crucial role of **interaction** between adults and children and children themselves in order for communication and language to develop.

## Why is the emphasis on learning through an ACTIVE approach?

An **active learning** approach is a 'first-hand experience and hands-on' approach. It means children are actively involved in their learning. In their play they handle objects, use all their senses to find out what the objects can do and how they work; they use objects in ways that are meaningful for them and they make mistakes. For example, only by repeatedly trying to put a large block inside a small container do they learn about size.

### Communication Climbing Frame



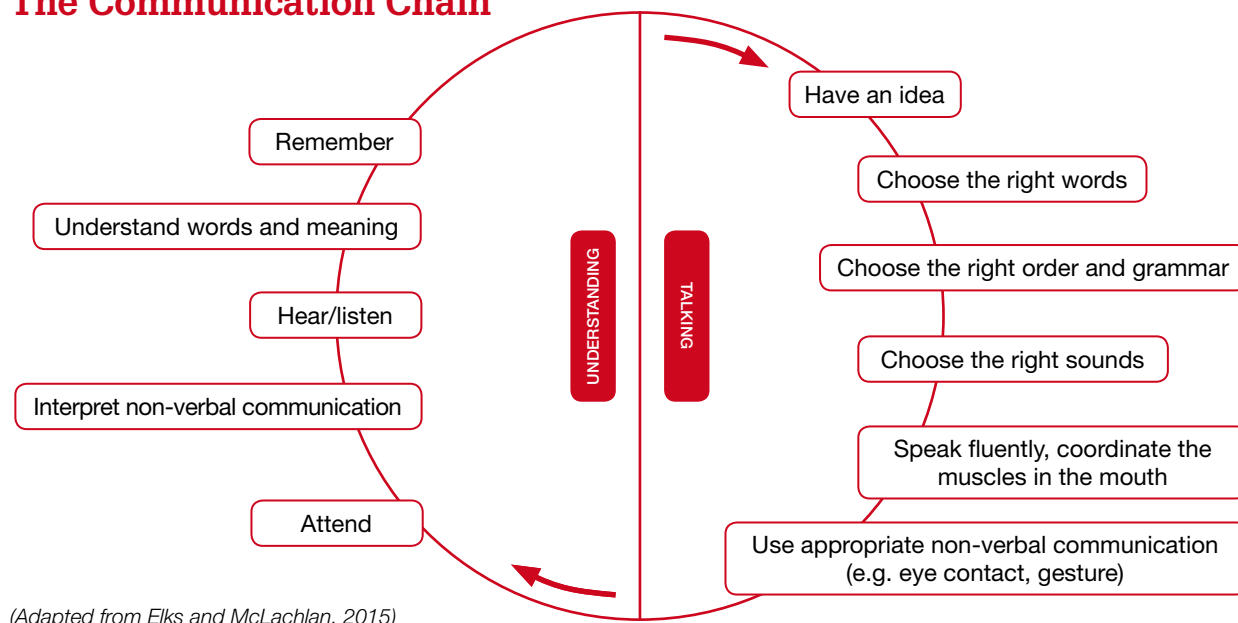
Everyday we communicate with a range of different people for different reasons. Although it may seem simple, communication is in fact a very complex process. Communicating successfully with someone else involves ‘a chain of interlinked processes that enables us to understand and convey messages.’ (Elks and McLachlan, 2015).

**Fully understanding** what someone else is saying requires a range of processes including paying attention to them and interpreting non-verbal communication. It also involves being able to hear, listening to what they are saying, and remembering these words in order to process and understand them.

**The Communication Chain** (Elks and McLachlan, 2015) shows the process of communication; what happens, step by step in our heads when we communicate with others.

As well as simply being able to understand the single words, you, of course, must be able to understand all the sentences used and then interpret the meaning of what has been said.

### The Communication Chain



(Adapted from Elks and McLachlan, 2015)

# Section 1: Active Attention and Listening



## Why is it important?



building blocks of communication development and form the foundation for all the other communication skills.

The **Communication Climbing Frame** shows attention and listening skills at the base, which means that they support the rest of the language and communication skills. None of the others can be mastered unless children attend to people, things and actions.

Take a look at the **Communication Chain** (page 5) and you will see that to attend, hear and listen come right at the start. So these skills are fundamental to language development.

*'The abilities to attend, to listen and to look are prerequisites for all forms of learning, including learning communication, speech and language.'*  
(Garforth, 2009)

This section is all about the development of attention and listening skills and explains how they impact on every area of communication. They are often described as the

*'Many children presenting with early language delay have been found to have immature attention control, and remedial work on attention problems has helped the children to develop language.'* (Reynell, 1980)



**Early Learning Goal (expected achievement for children by the end of the EYFS)**

**Listening and attention:** children listen attentively in a range of situations. They listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. They give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity. (Statutory Framework for the EYFS, 2017)

To pay attention to something is to concentrate, to focus and to keep your mind on something. Concentration is a fundamental feature of learning and so also underpins the development of communication and language. Listening requires paying attention to something, for example, a child sharing a story book with an adult needs to be able to follow the pictures in the book. Being able to concentrate therefore precedes listening skills.

Children learn through what they see, hear and do. To learn language and how to communicate with others, they have to pay attention to people, objects and tasks. The ability to focus and to maintain attention is therefore vital in learning language.

Babies are exposed to many sounds over their first year and are 'tuning in' to the specific sounds of their mother tongue. Time talking and singing with babies, holds their attention and gives them chance to assimilate the sounds and music of their home language. Giving a 'running commentary' and pointing to things draws their attention to things in the environment and is essential for their healthy development in language and communication.

## What is attention?

*'Attention is the ability to 'selectively focus our attention on specific features of our environment.'*  
(Ward, 2004)

It is important to look at how young children develop their ability to focus and concentrate on people things, and activities, because in order to focus on listening and language children need to concentrate. Let's explore attention skills generally, looking at children's concentration as they play, and how children develop these skills over time. This spans from the often fleeting attention of babies to the intensive concentration of the 4 year old who is determined to build a pirate ship. Children gradually develop the ability to focus on a task for longer periods of time, they then learn to switch their focus of attention from one object or activity to another. Following this, children learn to listen while carrying out a task at the same time.

By the time a child is five years old, they will typically have gone through five stages of attention development (Cooper, Moodley and Reynell, 1978). These can be seen in Tables of development (page 25).

Fleeting attention (0-1 year)  
Rigid attention (1-2 years)  
Single-channelled attention (2-3 years)  
Focusing attention (3-4 years)  
Two-channelled attention (4-5 years)  
(age bands are approximate)

Here are some examples that demonstrate children's attention span.

### Case study: Charlie, 3 years 2 months

*Charlie plays with toys he chooses himself for 10 minutes and can complete activities such as puzzles. Sometimes he will stop what he is doing to listen if an adult talks to him while he is playing.*

*During group time at nursery, Charlie usually looks towards the nursery staff when they are talking, he enjoys listening to stories and joining in action songs. He responds appropriately to group instructions most of the time, for example, he will stand up when the adult says 'everyone stand up'.*

**Charlie's attention and listening skills are typical for his age.**



## The adult role



*'By facilitating children's attention and listening skills, we are able to give them a better chance of achieving their potential in communication, speech and language, and therefore learning skills.'* (Garforth, 2009)

### 1. Take an active approach

#### **Use the natural world as a stimulus for learning.**

Children's attention can be captured and held by movement, either by watching or trying to imitate. Imagine watching a gymnast or a dancer; we are captivated by their skill and fluidity. For a child, an animal, caterpillar, butterfly, insect or bird may catch their attention. The wonders of nature and the movement will fascinate them. Children will become absorbed with the properties of natural materials and how they behave when mixed together, such as water, sand and soil. Fascination leads to a prolonged attention span.

**Do lots of action rhymes.** When singing action rhymes, it is the movements that children learn first, long before

the words. They find it more interesting and meaningful to watch and match movements to words. Their attention will be held by trying to copy the movements. They also love moving their bodies in different ways and in rhythm.

**Match movement to words** to help children understand them. Simply doing the actions for 'up' and 'down' creates understanding. Prepositions such as under, through or inside are easily understood when squirming through tunnels and negotiating the climbing equipment. Comment on children's movements, 'you are inside the box!' and say things like 'Teddy is under the blanket', or 'behind the cushion' to make these words visually meaningful. It encourages children to 'look' as well as 'listen', which naturally prompts and holds attention for longer. Telling a story using puppets and moving them to do things will quickly capture attention.

Children are naturally active little beings! Give them instructions to run, jump, or throw a bean bag and they are likely to listen!



**Help children to be actively involved in their learning**, so that they feel in control, excited, and consequently highly motivated. Encourage them to add and find resources to extend their play, to talk about their ideas and share them with others, and to reflect on what they are doing so that they can change things for the better.

So, using an active approach to developing young children's attention and listening skills is a winning strategy every time. It is the most natural way to gain and hold children's attention and enable them to listen and learn.

## 2. Play and Interact

**As a key person**, you have a vital role to play in developing children's attention and listening skills. As the person who spends the most time with the baby, toddler or young child, you can nurture concentration through everyday conversations and having fun with them. The baby has fewer voices to assimilate, which helps with 'tuning in' to language sounds. Find out what really interests your children and use this to captivate their attention.

When playing and interacting with the children in your setting, there are some simple strategies that you can use to support their attention and listening skills.

- **Say the child's name** and ensure you have their attention before speaking to them.
- **Physically get down to the same level** as the children so that you are at the same eye level. This will make it easier for them to look at you when you are talking, and easier for them to listen.
- **Be enthusiastic!** Make your voice sound interesting. Use plenty of intonation and use exaggerated facial expressions to keep the children engaged, for example use different voices during story time. Use puppets and toys to tell stories.  
*(Principle 2: Children learn words when they are interested)*
- **Keep your language simple, clear, consistent and relevant.** Meaningful language that links to what they are doing and what they can see, with sensitive repetition is more likely to hold their attention.  
*(Principle 1: Children need to hear many words often)*
- **Use lots of non-verbal communication**, such as gestures and pointing to accompany what you are saying to the children.
- **Be realistic in your expectations** for how long children should stay focused on an activity. Children's attention span depends on many factors, the most

significant being their level of interest. Concentration depends on:

- ✓ the child's level of well-being (see Leuven Scale, page 10)
- ✓ the child's level of involvement (see Leuven Scale, page 11)
- ✓ whether the activity is chosen by the child or adult
- ✓ the proximity of others, adults and children
- ✓ the interaction and play with other children
- ✓ the interaction with the adult
- ✓ other distractions
- ✓ the time of day and the child's rhythm of rest and play

- **Ensure children are feeling ok**, by consciously considering Leuven's levels of well-being. Their concentration depends on how good they feel about themselves, how happy they feel and their feelings of belonging.
- **Use the principles of SOUL to approach children's play** (High/Scope 1998). We sometimes interact without being sufficiently aware of the child's own agenda and purpose. So, before you begin to interact, use SILENCE, OBSERVATION, UNDERSTANDING and LISTENING to ensure that you understand what the child is doing and trying to do. You can then assess how best to interact, whether for example to play alongside, to remain quiet, to comment or to provide help with resources etc. The adult can either increase involvement and attention levels through meaningful interaction, or reduce their engagement by intervening and breaking the child's concentration. **Appropriate interaction is the key!**



# 8-week Development Programme for under 2s

Week	Adult role	Get active!
<p><b>Week 1: Focus ACTIVE ATTENTION AND LISTENING</b></p> <p><b>Fostering interests</b></p> <p><b>Developing relationships</b></p> <p><b>Improving the environment</b></p>	<p><b>Read Section 1: Why is it important?</b>  <b>Get to know</b> about attention and listening skills. Become familiar with the Leuven scales for well-being and involvement.</p> <p><b>Observe</b> your key children and assess their general levels of well-being and their levels of involvement at different activities.</p> <p><b>Read Section 1: The adult role</b> for guidance on the best environment.</p> <p><b>Read Section 1: Get Active!</b> For active ways to develop attention and listening skills.</p> <p><b>Focus on</b> discovering the interests of your key children and developing open-ended resources.</p>	<p><b>Find out</b> what your key children really like doing. What sparks their interest and grabs their attention. Write this down.</p> <p><b>Speak with parents</b>, find out more about the family and what the children like to do at home. Write this down.</p> <p><b>Make special times</b> for each child, when you play, chat and share books only with them, so that you naturally develop their attention span.</p> <p><b>Comment</b> on children's physical actions with enthusiasm and use words like 'up, down, under, over' when babies and toddlers climb and scramble around equipment.</p> <p><b>Improve your resources</b> like treasure baskets and heuristic play materials where babies and toddlers can explore the properties of things. (See pages 23-24)</p> <p><b>Consider the noise levels</b> in your environment and how individual children respond to noisy times; adapt practice for sensitive children, for example, take them to a quiet area or outdoors to help them feel comfortable.</p> <p><b>Share with parents</b> how screen time and background TV affects children's attention and their ability to listen.</p> <p><b>Try 3 new activities</b> from <b>Get Active!</b></p>
<b>Review</b>	<b>What worked well?</b>	<b>What can you improve? How?</b>
<p><b>Week 2 Focus: ACTIVE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION</b></p> <p><b>You as a role model</b></p> <p><b>Physical fun!</b></p> <p><i>Continue</i>            Spending quality time with each child, deepening your relationship</p>	<p><b>Read Section 2: Why is it important? and The adult role, Play and interact.</b></p> <p>Become more aware of how you <b>role model</b> communication to children. Notice your own non-verbal communication and your character traits that influence how you interact with children.</p> <p><b>Observe</b> each other and talk about your different strengths in how you connect and communicate with children. <b>Discuss</b> how you complement each other as a staff team. <b>Become more aware</b> of your own language with children, how do you get them to cooperate, through instructions or request? Have fun, relax and enjoy their company!</p> <p><b>Notice</b> the non-verbal communication of your key children.</p>	<p><b>Make special times</b> with each child part of everyday practice, tuning in to their interests and preferences.</p> <p><b>Play physical and social games</b> with babies and toddlers, like crawling races, hide and seek, dancing together, playing with balloons and bubbles, action songs, anything to help children enjoy being together in a group.</p> <p><b>Play physical games</b> that involve fun with others, like hide and seek, throwing bean bags. Have fun!</p>
<b>Review</b>	<b>What worked well?</b>	<b>What can you improve? How?</b>