



Makaton Magic: Building Communication from the start

About the AUTHOR

Tanya Snarey is an early years professional with a background in education, stakeholder engagement, and project delivery. A mum to three children under seven, she combines evidence-based insight with real-world experience to support young children's development and help practitioners create inclusive, high-quality early years provision.



Studies have shown that following (Makaton) training... the children were more attentive, more confident and having fun, all important skills for learning

— Ford, J. (2006)



Communication is one of life's greatest skills and our jobs as early years educators is to help teach children how to be effective communicators. Makaton is a unique communication programme that uses illustrated symbols and simple hand signs on top of everyday speech. These signs and gestures give your baby or child extra visual clues about what is being said. For example, the Makaton sign for 'book' looks like a book opening.

For babies and young children who experience frustration around not being able to communicate meaningfully or effectively, Makaton can provide a fun and interactive way for them to connect with others. It also supports children with SEND by giving them tools to connect with peers and adults more effectively.



BOOK

Makaton Magic

Benefits of using Makaton with Babies and Children include:

- ★ Improved Communication
- ★ Enhanced Social-Emotional Development
- ★ Supporting Development of Learning
- ★ Promoting Inclusion
- ★ Positive impact upon family relationships



Makaton provides another tool for children to access and utilise to aid their communication and reduce their frustration. As adults we know how frustrating it is when someone doesn't understand what we are trying to say, imagine how annoying it must be for a thirsty child not to be able to tell us all they want is a drink. Giving them the skills to communicate their basic needs can help reduce that stress and foster relationship building and language skills.



Using Makaton in Early Years

Whether you're already using Makaton or just getting started, it's important to consider how it can be effectively integrated into your setting. To ensure children experience a rich range of communication techniques that support their learning, please use Makaton alongside existing communication strategies rather than as a replacement for speech. Where appropriate, children should continue to be encouraged to verbalise alongside their use of Makaton. Use the following tips to plan, implement, or enhance Makaton use with the children in your care.

★ Start small and keep it consistent

Begin with a few everyday signs (e.g. **sleep** at nap times, **food** at meal times, **water** when offering them a drink, **book** for reading time). Use them regularly during routines. Consistency helps children link signs to meaning.

★ Integrate and model through daily interactions

Use Makaton naturally alongside speech during play, stories, songs, and transitions. Repetition through daily use makes learning fun and effective.

★ Involve everyone

Ensure all staff use the same signs and approach. A shared understanding across your team builds confidence and ensures children experience Makaton consistently.

★ Make it visual and accessible

Display key signs with pictures and words around your setting - object labels, or a "sign of the week" board to reinforce learning.

★ Be inclusive

Use Makaton with all children, not just those with identified needs. This promotes inclusion, peer understanding and better social communication.

★ Partner with families

Share the signs you're using in the setting with parents/carers so they can reinforce learning at home. Consider sending home a "sign of the week" or demonstrating during pick-up.





Conclusion

As highlighted by the Education Endowment Foundation, no single strategy is likely to meet all children's communication needs—using a variety of approaches is key to supporting development and progress. Integrating Makaton alongside your existing communication and language strategies can enrich your provision, making it more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all children in your care.

Reflective Questions:

- ★ Which daily routines or activities could I start using Makaton in right away?
- ★ How inclusive is my current communication approach for children with speech, language, or communication needs?



References:

Ford, J. (2006) Enhancing parent and child communication: Using Makaton signing for babies. Makaton Vocabulary Development Project. <https://www.katemb.com/wp-content/uploads/ford06babies.pdf>

Larkin, A. (2021) 'How effective is Makaton in encouraging communication and social interaction in children and young people', Archives of Disease in Childhood, 106(Suppl 1), A177.1. Available at: https://adc.bmj.com/content/106/Suppl_1/A177.1

The Makaton Charity 'What is Makaton?', Makaton, The Makaton Charity. Available at: https://makaton.org/TMC/TMC/About_Makaton/What_is_Makaton.aspx?hkey=b275ea4d-55a9-40c3-8f10-a40f71f2395e

Education Endowment Foundation Communication and language approaches. Early Years Toolkit. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/communication-and-language-approaches>



We'd love your feedback!

Take our 2-minute survey to help the Thames Valley & South Central Early Years Stronger Practice Hub make our blogs even better.

For more information on Early Years best practice please access [The Thames Valley Early Years Stronger Practice Hub](#) resources including the Blog on [Communication and Language](#). By [Fiona Greenwood](#) or email admin@tveysph.org for more details and resources.

**SCAN HERE TO
GET IN TOUCH**

