

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADAPTING APPROACHES TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE FOR CHILDREN WITH SEND

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Modelling and providing a diverse range of communication strategies to meet the unique needs of children with SEND is essential in promoting language development, social interaction, emotional wellbeing, and inclusion.

By remaining flexible and responsive to individual needs, we help children feel seen, heard, valued, and understood.

Through adapting our approaches, we can create a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters engagement, understanding, confidence, and self-expression, ultimately enhancing children's social, emotional, and educational experiences.

"COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE APPROACHES ARE A CRUCIAL PART OF PROVISION IN THE EARLY YEARS. ... IMPLEMENTATION IS IMPORTANT, CAREFULLY MATCHING APPROACHES WITH THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN." EEF

We structure our daily nursery routine to create a language-rich environment by embedding flexible and adaptive communication support throughout all aspects of provision. This enables every child to access, participate in, and engage with their learning and play experiences.

HOW DO WE DO THIS?

There are many alternative methods of communication that can be embedded into everyday practice across all areas of the nursery environment.

These include:

- Providing core boards to promote choice, communication, and self-expression
- Using objects of reference to prepare for and support understanding of transitions
- Providing sound buttons to enable children to communicate verbal messages
- Using photos, symbols, and visual supports
- Using Makaton signs to support key instructions, routines, and interactions



Through these approaches, Gestalt Language Processing (GLP) strategies can also be incorporated to support children who process language in this way.

"GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING (GLP) IS A NATURAL WAY OF ACQUIRING LANGUAGE WHERE INDIVIDUALS FIRST LEARN AND USE WHOLE, MEMORIZED PHRASES OR "GESTALTS" INSTEAD OF LEARNING WORDS ONE BY ONE".
BLANC, M, BLACKWELL 2023

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Sound Buttons

Sound buttons can be used within greeting rituals and to support children who may be non-speaking to convey messages independently.

They can:

- Enable every child to say hello, goodbye, or good morning/afternoon
- Support participation in play scenarios and leadership roles within people games
- Allow children to initiate communication through messages such as “stop” and “go”
- Be integrated into stories to bring them to life and increase engagement
- Help children explore characters, sounds, and different elements of storytelling
- Support communication during snack and mealtimes through messages such as “more”, “help”, or “finished”



Objects of Reference

Objects of reference are physical items that visually support a child to understand and prepare for transitions and upcoming parts of their day.

These can be simple everyday objects, such as:

- A spoon to represent lunchtime
- A wooden brick to indicate home time

It is beneficial for staff teams to agree upon consistent Gestalt phrases to use alongside these objects. This supports children who may be Gestalt Language Processors by helping them associate the phrase with the object and its meaning.

Try to avoid making phrases overly time-specific, as this can create pressure around immediate transitions. Consistency is key – use the same phrase for the same object each time.

Core Boards

Core boards are highly versatile resources that can be adapted to suit an individual child, activity, area, or communication need.

They can be used to:

- Support children to communicate wants, needs, feelings, and choices
- Model communication methods for peers and adults
- Encourage interaction with children who communicate in alternative ways

To begin with, you may create a simple core board containing universal core vocabulary that can be used across all areas and activities.

From there, boards can become more specific. For example:

- A snack-time board could include symbols for food choices, equipment, and words such as “more”, “finished”, “like”, and “don’t like”
- A topic core board may include symbols or visuals linked to a specific activity, such as playdough. This could include colours, tools, actions, descriptive language and core vocabulary such as roll, cut, more, help, big, small, my turn, and your turn to support communication and interaction during play.
- Individualised boards may include different areas of your setting, favourite activities, emotions, and daily care requirements such as a child’s packed lunch, water bottle, and symbols for the toilet.

Where possible, use symbols rather than photographs to reduce confusion if real-life objects differ from the images shown.

Model the use of core boards consistently and ensure they remain accessible throughout the environment. However, it is important to remember that children should never be pressured or forced to use them.

Including Gestalt Language on Core Boards

Gestalt phrases can also be incorporated onto communal or individual boards for children who may be GLPs.

For example:

- “Let’s go to the garden”
- “Time for snack”
- “All finished now”

This helps children connect language meaningfully to routines, places, and experiences.

Visual Supports

Visual support can take many forms, including:

- Photos
- Symbols
- Now and next boards
- Family and friend books

Displaying photos of different areas within the setting helps children understand where they can go and supports independent choice making.

Practitioners may also keep collections of symbols or photos on lanyards or keyrings to use in the moment when preparing children for transitions or supporting understanding.

Visual supports can help children understand concepts such as:

- Stop
- Wait
- Finished
- Feelings and emotions



Now and Next Boards

Now and next boards help children understand what is happening now and what will happen next. This can reduce anxiety, support predictability, and promote a sense of choice and control.

These are typically introduced once children demonstrate understanding of earlier visual supports such as objects of reference, photographs, or single symbols.

Family and Friend Books

Having photos of family members, familiar adults, and nursery friends available in scrapbooks or photo albums can provide comfort, familiarity, and reassurance – particularly for children with additional needs.

These books:

- Support children to process important relationships
- Create opportunities for meaningful interaction and communication
- Promote belonging, emotional security, and connection.

Makaton

Makaton is a communication programme that uses signs, symbols, and speech to support understanding and communication.

Makaton provides children with additional visual and physical cues to support spoken language. It can also empower children who are unable to communicate verbally, or who find verbal communication difficult, to express themselves through gesture and sign.

A useful starting point may be to identify and learn 10 key signs that are meaningful within your setting and relevant to the children you support.

These signs can then be consistently used:

- During play
- Within routines and transitions
- During group activities
- In stories, songs, and nursery rhymes

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Alternative communication methods promote inclusion and ensure that every child has the opportunity to have their voice heard.

Some children may not yet realise they have a voice or that their thoughts, wants, and feelings can be communicated and valued. This is where the role of the practitioner becomes vital.

By modelling and embedding communication supports throughout daily practice, we show children that their voice matters – that they can make choices, express needs, and be understood.

These approaches also educate other children about diversity, communication differences, and inclusion, helping to create environments built on empathy, understanding, acceptance, and support.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

“When we use visual support at the same time as talking, we give children extra time to understand, prepare for change, and think about how to respond.” - **Speech and Language UK**

“For those who have experienced the frustration of being unable to communicate meaningfully or effectively, Makaton really can help. Makaton takes away that frustration and enables individuals to connect with other people and the world around them.” - **The Makaton Charity**

References

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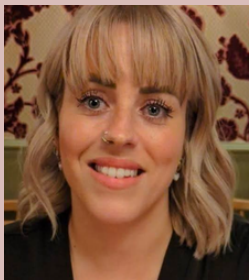
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THANK YOU FOR READING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon Ball is a Senior Advanced Teaching Assistant (SEND) and has worked with children with a wide range of additional needs for her whole career. She specialises in supporting children with social communication difficulties and in her working role works with children, families and professionals in this field. Here she writes about the importance of including all children and gives some practical advice that you could use in your setting.