

Social Communication

What are social communication skills?

Social communication is a social interaction where people communicate through shared experiences and emotions with another person. These skills are important in order to build social relationships with other people.

Social Communication has three components, including:

- The ability to use language for different purposes (e.g. to greet, inform people about things, demand, command, request).
- The ability to adapt language to meet the needs of the listener or situation (e.g. talking differently to another child versus an adult, talking louder when there is lots of noise, being aware of the listener's knowledge and adapting the amount of information we provide as needed).
- Following the often “unspoken” rules of conversation and storytelling (e.g. taking turns in conversations, looking at the speaker, standing at an appropriate distance from the speaker, using facial expressions and gestures). ***The ‘rules’ of conversation are often different across cultures, within cultures and within different families.***

How can you tell if a child has difficulties with social communication?

It is not unusual for children to have social communication difficulties in a few situations. However, if they occur often, they may need further support for this.

A child with social communication difficulties may:

- Find it difficult to initiate or end interactions with others.
- Have difficulty remaining on topic in conversation.
- Not try to gain the attention of adults because they do not know how to or does so inappropriately.
- Tend to stand too close to the speaker and is unaware of personal space.
- Tell stories in a disorganised way.
- Have difficulty looking at the speaker or may look too intensely at the speaker.
- Dominate conversations with their preferred topics or discuss topics without considering the level of knowledge from the listener.
- Does not ask for clarification when they haven't understood.
- Be unable to interpret the tone of voice in others (e.g. does not recognise an angry versus a happy voice).
- Use language in a limited way (e.g. only gives directions or makes statements but doesn't greet or ask questions).
- Have difficulty understanding another person's point of view.
- Have difficulty making and/or maintaining friendships.

Strategies for supporting social communication

- Encourage the child to become an active listener, support the following with pictures or symbols e.g. look at the speaker, sit still, think about the words he is saying and try to talk about the same things.
- Don't expect eye contact if this is uncomfortable for the child; instead, suggest they turn their bodies to face you so that you know they are listening even if they cannot make eye contact.
- Use Circle time to teach key principals of good social interaction e.g. listening, looking, waiting, turn taking and responding to others. Adults should model appropriate behaviour.
- Encourage the child through modelling to greet and say goodbye to adults and peers using appropriate phrases.
- Model how to maintain a conversation by nodding, maintaining eye contact and using verbal fillers such as uh-hum, ummm, ok etc...
- Avoid allowing the child to change the subject, pause, and remind them of the subject. Recognise appropriateness for the audience – highlight times when the child has given you too little, or too much information e.g. let them know if you don't understand and highlight when the detail is irrelevant because you already know it.
- Encourage turn-taking, initially through games, and then through conversation. Ensure the child is aware of the need to take turns in conversation so that each person has a time when they talk and when they listen.
- Try to avoid being side-tracked by off-topic interruptions. This can easily become a child's monologue, rather than a reciprocal conversation. Praise the child for their input but remind them of the topic and request they continue with related information.
- When setting group tasks, make sure all group members are certain what the task is and what the expectations are. Try to allocate specific roles (e.g. cutting the tissue paper, sticking the paper on the card) to make it easier for children to join in.
- Provide opportunities for structured activities throughout the day. This can be easier than unstructured socialising. These may be activities supported by an adult.

Developing social communication skills

Some children need support to develop their social communication skills. This can be for a variety of different reasons, and they may be at different stages of social communication development.

Intensive Interaction

Some children find it difficult to use intentional communication and may not yet be aware that their behaviour can influence changes in their environment, through another person.

Some children may not yet appear to notice or respond to another person within an interaction or allow another person to join their play space or activity.

See our handout on '**Intensive Interaction**' for more information.

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

Some children have difficulty initiating an interaction independently. They may not yet be aware that their behaviour can influence changes in their environment, through another person.

Some children may not seek an adult to make a request, or to indicate a want or need. They may not yet understand that an adult/another person, can facilitate this need being met. See our handout on '**PECS**' for more information.

People Games

These games are where the child is playing with a person, rather than a toy. Playing with you is the best way for a child to learn how to interact and communicate. When a child is having fun and is relaxed they are more likely to be motivated to communicate with you.

People games may include:

- Chasing games
- Tickling/squeezing
- Soft play
- Peek-a-boo
- Singing nursery rhymes

People games help develop:

- The child's attention and awareness of engaging with another person.
- The child's awareness that they can make something enjoyable happen through their behaviour/communication.

Tips for people games:

- Start the game in the same way each time and repeat it several times so the child is familiar with the activity.
- Use the same, simple language throughout the game/routine.
- Once the child is familiar with the game, begin to leave a short pause. This will provide the child with the opportunity to communicate with or without words that they would like the game to continue. They may communicate this by looking at you, making a sound, flapping their hands, saying a word, or pushing your hand.
- When the child has communicated in any way that they would like the game to continue, respond as if they had said the word and continue with the game. Do not wait for the child to say the word or expect them to repeat the word. Simply say the word for them and continue with the game. The child will begin to learn what the word means and may start to use it too.

People Toys

People toys are toys the child will need your help to operate or play. People toys are a great way to encourage the child to communicate and interact with you.

People games may include:

- Wind-up toys
- Bubbles
- Balloons



Tips for people toys:

- Pause within the routine and wait for the child to show you that they would like the routine to continue. The child may look at you, make a sound, jump or say the word. For example, when you blow up a balloon, and wait, the child may: mime blowing, look at you, or say 'blow'.
- Avoid asking the child to repeat what you say. If the child feels under pressure to talk, they will be less willing to play with you.

Turn-Taking

Turn-taking with another adult/child in play in an important interaction skill for children to learn. Through these activities, children learn to wait, listen, and share activities with other people.

Tips for turn-taking:

- Use consistent language to claim your turn e.g. 'my turn', 'Emma's turn'. Describe the child's turn as 'my turn' so if they copy your words it will make sense from their point of view.
- You could use a picture (my turn/your turn) to show whose turn it is. The adult should also model how to do good waiting.
- If needed, allow the child to have more than one turn until they are ready to take equal turns in activities.
- Give lots of praise when the child has waited for their turn.
- Initially you might want to start with just the adult and then build in another child.

Activity Ideas:

- Threading beads
- Building a tower
- Completing a puzzle
- Snap
- Turning over a card and then showing the group
- Taking an object / picture out of a feely bag
- Jumping frogs
- Circle time.

Encouraging Social Interaction with peers

There are many ways in which adults can support children to socially interact with their peers within the setting.

- Encourage turn-taking. You may need to use visual rules/cues such as objects, pictures to support.
- Give the child the experience of responsibility e.g. handing out the drinks, collecting in the plates or asking his peers to find their shoes.
- Accept any interaction the child shows towards his peers whether this is verbal or non-verbal.
- Encourage recognition of another's needs e.g. child collects his coat and is supported to get another person's coat.
- Use mutual help activities to encourage interdependency. Find activities where the child may need help from a peer e.g. sharing an activity of Mr. Potato, putting a puzzle together, fixing Lego, holding a jug whilst other child pours water.
- You may need to prompt the child with the words they need to use e.g. 'Would you like milk or water?' or 'I need that piece of puzzle'.
- Find or make up social stories where people work together or where they have had to initiate communication. Please speak with the Speech and Language Therapy Team if you would like more information on social stories.
- Encourage the child to observe how others behave e.g. 'Look, Sam asked before he took the pen'.
- During times of social interaction, e.g. snack time, lunchtime or show and tell sessions encourage peers to question each other. This will help to build up a catalogue of questions children can ask each other and will further build conversation skills e.g. 'Sam what are you drinking?'

Playing with a friend

Social play is an important part of children learning to develop their social skills and to develop friendships.

Children increase in confidence when they have opportunities to practice new skills, and by watching and playing with others in a safe or familiar environment.

Adults can structure play activities to provide opportunities to develop these skills. Initially, the adult may need to be present, to model, to scaffold, and to support the children to engage with each other. Gradually, as children's skills develop and they are able to interact with each other more independently, the adult can reduce their involvement, and perhaps watch from a distance.

Adults can:

- Engage two children in identical play e.g. drawing, sticking, puzzles.
- Build a tower where both children have some bricks and take it in turns to add one onto the tower.
- Structure activities on equipment and/or toys that require two people e.g. sea-saw, pushing each other in a car, and support the children to help each other.
- Model the use of turn-taking by using specific vocabulary e.g. 'George's turn'.
- Comment on what each child is doing and draw their attention to each other e.g. 'look what Ivan is doing, he's drawing a picture!'.

Playing in groups

Playing in groups is important for children to learn new skills by observing other children.

Playing in groups helps develop social skills such as turn-taking, eye-contact, negotiation, and conflict resolution. This all forms part of social and emotional learning and development.

Adults can play alongside the children initially. You may also start with fewer children, and gradually increase the group size as children become more able to engage and interact with a number of their peers.

Activities may include

- A pretend tea-party with each child having a toy.
- Play shops where one child is the shop keeper and the others buy food.
- Chase or playground games e.g. 'what's the time Mr Wolf', or 'stuck in the mud'.
- Ball games.
- Race games e.g. three-legged races, obstacle courses, relay races.
- Simon says.