

# Building Communication

*A guide for families, therapists, and professionals supporting children with complex communication needs*

Every child has a way of communicating, even when they do not use spoken language.

For children with Level 2 or Level 3 autism who have limited or no functional speech, expressing their needs, interests, and feelings may be particularly challenging. Some may also have associated intellectual disabilities, sensory sensitivities, or difficulties understanding spoken instructions.

However, a child's limited use of speech does not tell us everything about what they understand or how they learn.

Before deciding how to teach communication, we need to discover how the child already connects with the world.

What interests them? What captures their attention? How do they express enjoyment, discomfort, or curiosity? What helps them feel comfortable enough to explore and interact?

These observations can guide us towards communication methods that are meaningful and accessible to the individual child.

## 1. Begin with a Comfortable First Meeting

Whenever possible, arrange the first meeting in a familiar environment, such as the child's home.

For some children, an unfamiliar setting, new people, or direct expectations to perform can make it difficult to demonstrate their abilities.

A familiar environment may allow the child to feel more comfortable and behave more naturally.

Before the meeting, speak with the family about the child's interests, favourite activities, sensory preferences, and existing ways of communicating.

Use this information to prepare a small selection of materials that may appeal to the child.

**Materials to consider:** Sensory and play materials

Favourite sensory toys, building blocks, LEGO, or other familiar play objects.

**Pictures and books:**

Photographs of favourite people, objects, places, and characters; picture books or familiar stories.

**Visual learning materials:**

Colourful letters, numbers, simple written words, drawing materials, or matching activities.

**Digital activities:**

Familiar apps, music, videos, or interactive activities suited to the child's interests and abilities.

There is no need to present everything at once. Too many unfamiliar objects or activities may overwhelm some children.

Instead, make a few appealing materials available and allow the child to explore them freely.

Avoid immediately asking questions, giving instructions, or expecting the child to demonstrate a particular skill.

Observe what they choose, how they explore, what holds their attention, and whether they invite you to participate.

The purpose of this first meeting is not to measure how much the child can do on demand.

It is to begin understanding how this particular child learns, communicates, and connects.

## **2. Discover the Child's Interests and Natural Communication**

As the child explores, pay attention to their individual patterns of attention, interaction, and expression.

Notice which objects or activities they return to, how they indicate a preference, and what happens when an enjoyable activity pauses or changes.

Some children may reach towards an object, lead an adult by the hand, use eye gaze, make a sound, or move closer to something they want.

Others may communicate through gestures, facial expressions, pictures, written words, or a familiar digital device.

Also notice how the child responds to your presence.

Do they enjoy having you nearby? Do they prefer to explore independently before allowing you to join? Do they respond more comfortably when you demonstrate an activity rather than explain it verbally?

These observations help identify possible starting points for communication.

For example, a child who enjoys matching pictures may be interested in using photographs to make choices. A child who recognizes written words may find printed labels helpful. Another child may be more interested in communicating through familiar objects, gestures, or a digital device.

Do not assume that an interest automatically indicates understanding of a particular communication method. Explore the possibilities gradually and observe how the child responds.

Share these observations with the family, who can help you understand whether the responses are familiar, meaningful, or specific to the situation.

### **3. Explore Different Ways to Communicate**

Communication is not limited to speech.

Children can express themselves through gestures, signs, pictures, objects, written words, typing, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems.

The aim is to identify and support communication methods that the child can understand and use meaningfully.



#### **Gestures and simple signs**

Introduce familiar gestures or signs during everyday activities, such as "more," "go," "eat," "drink," "yes," and "no."

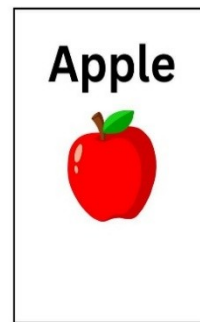
Pair the gesture with the spoken word and the corresponding action. Allow the child to respond in their own way without requiring them to imitate the gesture.



#### **Photographs and picture communication**

Use photographs of familiar objects, people, places, and activities to offer choices or support communication.

Some children may understand real photographs more readily than abstract symbols, while others may respond well to illustrations or established picture systems.



### **Written words and visual associations**

For children who show an interest in letters or written words, pair clear printed words with familiar objects, pictures, or actions.

This can help explore whether written language offers another accessible route to understanding and expression.



### **Communication devices and apps**

Explore AAC tools suited to the child's individual needs, including picture-based communication apps, speech-generating devices, or text-based systems.

An AAC-experienced speech-language pathologist can help assess access needs and select an appropriate system.

A child does not need to master gestures or picture cards before being offered access to a communication device.

These approaches can be used together. A child may communicate through gestures in one situation, photographs in another, and a digital device when they need to express something more complex.

The goal is not to make the child use one particular method.

It is to provide accessible ways for them to express what matters to them.

## **4. Make Communication Part of Everyday Life**

Once a useful communication method has been identified, introduce it naturally into the child's daily activities.

Begin with familiar routines and interests rather than creating separate communication exercises for every interaction.

For example, if a child enjoys a particular song, you might pause briefly before playing it again and model the word or gesture for "more."

If they show interest in a favourite snack, offer a choice between two familiar options using objects, photographs, or their communication device.

During play, model simple words or messages such as "go," "stop," "again," or "my turn," depending on the child's interests and abilities.

Allow sufficient time for the child to process the interaction and respond.

Avoid repeatedly asking the same question or withholding something essential until the child produces a particular response.

Communication should help the child participate in everyday life, not become a condition for having their basic needs met.

Families, therapists, teachers, and other communication partners can support consistency by using familiar methods across different environments.

However, the pace and expectations should remain responsive to the child.

## **5. Respond to Every Meaningful Attempt**

A child's willingness to communicate can grow when they discover that their actions and expressions have an effect on the people around them.

When a child reaches towards an object, acknowledge their interest.

When they indicate a choice, respond to it whenever possible.

When they communicate that they do not want something, respect their refusal.

And when they use a gesture, picture, sound, or communication device, respond to the meaning of their message rather than focusing only on whether they used the method correctly.

For example, if a child selects a picture of a favourite activity, acknowledge the choice and, when possible, help them access that activity.

If the activity is not available, explain this in a way the child can understand and offer an alternative.

This helps the child learn that communication is a two-way process in which their preferences, feelings, and choices matter.

The most meaningful response to communication is being understood.

## **6. Build on What the Child Shows You**

Communication development is not always linear.

A child may use a new method successfully in one setting but need additional support in another. They may demonstrate an ability during a favourite activity that is not yet apparent in a structured learning session.

Continue observing, adapting, and exploring.

As the child becomes familiar with a communication method, gradually introduce additional opportunities to use it with other people, in different activities, and in new environments.

Work with the family to identify what is meaningful to the child and what changes are making a difference in everyday life.

Progress may include initiating an interaction, expressing a preference more clearly, refusing an unwanted activity, sharing enjoyment, or communicating with someone outside the immediate family.

Each of these developments can contribute to greater participation, independence, and connection.

## **Final Thoughts**

Building communication begins with recognizing that the child already has something to communicate.

Our task is to discover how they express themselves, understand what interests and motivates them, and provide accessible ways for them to participate more fully in the world around them.

We do not need to begin with a predetermined teaching method or expect every child to follow the same developmental pathway.

Instead, we observe, listen, respond, and adapt.

The child helps us find the starting point. Our role is to build from there.

