



COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG CHILDREN

What does good look like when communicating with Disabled children and young children?

A practice standard on expectations for social workers

Why is it so important?

A child's right to communicate is preserved and respected through Article 23 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child. The Children Act 1989 and 2004 also enshrine the duty to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children.

Communication is a vital and continuing process for us all. It is the means by which all people make contact, share experiences, understand their world and find their place within it. Communication is the way by which we obtain information and use that information to make decisions and choices. We all use communication to express ourselves and our interests our dislikes or what we need.

For many people information is exchanged using speech but where people do use speech as their preferred method of communication, it is clear that we do not solely rely on words to convey meaning.

Given that the spoken and written word can be interpreted to mean very different things, extra effort must be made to ensure that disabled children and young children are given the opportunity to express their wishes and views.

How do we achieve good communication?

- Every child communicates what they are feeling and therefore there should never been an occasion where a SW reports that the child is unable to communicate due to their disability or age.
- SWs need to view that the Disabled child has a voice, and that it is worth the time eliciting what this is. Attitudes are the biggest barrier to effective communication.
- Every child should have a communication profile if they require one, which is updated annually. This should be clearly recorded on the file.

- SWs need to know what specific methods of communication best suit the child. Use the same method of communication as others to minimise confusion.
- SWs need to know whether the child has access to the specific vocabulary in order to be able to communicate what has happened with the SW. This will often involve a discussion with their Speech and language therapist who may need to adapt the child's communication aid in order to facilitate the conversation. This means that the SW needs to plan ahead for their intervention
- SWs should record on FWi how they have supported the child to express their wishes / feelings.
- SWs should give children plenty of time to both process what they have said and to enable the child to formulate their responses. It is more important that an accurate communication occurs.
- Do not make assumptions about what a child is trying to say. A smile does not necessarily mean that a disabled child is happy. The child needs to be observed
- SWs must get to know the child through observation and discussion with key professionals. Communication may be very subtle, such as flickering eyelids or other small movements – there is no link to ability to verbally communicate and learning ability.
- SWs must understand the cultural expectations – what is acceptable in the specific culture regarding communication. Home sign language may have developed which is specific to that family.
- SW's must not assume that Disabled children, who do not verbally communicate in English, do not understand or communicate in their home family language eg. Lip-reading Polish.
- SWs must consider where they are going to see the child so that it is conducive to good communication.
- SWs must consider if they have asked another adult to support the communication whether it will inhibit the child's responses.
- SWs must understand what triggers particular behaviours in the child and must know how the child might react in these circumstances.
- SWs should not pretend that they understand what the child has communicated – they should ask for it to be repeated. There is no point recording an incorrect communication.
- SWs should have specific training to increase their strategies to communicate.
- SWs should use people where possible who know the child to understand and recognise the communication.
- SW's should upload all visual communications on to FWi.

- Children communicate through play; they may have an 'All about me' book which will introduce themselves.
- SWs need to have the correct tools / visual aids / feelings pictures/ symbols/ pictures / PECS/photographs to create a social story/ sign language interpreters.
- SWs should avoid the use of jargon and should use visual aids to support their verbal communication.
- SWs should consider the role of advocacy services with Disabled and young children.

Communication is a two way process and a shared responsibility. SWs need to make sure that what is said or communicated is properly understood and in turn SWs must make efforts to ensure that the information they think they got from a disabled child is correct and that they do not make assumptions based on faulty interpretation.

With time and effort every child can express themselves and be assisted in making their voice heard.

The Additional Needs and Disabilities Service has a *Communicate: In Print* licence, and can assist professionals to produce specific information using signs and symbols to communicate with children and young people about their feelings and wishes.

