



**Down's Syndrome
Association**

A Registered Charity No. 1061474

Communications Series



C. Encouraging Communication

For Children

A Down's Syndrome Association publication

Our Information Team are here to help

Please see our website for up-to-date information: www.downs-syndrome.org.uk

If you would like to talk about the activities or where to start, then please get in touch with our helpline by calling 0333 1212 300 or by emailing us on info@downs-syndrome.org.uk.

Helpline Monday - Friday 10am-4pm | Telephone: 0333 1212 300

Encouraging communication

Please read the information in the Keys to Communication and Pre-language guides before using this booklet.

Some children with Down's syndrome have good communication skills without even speaking. It is often easy to anticipate their needs. Siblings are particularly good at talking for their brother and sister. The whole family can be very great at knowing what the child with Down's syndrome needs and wants.

Sometimes this can lead children to use the minimum words and gestures required to get what they want.

To encourage communication, you need to choose something your child really likes. This could be a favourite food or a drink, a cuddle or a particular toy. Choose just one thing at first and create opportunities throughout the day for your child to ask for this thing.

It can be difficult to know what you can reasonably expect. Observe your child carefully and make a note of what you see and hear. This will help you to know exactly what your child can do to communicate. Your child may use a look, sound, gesture, sign or word.

The following suggestions will encourage your child to be a more active communicator.

1. Ensure there is a need to communicate

Avoid anticipating your child's needs. Some children will interact less if it is easier to wait for a helpful sibling or adult to give them a drink, etc.

You may need to create a reason for your child to communicate. You can do this by capturing her interest. You could present something silly or amusing, or create a situation in which you can expect a response. For example:

- Give your child an empty cup and say *'Here's your drink'*
- Turn on the television with no sound
- Put your child in the bath with no water etc.

Any reaction from your child can be taken as a form of communication. You can make it fun by responding with animation and commenting on what you've forgotten.

Remember to give your child plenty of time to respond.



2. Let your child take the lead

Follow your child's lead! Engage with her interests. This could be anything: an animal or toy, running water, a leaf, a piece of paper. Use your child's focus of interest as an opportunity to communicate.

3. Provide a model to imitate

A) Indirect model (choices)

Offering choices will encourage your child to communicate. Begin by offering a choice between one item that you know he will like and one item that he will not want. Show him the choice of two items (use pointing, gesture, signing and words). Use hand over hand signing to show your child how to sign each word. Then give him plenty of time to attempt to sign. You can accept signs that are not quite correct.

- *'Do you want teddy or dolly?'*
- *'Do you want to look at X book or Y book?'*
- *'Would you like water or milk?'*

It is important to give your child the item she chooses straight away even if you feel she hasn't fully understood the question.

Later on you can ask your child more open-ended questions. For example:

- 'What would you like to drink?'
- 'Which toy do you want?'

Direct model

This is like an instruction telling your child directly what he should say and sign.

- 'If you need your coat, say 'coat'.'
- 'If you need help with that, say 'help.''

Try the indirect model first and use the direct model when you are sure your child is able to imitate the word.

4. Avoid “yes | no” questions

A general comment gives much more opportunity for children to communicate than a yes/no question such as 'Do you want a banana?' 'Yes'

Here are some examples of more general questions:

Yes No Question	Alternative
'Do you want a drink?'	'I expect you're thirsty' (as the adult pours herself a drink).
'Shall we look in my bag?'	'I've got something exciting in my bag.'
'Shall I tell you what Peter and Sally made this morning?'	'Your friends were cooking this morning.'



5. Respond to ALL your child's attempts to communicate

Respond to all of your child's communications! Accept any attempt she makes to request information, objects or actions, **regardless of errors in sounds or signs**. At the moment the focus is to help your child develop a basic vocabulary to communicate her needs.

Reinforce the request by responding to it immediately. Praise your child's attempt, even if the timing is not convenient! For example:

- 'You said 'juice' so here is your juice!'
- 'You want your book? Here it is! Let's share it later.'

Your child may not understand all the words you are saying. You can use short, simple sentences, together with signs and gestures to reinforce your spoken words.

Here is a detailed example of how to encourage your child to communicate at snack time. This is what you do:

- Break some food (something your child particularly likes) into very small pieces.
- Sit opposite your child at a small table. Make sure he can see your face clearly. Keep the food out of your child's reach!
- Hold a small piece of food near your face.
- Encourage your child **to look at you** by saying her name. As soon as she looks at you (and the food) pop a piece into her mouth. Do this until your child has got the idea and she looks at you every time she is ready for another piece.
- The next step is to encourage your child **to look at you and make a sound or sign**. Do this by holding the food but don't give the food until he has looked at you *and* made a sound or sign. *As soon as* he looks in your direction and makes a sound, put the food in the child's mouth and praise him. Carry on until your child has the idea and nearly always 'asks' for food.
- The next stage is to help your child to consistently use **sounds or signs that can be recognised as a word for the food**. Listen carefully to the sounds your child is making. Every time your child makes a particular sound for the word, give her the food. Praise her and repeat the food word. Continue to do this until she has got the idea and is saying the same sound every time she 'asks' for that food. The same applies to signs. If your child attempts to sign for a particular food, even if it is not clear, this still counts as communication.

This exercise will help your child to learn some important lessons:

- Non-verbal social skills such as eye contact.
- Language has a purpose - he can use language to get what he wants.
- He has to ask for what he wants

You can use the same exercise described above in other situations too!

Encourage your child to 'ask' before you lift her up.

- If your child holds up his arms to you, say 'Do you want to come up?' and emphasise the word 'up'.
- Repeat the word 'up' several times. If your child makes a sound or attempts a sign immediately reward her by lifting her up, smiling and saying something like 'Up you come'.

Encourage your child to ask you to throw a ball, push him on a swing or begin any other enjoyable activity.

Another popular game for small children is turning on lights.

- Stand with your child in your arms, so she can see your face, at the entrance of a dark room by the wall light switch.
- Wait for a few seconds quietly in the dark so your child can fully realise that it is dark.
- Slowly say 'Ready...Steady...' while holding your finger on the light switch and looking expectant (raise your eyebrows).
- As you say 'Go!' turn on the light and change your facial expression to one of pleasure (by smiling).
- Continue to play this game over several days or weeks. Each time wait expectantly until your child responds to 'Ready...Steady...'. For example, your child might wriggle or make a sound.
- As soon as your child responds turn on the light! This will teach your child that his response (wriggling or making a sound) has made the light turn on.
- Gradually you can stop turning on the light in response to a wriggle and wait until she makes a sound.
- When your child is able to make a sound like 'Go' you turn on the light only when he makes this sound.

The Down's Syndrome Association provides information and support on all aspects of living with Down's syndrome.

We also work to champion the rights of people with Down's syndrome, by campaigning for change and challenging discrimination.

A wide range of Down's Syndrome Association publications can be downloaded free of charge from our website.

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