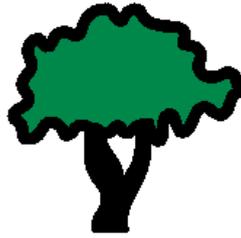
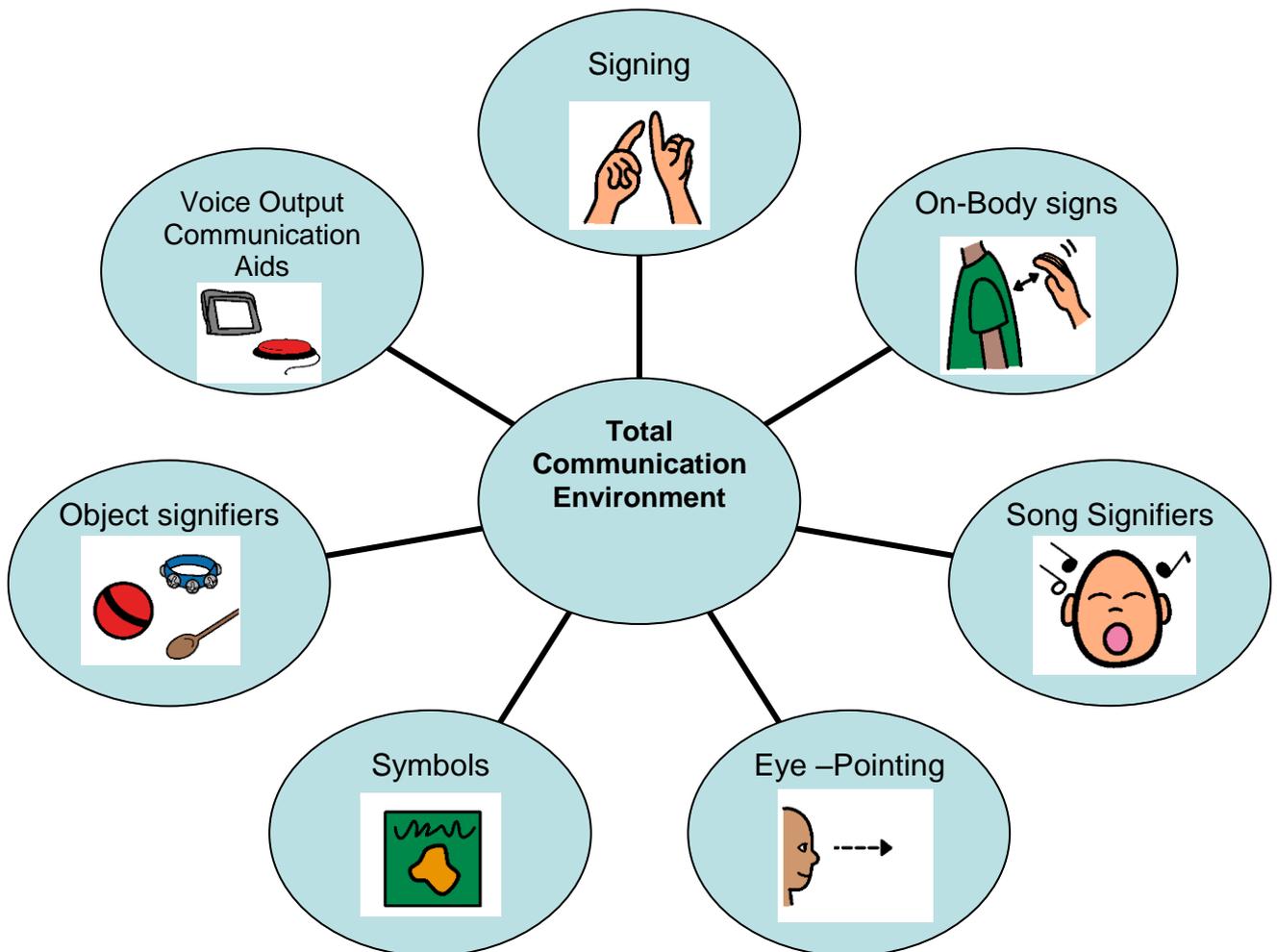


Oaklands School



Our Total Communication Environment



Our Total Communication Environment at Oaklands.

Children who come to Oaklands school have profound learning difficulties. This affects all their learning including learning about communication.

Who is this booklet for?

Anybody working with, living with or caring for our children.

This might be:-

- parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents and friends
- new staff, visitors, volunteers, new after school care staff and respite workers.

Reading this booklet will help you to understand the different ways the children are learning to communicate, and help you to use these ways as well.

What is communication?

Usually we think of communication as spoken conversation between people, but it is actually more than that. We also use facial expressions, gestures and body language all the time. Using these we give each other important messages, often without knowing it.

Most people learn to communicate as they grow from a baby to an adult. However, if that development is slowed down or interrupted a child may not learn about:-

- interacting with people in a meaningful way
- watching people when they are talking
- listening to people when they are talking
- the meaning of words, or
- how to have a conversation.

What happens when communication does not develop as expected?

If you can't understand what people are saying to you and you have no way of telling people what you want or feel the world is a very scary place.

You can become frustrated or upset because:

- you need something – but can't tell anyone what it is
- you don't want to have or do something – but you don't know how to tell anyone
- you don't know what is going to happen next
- you don't know where you are going
- you don't know where your mum/dad/favourite carer is going and if they are ever going to come back.

You can simply decide it is all too difficult and withdraw into your own world and become very passive.

Children without a good communication system are often frightened and frustrated children. The only thing they have left to communicate with is their behaviour. The more frightened and frustrated they are, the more likely it is that the behaviour will be challenging behaviour – biting, hitting, kicking and tantrumming.

This behaviour is communication. Sometimes we (their grown ups, brothers and sisters and friends) know exactly what it is they want or don't want. Very often we don't. This can be very frustrating for us. Sometimes even though we know what they want, we can't give it to them, but we can't get them to understand the reason why.

It is **really important** that children learn some form of communication.

The Total Communication Environment

At Oaklands we have a Total Communication Environment; this involves using many forms of communication all at the same time;

1. to enable the children to choose to learn and understand at least one
2. to support one form e.g. speech by another form e.g. symbols

Our Total Communication Environment involves:-

1. Gestures, facial expressions and body language
2. Eye-pointing
3. Object signifiers
4. Speech
5. Signing – On-body signing and Signalong signs
6. Song signifiers
7. Photos
8. Symbols

Why do we need a Total Communication Environment?

All of the pupils at Oaklands have some problems with communication.

Some pupils do not understand that the noises we make when we talk have meaning. They do not understand the purpose of speech.

Some pupils understand that when we talk we mean something, but they don't know what it is we mean.

Some pupils understand some key words and can say some words but these pronunciations may not be clear to everyone; they therefore need another system to support their spoken language and understanding.

All of our pupils, whatever their level of understanding, have much greater problems understanding communication when they are under stress and at these times they need more support.

All people are better at learning in one way than another. Some like to listen, some prefer to see things and some learn best by doing things. In general our pupils prefer to learn by looking at things. Indeed, many of our pupils have a particular strength in learning by watching.

Listening to speech and working out what it means at the same time can be quite hard. Spoken words are said and then they disappear, you have to remember them and work out what they mean. This is not always easy. Some of our pupils work out what words mean very slowly and so miss out on the whole sentence.

They need supports.

In Oaklands we support speech with gestures, object signifiers, photos, signing, and symbols. We give visual support. Objects, photos and symbols remain visible and allow children the time to work out what they mean. We continue to use speech as well as signing and symbols because we do not know who will learn to speak or understand speech and who will not, and we always work towards the goal of children speaking if they can. However, the most urgent need is for each and every child in our school to have some system of communication that they can use.

How do we start?

Early Interaction/Play

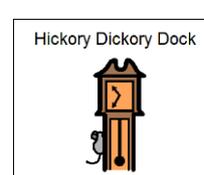
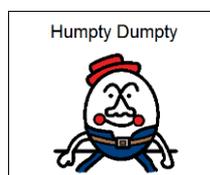
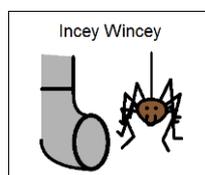
This is a **very important** stage and is the basis from which all further communication skills will develop.

Early interaction involves joining in with someone else and having fun. Through playing and having fun with somebody else a child learns to look at a person, to listen, to take turns, to copy and to join in with activities. Children learn to communicate through play. Some of our children are quite difficult to play with, but this does not mean that it is OK to give up. The children at Oaklands enjoy a variety of games and interactions; try various toys, nursery rhymes to see what they like and respond to. Play can be used to encourage communication by:-

- Stopping the play and waiting for any sign that the child would like it to continue.
- Imitating the child – joining in with the things s/he likes doing.
- Using simple repetitive language like Ready steady go, what happens if you leave off the word go and wait?
- It is important that you enjoy the playing and laugh and be happy. It is important that we communicate to our children that they are fun to play with.

Songs and Nursery Rhymes

Our pupils generally love music and songs. At Oaklands our children listen to songs every day, they are used to signal the start and end of an activity (song signifiers). The children can make choices about which song they would like using symbols or object signifiers e.g. a toy bus for the Wheels on the bus. Here are some of the symbols we use for some nursery rhymes:



The adult leads the song, singing the song slowly and clearly and signing the key words (the most important words). With some songs the adult may use finger puppets to mime the song e.g. 2 little dicky birds. Later the children may take turns using the finger puppets. With other songs the adults may pause to leave a gap for the children to fill in using a communication aid such as BigMac, the child would be supported to press the switch that would play the pre-recorded message (e.g. 5 fat sausages the children may fill in the “Bang”). Children are supported to join in with

actions as in the Wheels of the bus. By repeating the songs again and again, the children learn to use gestures, signs, tunes and words.

If you would like symbols for the different songs at home – ask your child's teacher.

This is a good time to introduce children to books with clear pictures and the simple repeated lines of the songs. We use commercially produced books which are easily available in book shops, but we also make some of our own which can also be listened to on the computer.

Song signifiers



Song signifiers are also used at the beginning and the end of each activity. There are different tunes for different activities but the finish song is always the same:

Finish song – sing to the tune of 'Frere Jaque' - *** → insert name of activity

*** is finished

*** is finished

Time to stop, time to stop

*** is finished

*** is finished

Time to stop, time to stop

Song signifiers help to develop awareness and anticipation skills. They are another tool that we can use to help children understand their environment.

Making choices

Some of our pupils do not understand the purpose of communication. They do not understand what it is for. Others may understand but are simply not very interested in doing it. They prefer their own world.

A very basic understandable form of communication is asking for things you want. It is easy to understand the purpose of asking for things and the good thing is that you get a result, a reward. The reward may well motivate you into having another go.

One of our major starting points for making and communicating choices at Oaklands is snack. Most of our pupils like snack. For the purpose of helping children communicate we have snacks they enjoy – usually crisps, biscuits and fruit. We break snack into small pieces so that the children have many opportunities to ask for a piece.

The adult leads the snack. At any snack time at Oaklands there will be children at different stages of communication. This is a good thing. It offers the opportunity for children to learn from each other. It also offers the opportunity for children to help each other. Keeping snack a happy relaxed social affair. The adult interacts with each child at their level. The adult speaks, signs and encourages the use of symbols.

At the beginning we encourage children to make choices by looking at, reaching for or pointing to what they want. This can then be developed into a word, a sign or a symbol. Use of single words, signs and symbols are gradually developed into

sentences by the adult's example and encouragement. The adult always speaks, signs and reads the photos or symbols. The children are all encouraged to do the same.

Throughout the school day we offer the children other choices using the same systems e.g.

- They choose songs in circle
- They choose toys they want to play with
- They choose leisure activities
- They choose food at lunchtime
- They choose ingredients in cookery

Situational understanding.

At Oaklands we involve the children in routines. Every day we have circle, snack, playtime, lunch (to name but a few). We repeat and we repeat and we repeat. Gradually the children begin to pick up clues about what is happening. They see snack table being set up. They think "snack" and when they are asked to, they sit down in their place. They do not necessarily understand the words, but they understand what is happening, the situation, in time this will help them with understanding the words.

The children find these routines very reassuring. They can understand and anticipate what is happening. These experiences are repeated over and over again, day after day. It is the repetition that helps children to learn.

Timetables

As the children learn the different routines of the day they are also introduced to timetables. Our pupils can be very distressed when they do not know what is happening or what is going to happen. So from the earliest days in school we give them clear clues as to what they are going to do next.

All the children in the school have their timetables in a visual form.

Some children who are not yet ready to understand photographs or symbols have object signifiers to communicate what they are going to do next. Object signifier is a thing which is meaningful for the child. Examples are:-

Holding out a ball pool ball means "We are going to soft play"

A plate means "It is time for lunch"

A toy minibus means "We are going on the minibus"

Object signifiers tend to be particular to each child.

The next stage uses photographs of e.g. soft play, our lunch hall or Class 3's circle time. These are particular to each class.

The next stage uses boardmaker symbols – a soft play symbol, a lunch symbol and a bus symbol. These symbols are used throughout the school, at respite and in other schools and Adult centres. The written words are printed above the symbol.



This is an example of a talking timetable that is used within the school. When the symbol is removed a recorded message will play telling the child what the symbol is representing e.g. music.

In one class children may have different types of timetable according to what stage they are at. The actual timetables take a variety of forms:-

- a vertical timetable with a pocket at the bottom to put finished activities in, the photos or symbols are fixed to the timetable with Velcro to make it easy to put them on and take them off.
- a horizontal timetable
- small flipchart type timetables which can be carried around.

These same timetables can be developed for use at home or respite. Speak to your child's teacher or speech and language therapist.

Ways of communicating

There are children at Oaklands using every type of communication and often a combination of different ones in different situations.

Gestures, facial expressions and body language

Everybody naturally uses these ways of communicating. At Oaklands the adults deliberately exaggerate gestures and facial expressions to emphasise and direct attention to the adult and the adult's message.

We have to observe our pupils very carefully in order to work out from sometimes very slight, and sometimes slightly unusual body language, what they are feeling. Sometimes it takes a long time for us to learn to understand what they mean.

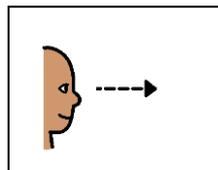
First attempts at communication by our pupils are frequently facial expressions, either to demonstrate that they like what they are experiencing or that they don't like what they are experiencing. Some children will physically move an adult to whatever they want (e.g. the toy that they want to play with) and some children will be able to give you a symbol, to indicate their want or need.

Typically many of our pupils have not learnt to point. Pointing is a very useful gesture. It has 2 purposes

1. "I want that" this is the easier purpose to teach.
2. "Look at that". Not so easy, but we have plenty of opportunity for working on it when we go out on the bus etc. We also encourage pointing when looking at books in the classroom or library.

Pointing can be done by a finger, an arm or even with eyes; we have to observe our children very carefully to see if they are giving us messages.

Eye-Pointing

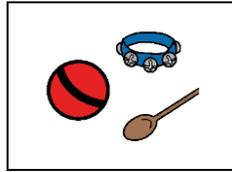


Some children are able to look at a picture or symbol in order to make a choice.

Here an Eye-Comm frame is used. This is a plastic frame and pictures can be placed around it. It enables you to give someone more options, so 3 or 4 pictures can be put around the frame rather than holding 2 pictures (one in either hand). The person choosing then looks at their choice.



Object Signifiers



Object signifier is something which is meaningful to the child; the same object signifier must be used consistently with a child.



At home object signifiers might

- A toothbrush mean “It’s time to clean your teeth”
- A doll’s house bed might mean “Bedtime”

At school we use a variety of object signifiers; these are some of the ones we use:

- A wooden spoon to mean ‘cooking’
- Bells to mean ‘music’
- Material to mean ‘drama’
- A ball to mean ‘soft play’

A child may also use objects to try and tell us things e.g. bring a coat when he wants to go out. We should always **respond** to such communication from a child if you cannot do the desired activity then, then say something like “You want to go out? Lunch first, out later.”

Speech

When we speak we use simple language in short sentences or phrases. We talk slowly and clearly and give the children time to work out what we have said and what it means. We sign the key words. We pause.

Well, that is what we should ideally do. In practice we all tend to talk too much, too quickly, using too many words, repeating ourselves, repeating ourselves using a new set of words that mean the same e.g. “Stop playing and come to circle, put your toys down and come and sit over here,” – effectively it means the same – but in practice more words to understand.

It is very difficult for teachers, in particular, to stop talking, but we do try.

General rules for speaking to our children.

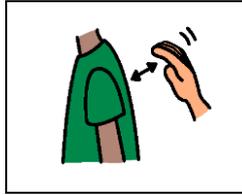
1. Keep the language simple, clear and literal. Literal words are words that mean exactly what they say. Avoid expressions like “Don’t **skip** the queue” “Don’t **barge** in” Say “Go to the back of the queue please”.
2. Speak slowly, but keep the natural rhythm and intonation, if you know them sign the key words.
3. Try to avoid the word NO. It can cause tantrums. Use words like Stop... or better still, instead of telling the child what not to do “Stop drumming with your knife and fork” tell him/her what s/he IS to do. “Put your knife and fork down please”. It is always easier for a child to do something than to stop doing something.
4. **Pause** give the child time to work out what it is you have said, what it means, and what you want them to do. Wait and then wait a little bit longer and THEN wait a little bit longer. This is very difficult but it can be very effective.
5. If a child is having a tantrum, stop talking, or at the very least, say only the essential. When our children are under severe stress they cannot understand what we say. Talking at children at times like these usually makes things worse.
6. Don’t insist on eye contact. Some of our children can take in all the visual information they need with little sideways glances. Some of our children find keeping eye contact very distressing and the distress they feel gets in the way of understanding.

Before children learn to speak they make all sorts of sounds, some of these are meaningful some are just playful. At Oaklands we encourage these early sounds (by showing interest and by imitation) because these early sounds are part of early interaction and a basis for further development.

Signing:

At Oaklands we use Signalong signs and On-body signing:

On-body signing

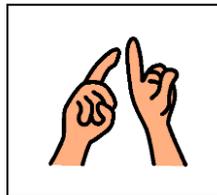


On-Body signs are used predominantly for children with visual impairments. The signs are tactile and made on the child's body. They are used to develop awareness and understanding of what is happening.



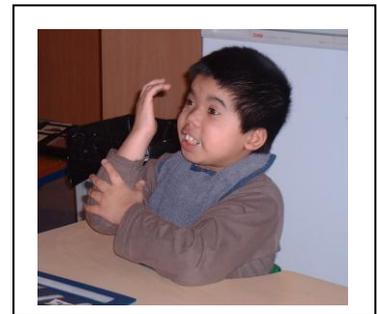
This is one of the signs that we use, this is how to sign 'goodbye'.

Signalong



At Oaklands we use Signalong, a simplified signing language for people with special needs. We do not sign every word, just the key words in each sentence. e.g. It is time for lunch.

Some of our children use signing to communicate with us, others choose not to. We encourage any attempts at communication. The picture on the right shows one of the children signing 'biscuit'.



We use hand-over-hand signing to help the children to sign. In this picture help is given to sign 'finished'.

Photos

The photos we use at school are photos of the children, photos of the children doing things, photos of places the children go to. They are used to label coat pegs, bag pegs so that the children can put their coats away. They are used in timetables and they are also used in PECs (Picture Exchange System explained later).

At home photos of family and friends can be used to tell children about visitors or visits.

They can be used on a timetable to explain what is going to happen during the day.

Pictures can be used to give choices –

- do you want to play outside or watch a video?
- do you want sausages or eggs for tea?

They can be used to de-stress a scary experience e.g. going to the supermarket. Photos can be used to make a social story. Social stories are made up to help children with difficult situations.

Going to the supermarket (photos of)

1. Drive to supermarket
2. Get trolley
3. Push trolley round supermarket
4. Got to checkout
5. Wait at checkout
6. Take shopping out of trolley
7. Put it in bags
8. Put bags back in trolley
9. Pay for shopping
10. Etc.

They can be used to plan a new experience, e.g. a new baby, going to the airport.

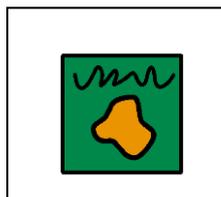
The best way of arranging these photos is in a little photograph album. Then the experiences can be read as a story. Later on symbols and wordlists can be used instead of photos.

Photos can also be used to communicate to somebody else what the child has done. e.g. a trip to the park – another person can ask questions and make comments about the photos enabling a conversation. Sometimes some family members and friends find it very difficult to talk to our children. Our children nearly all love photos of themselves and this gives the opportunity for conversation.

In school some classes use photos of school activities in a home-school diary to inform people at home what the child has done at school. Parents can also send in photos of weekend and holiday activities to show the rest of the class.

If photos are made available for the child the child can use them to tell us what s/he wants or would like to do, or to start a conversation by bringing an adult an interesting looking photo of some occasion. We cannot resist talking about photos.

Symbols



Symbols are the next stage. Symbols are a more formal method than using photographs. However, all these stages and systems are used together in the school day allowing the children maximum opportunity for learning.

The symbols we use at Oaklands are Boardmaker symbols. We use these in timetables, labelling cupboards and drawers etc., supporting reading and writing, for PECs and on Speech communication aids.

The labelling of storage spaces enables the children to become progressively more independent in finding the things they need for everyday school life.

This sort of labelling of clothes drawers and toy cupboards could be useful at home.

The school will happily supply the necessary symbols.

PECs Picture Exchange system

Children use little cards with symbols on them to get things they would like. E.g. crisps symbol card in exchange for crisps, or a bubbles symbol card for bubbles.

The most important thing we are trying to develop with the picture exchange system is the child initiating or independently communicating without waiting to be asked. Many of our children don't communicate until asked "What do you want?" and this relies on the adult knowing that they want something.



The children start with handing over one symbol to exchange for something and work up to handing over a whole sentence. When they hand over their sentence they may speak or sign the sentence or just point to the symbols.

This is a folder ready for snack, all of the symbols that are required for snack are on the front page and all other remain inside the folder. The light blue strip at the bottom is a sentence strip, the child can use the symbols to make sentences and hand the sentence strip to their communication partner.



Some situations have special boards of symbols, e.g. toys in the playroom, the fitness machines in the fitness room, musical instruments in the music room and a song board in circle. Other children have a PECs folder which they carry between school and home with their own personal sets of symbols.

If you think you would like sets of symbols for home situations or if your child's PECs folder is missing symbols that you need at home contact your child's class teacher or Speech and Language therapist and we will work together to provide what your child needs.

Again, the good thing about picture exchange is that it allows the child to initiate, not to merely respond to a question. Initiating or starting the conversation is very difficult for our children, but they can do it with PECs.

Written words

It is possible that some of the children will learn to read whole words. The types of words that children are likely to be able to recognise are *social signs*, e.g. EXIT, TOILET. The children will be recognising the whole word (as if it were a picture) rather than learning letters and sounding out, so they would not be able to read and understand new words. They learn through exposure and repetition, it may take a long time for children to reach his stage.

Home school liaison

Home is not like school. Families always know and understand their children much better than the staff at school do. So families might feel they do not need to use our Total Communication Environment. Indeed they may have systems that work for them in the home that they would like to share with us to make their child's life easier. We would be glad to hear about them.

Families of our children sometimes have difficult times when they may feel that they cannot take anything new on board, and when they feel like that they must be respected. Every situation is different.

However, if a family wants to join in with any aspect of our Total Communication Environment then the school will give them as much support as we can in setting up symbols, in demonstrating signs, etc. because we feel that the children would benefit from any continuity between home and school. The children are at home a lot longer than they are at school.