

# Communicating with disabled children and young people

PIP Briefing



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## Introduction

The focus of this Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP) briefing is communication with disabled children and young people – the theme of the PIP regional taster training events held during Autumn/Winter 2010 in partnership with The Communication Trust and Sense.

This briefing outlines some of the barriers to communication that exist and the variety of tools that can be used in order to support communication with all children, as well as highlighting some methods that promote better communication for all.

Communication is a vital and continuing process for us all. It is the means by

which all humans 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 desires and what we need.

For many people, information is exchanged using speech, but even 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: in fact, words can often make the least impact!

### 3 Elements of Communication

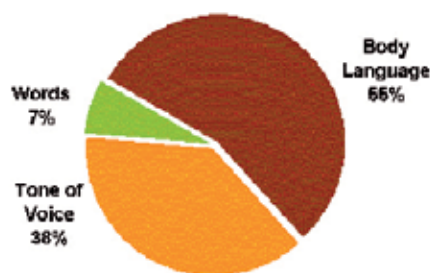


Figure One, source: Project Include

As the diagram above illustrates, non verbal communication (such as body language) is a very important element of communication, and it is also the preferred method for some children and young people. Non-verbal communication can include using symbols, objects and signs.

Everybody, regardless of any impairment, is able to communicate in some way. With time and effort, you will find that every child can express themselves and can be assisted in making their voice heard. It is particularly important that disabled children are given the opportunity to communicate and have their feelings and opinions recognised and acted upon.

Children with sensory and other impairments can often be isolated from their community and environment because their communication goes unrecognised. It is essential that action is taken to ensure that disabled children and young people are empowered through effective communication and consultation, so that they can contribute to society and have an impact on the world around them as well as being in control of their own lives and influencing the decisions that are often made on their behalf.

Communication is a two-way process and a shared responsibility. We need to ensure that the information we transmit is clear so that we are properly understood. In turn, we must make efforts to ensure that the information we get from disabled children is correct and that we do not make assumptions based on faulty interpretation. Sometimes this process can be time-consuming and may take many

hours, but it is necessary to ensure that the child's right to communicate is preserved and respected. (**Article 23, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**).

It is also important to recognise that we all have certain communication requirements, and so promoting clear communication is good practice for all.

## Barriers to Communication

Everyone has specific ways by which they communicate and preferred methods of communication. Accent and tone in speech or written text can be interpreted in different ways and can influence how the recipient perceives the message. It is worth bearing in mind that not everyone has access to these more subtle forms of communication.

Given that the spoken and written word can be interpreted to mean very different things, extra effort must be made to ensure that we consider the additional barriers that many disabled children can face.

Some barriers that can impair communication include:

- The impairment – you do not need to have in-depth knowledge of each specific impairment, but you do need to know if and how the child's ability to communicate through speech and body language is impaired and therefore what specific methods of communication best suit the child.
- Language used – this can include slang which continually changes as well as technical and official language which often needs decoding to understand.
- Attitudes – unfortunately, there are still people who interpret a person's lack of ordinary communication as stupidity. This attitude is the biggest barrier to effective communication.

- Assumptions – there is also an assumption that some children with multiple impairments are unable to communicate. This is not true. However their communication may be very subtle, such as the flickering of eyelids or other small movements. The key to communicating with children with multiple impairments is to spend time building a method by which communication is achieved, or to start by asking others who know the child to tell you about their preferred method of communication.
- Cultural expectations – children come from a wide range of cultures. It is therefore important to understand that what might be acceptable in one culture may be offensive in others. Eye contact in particular is important: some children will avert their eyes from authority figures as in some cultures direct eye contact is considered insolent.
- English as an additional language – it is possible that the children you work with are not speaking English in their home environment. This can create an extra barrier.
- Lack of knowledge – this can be parents not knowing what happens in your childcare setting, or staff not knowing how to support a disabled child.
- Physical environment – a poorly laid out area without clearly defined boundaries can be confusing to some children with sensory impairments. Lighting and temperature are also essential elements to consider. For example, cold/warm and bright/dark places can affect mood and behaviour.
- Behavioural issues – poor communication can be linked to a child's challenging behaviour. A perceived understanding of what triggers particular behaviours, and how a child reacts when they are unable to understand or make themselves understood, can help staff support a particular child.
- Lack of confidence – some children may not feel confident in communicating with staff and staff may not feel confident in communicating with some children. Training may help to address this, but a willingness and an ethos of 'having a go' is a good start.
- Lack of time to build a relationship – more often than not, it is time that is important to get to know a child and build an effective method of communication.
- Lack of funding – some children may require a specific piece of equipment in order to communicate. Creative thinking helps as this need not mean expensive software; it could be something as simple as using of symbols and pictures.
- Different settings using different approaches – because a disabled child is more likely to spend time with professionals. It could be that each professional is using a different way of communicating, causing further confusion and a potential communication break down. Joined-up working between professional teams or via a keyworker using a consistent approach should help avoid this.



## Overcoming Barriers to Communication

### A welcoming environment

Good inclusive practice means that effective communication with disabled children and young people is vital for them to feel included and to break down many other barriers. KIDS' All of Us Framework for Quality Inclusion is a good reference guide to measure your setting against when trying to tackle barriers. One of the first key points to consider, is to ensure that "everyone is welcomed on arrival and wished well on departure in a way that suits them" (KIDS All of Us Framework for Quality Inclusion). This helps to reinforce an inclusive ethos and demonstrates a willingness to engage at the most basic level.



### Using play to communicate

With disabled children, it is important to find out what forms of communication they are already using and be ready to learn how to utilise them. It is important to let them set the pace and have control so that they can build up a trusting relationship with you. Using play is an excellent way to get to know each child and enable them to feel comfortable in your presence as well as having fun at the same time. Embrace your creativity and resourcefulness and build spaces that encourage creative communication. Think about the place or space you are using – lighting, temperature, sound, fragrance, texture and resources. Outside space and natural elements are equally valuable when stimulating the creative instincts of children.

### Training

KIDS offers a training course entitled Let's All Communicate. The aim of this course is to enable providers of services and parents to better communicate with disabled children and young people, whether in a service or a private context. The training offers participants the chance to develop their own 'communication book' and participate in a range of games and activities.

### 'All About Me' books

Creating an 'All About Me' book helps children to introduce themselves to a setting and to other children. It is interesting to consider what information we believe is important for others to know, and compare this to what kind of information we actually get from children and families when they access services. The registration information we get about children should support them to be included. All children can create these books, it should not be an activity just for disabled children. The creation of the book could be a group activity, with all children creating them together, therefore learning about each other's needs, likes and dislikes. The books are about the process, not just the output. A skilled facilitator can learn a lot from the children and young people during this activity, such as thought processes, co-ordination, concentration etc. Of course, the output itself depends on the resources you have available. You will need to consider whether this is an item to be created just by the young person, or whether adults will also have an input. Who will own the document? The document should also be updated as the child grows and changes. Over time, you can build a holistic picture of an individual child.

### Think about:

- What the child wants in the book;
- Who the child wants to share the information with;
- Whether the information can stay with the child;

- Whether it will help reduce the number of times the child is asked the same questions;
- Whether it will help the child settle into a group, when they and the staff have more confidence, and knowledge of their specific requirements;
- Whether going through the process with a member of staff can help to build relationships and start the process of finding out about the child;
- Whether you can include use of photos taken by the child or of them enjoying different activities etc;
- Whether you could include using a DVD of a child's preferred method(s) of communication.
- Using smaller groups can allow for different patterns of language exchange and having the presence of an adult in small group situations can support these exchanges.
- Using visual support, pictures, photographs, signs and symbols to help understanding and communication is useful, particularly for children with communication needs.
- Using the right level of language for individuals is key; be wary of using jargon out of context.
- Encourage a friendly environment by praising children who say, "I don't understand" or ask for help (eg thank them for asking and then offer help or an explanation).

You can use the KIDS 'Requirements for Inclusion' form to trigger thoughts about other items you may wish to include in each book ([www.kids.org.uk/resources](http://www.kids.org.uk/resources)).



### Some tools & tips to support children's language and communication

- Initiate conversations about how children feel and how that affects what they do, these are important in learning social communication skills
- Often when adults use comments and prompts instead of questions, children are more likely to join in and express their own thoughts.
- Let staff support child-to-child interaction by organising games or creating quiet areas.
- Have consistent, predictable structures and routines so children know what to expect.
- Improve contact with parents to better inform them of how they can support their child's language and communication skills – eg through games, activities, items in newsletters or communication diaries.
- Share activities with parents, if permission is given take photos, or ask children to draw pictures so they can share what they have been doing
- Children learn from what they see and hear, so it's useful to model good communication.
- Ensure all staff know about the links between language, behaviour, learning, play and social interaction.
- Give children plenty of time to both process what you have said and formulate their responses.

### **This quick quiz from The Communication Trust highlights some facts about speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)**

(True or False? Answers on the back page)

1. 10% of all young people have SLCN
2. 5-7% of all young people have SLCN as a primary difficulty
3. At least 50% of young people with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties have undiagnosed SLCN
4. Most teachers are confident in their ability to teach speaking and listening skills
5. Young people who are slow to develop language are likely to be slow to develop reading
6. Children with SLCN feel they are less able or popular than their peers
7. Children with weaker vocabularies are more likely to learn new words from incidental exposure than children with larger vocabularies
8. Talk and social interaction among children play a key role in children's social development and learning
9. Children from economically deprived backgrounds are at considerable risk of language delay
10. By age four an average child will have experienced almost 45 million words
11. The acquisition of a first language is the most complex skill anyone ever learns
12. 20% of youngsters in the youth justice system have SLCN

### **Recent Findings**

In September 2007, John Bercow MP was asked to lead an independent review of services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The final report, published in July 2008, set out 40 recommendations to improve services across five key themes:

- Communication is crucial, a key life skill at the heart of every social interaction and vital to children's successful development;
- Early identification and intervention is essential for maximising each child's chance of overcoming their communication need and succeeding;
- A continuum of services designed around the family is needed for children with SLCN;
- Joint working is critical to delivering services that provide effective support;
- The current system is characterised by high variability and a lack of equity.



These themes are equally important for play and childcare practitioners to consider, and to then agree and plan for how their service will meet the requirements of children with SLCN.

## Multi Sensory Impairments

Some children have Multi-Sensory Impairment (MSI) which can present significant communication issues. A child with MSI will often have very multiple educational and developmental requirements, relating particularly to the interpretation of information from the senses. The term MSI is a functional description rather than a medical one.

The different senses are usually related to different organs:

Sense	Body Part	Function
Visual	Eyes	Vision/Seeing
Auditory	Ears	Hearing
Tactile	Skin	Touch/Pain/ Temperature
Olfactory	Nose	Smell
Gustatory	Mouth	Taste

However, there is also a sixth sense, not often recognised, known as proprioception. Proprioception is the **sense** of the relative position of neighbouring parts of the body. It provides feedback solely on the status of the body internally. It is a usually unconscious sense that gives us information regarding the location, movement and posture of our bodies in physical space. Proprioception is what allows someone to learn to walk in complete darkness without losing balance. During the learning of any new skill it is necessary to develop proprioceptive tasks specific to that activity. For example, without the appropriate proprioceptive input, it would be impossible to drive a car because a motorist would not be able to steer while looking at the road ahead. Without proprioception, movement and balance become very difficult.

Disabled children with MSI often have an impaired proprioceptive sense, related to their sight and hearing impairment. KIDS training delegates who experimented with temporary sense limiting devices such as sight distorting aids and earplugs reported:

“Body language changes when a sense is removed – people became slower, bent over, shuffling, hands out, feeling with feet. Lighting

changes in different areas start to make a real difference. You have to make different body movements to compensate for your impairment – generally it was exhausting. Compensating for different impairments has effects; for example, dizziness. You feel you have no control, you have to trust someone else”



Therefore, it is very important that you consider a disabled child’s proprioceptive sense, particularly if they have MSI, and how this might impact on how they communicate with you and the world around them.



### Sources of Information

KIDS recognises that there is a wealth of useful information from a variety of organisations which can support practitioners with communication tips, tools and resources. The list below outlines some of these.

**The Communication Trust**, a consortium of 40 leading organisations (including KIDS) with expertise in speech, language and communication, are the driving force behind the 2011 national year of communication campaign. This campaign, entitled Hello, will focus throughout the year on the critical importance of speech, language and communication in children's lives. New resources have been launched based on partner organisations' expertise and guidance. Throughout 2011, the Hello campaign will be developing a number of publications and resources for parents and carers and those who work with children and young people. Go to [www.hello.org.uk](http://www.hello.org.uk) to download resources and register for regular updates.

**Afasic England** supports parents and carers of children with speech and language impairments. Afasic provides various services including a telephone helpline, downloadable information, resources and publications and specific areas on the website for parents, young people and professionals. There are also distinct Afasic websites for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Go to [www.afasicengland.org.uk](http://www.afasicengland.org.uk) for more information.

**I CAN** is the children's communication charity, working with families, education and health professionals to ensure that no child who struggles to communicate is left out or left behind. I CAN works with schools, nurseries and local authorities through a variety of national programmes. These offer resources, accreditation, advice, and training from I CAN's specialist staff to help improve support for children with speech, language and communication needs. Visit [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk) to sign up for a free monthly newsletter and download free resources.

**Sense** is the leading national charity that supports and campaigns for children and adults who are deafblind. Sense provides expert advice and information as well as specialist services to deafblind people, their families and carers and the professionals who work with them. Sense also supports disabled people who have sensory and other impairments as well as offering a variety of information resources for deafblind people, parents, professionals and the public. For more information go to [www.sense.org.uk](http://www.sense.org.uk)

**Talking Point** is a website about children's speech, language and communication. It is designed for parents, people who work with children, and children and young people themselves. It has recently been redesigned and updated in preparation for the national year of communication. Talking Point offers a Progress Checker to parents and professionals – where they can see how well the child in their care is developing. There are also downloadable factsheets, free resources, video footage of real life stories and a parent forum, where you can share tips, experiences and become part of an important community. Go to: [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk) for more information.





## Communication tools – a glossary:

The following list details some of the various forms of alternative communication. It is possible that you will come across one or more of these methods. To learn more visit the websites of the organisations mentioned.

**Braille** is a method of reading by touch which is used by people with visual impairments. Braille letters are made of raised dots and are usually written on a braille. The RNIB publishes a variety of materials in Braille and also runs a translation service. [www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/readingwriting/braille/Pages/braille.aspx](http://www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/readingwriting/braille/Pages/braille.aspx)



**British Sign Language (BSL)** is the sign language used by the Deaf community in Britain. It uses gestures of the hands and body, including the face. BSL is a visual language in both the way it is used and understood. It is an independent language with a structure and grammar different from English and cannot be used at the same time as spoken English. [www.rnid.org.uk/information\\_resources/communicating\\_better/sign\\_language/](http://www.rnid.org.uk/information_resources/communicating_better/sign_language/)

A variation on BSL used to teach English to deaf children is Signed English - [www.wpse.org.uk](http://www.wpse.org.uk)

**Deaf-Blind Manual Alphabet** is designed for use by people who are deafblind. Sometimes wrongly known as fingerspelling, it is a method of spelling out words onto a deafblind person's hand. Each letter is denoted by a particular sign or place on the hand. [www.sense.org.uk/what\\_is\\_deafblindness/communicating\\_with\\_deafblind\\_people/main\\_methods\\_of\\_communication/deafblind\\_manual](http://www.sense.org.uk/what_is_deafblindness/communicating_with_deafblind_people/main_methods_of_communication/deafblind_manual)

Fingerspelling is used for names, to spell words for signs that the signer does not know, or to clarify a sign that is not known by the person reading the signer.

<http://www.british-sign.co.uk/fingerspelling.php>

**Easy Read** is an accessible information format. It is mostly used by people with learning difficulties, as well as other groups like older people and speakers of other languages. Easy Read does two main things - making the words used simpler, and using pictures such as PhotoSymbols alongside the words. KIDS is an approved provider of Easy Read in Essex. [www.photosymbols.com/easyread.htm](http://www.photosymbols.com/easyread.htm)

**Electronic Communication Aids** may be used alongside, or instead of, other systems, such as paper based charts, signing systems etc. Few people with communication impairments will use only one particular method of communication, in most cases somebody using an electronic aid will reinforce its messages with gesture, head movement etc. Many users of electronic aids use a symbol or pictorial system to associate the images with larger messages. For those users who are able to spell, more complex machines allow them to type in messages which the machine then turns into speech using speech synthesis. Increasingly, portable computers are being used as electronic communication aids by running specialist software. This operates in much the same way as the purpose-built communication aids. Computers can provide the user with access to a wider range of options; for example, a child in school can use the computer both as a communication aid and as a method of accessing the curriculum. [www.inclusive.co.uk/articles/communication-aids-a274](http://www.inclusive.co.uk/articles/communication-aids-a274)

**Lipreading** is 'reading' the visual cues of the spoken message: the movements of the lips, the tongue, the lower jaw, the eyes, the eyebrows, the facial expression and gestures. They are all clues for the lipreader. The lipreader will also observe the syllables, the natural flow, rhythm, phrasing and stress of speech. It is not possible to distinguish all speech from lipreading alone, therefore it is easier to lipread if another system is used as well. [www.rnid.org.uk/howyoucanhelp/campaignwithus/ourcampaigns/lipreading/](http://www.rnid.org.uk/howyoucanhelp/campaignwithus/ourcampaigns/lipreading/)

**Sign-supported communication** includes various programmes which use signs to support spoken and written language, working on the principle that visual communication can aid the development of language. Children and adults with communication impairments can often benefit from a visual approach. Of these programmes, Makaton and Signalong are the two most commonly used within schools in the UK.

**Makaton** is made up of a small vocabulary of specially selected concepts which are taught using speech, signs and symbols; the signs used are derived from BSL. When using Makaton, words are signed in spoken order and are accompanied by spoken English. [www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org)

**Signalong** has researched and published the widest range of signs in Britain. These are drawn and described following a consistent method that enables users to access vocabulary according to need. [www.signalong.org.uk](http://www.signalong.org.uk)

**Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)** is a form of augmentative and alternative communication. It is typically used as an aid in communication for children with autism and related impairments. PECS is designed to teach functional communication with an initial focus on spontaneity. It is implemented in a variety of settings (home, school, community) so users

have the skills to communicate their wants and needs. PECS does not require complex or expensive materials since it uses picture symbols. Research has shown that many preschoolers using PECS also begin developing speech. <http://www.pecs.org.uk/general/what.htm>

**Total Communication** is about having lots of communication methods available. Sometimes one method of communication cannot provide total understanding. It is better to use an additional method to assist or replace the first. Total communication stresses the equal importance of all communication methods to gain an understanding of language. Typically, signing and speech are used together. <http://www.totalcommunication.org.uk/>

**Widgit Symbols** are pictorial support for written language. They have been developed over the past 25 years and contains more than 10,000 symbols, which cover an English vocabulary of over 40,000 words. The symbols each illustrate a single concept, and cover a range of topics wide enough to make them suitable for symbol users of all ages and abilities. The Widgit Symbol Set is designed specifically for written information, so users can develop a real independence in their reading and writing. They follow a schematic structure facilitating independent vocabulary development. [www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com)



### Answers to The Communication Trust Quick Quiz

1. TRUE. 10% of all children and young people have long term or persistent SLCN.
2. TRUE. 5-7% of all young people have SLCN as a primary difficulty that is not linked to other impairments.
3. TRUE. At least 50% of children and young people with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties have undiagnosed SLCN.
4. FALSE. 60% of teachers report lack of confidence in their ability to teach speaking and listening skills.
5. TRUE. Children and young people who are slow to develop language are likely to be slow to develop reading skills. There is lots of strong evidence about the link between speech and language difficulties and difficulties learning to read, write and spell, eg. children who fail to develop adequate speech and language skills in the first years of life are up to six times more likely to experience reading problems.
6. TRUE. Children with SLCN feel they are less able or popular than their peers, particularly older children – age seven and above. Younger children are less aware.
7. FALSE. Children coming into school with poor vocabulary are less likely to take in and learn new words than their peers who have more words in their vocabulary.
8. TRUE. Talk and social interaction among children plays a key role in children's social development and learning (evidenced in Cambridge review of primary education)
9. TRUE. Children from economically deprived backgrounds are at considerable risk of language delay (evidence from Locke, Ginsborg, & Peers, 2002 found around 80% of children starting school with delayed language).
10. TRUE. By age four an average child should have experienced almost 45 million words. One American study found differences in amount and type of language heard in children from different backgrounds: by age four a child in a professional family would have experienced almost 45 million words, compared to a child in a family receiving public assistance who would have experienced around 13 million words. Children from professional families experienced the most encouragement and the least discouragement to a ratio of about 6:1, compared to children from low-income families who experienced more discouragement than encouragement to a ratio of about 2:1.
11. TRUE. The acquisition of a first language is the most complex skill anyone ever learns. This sometimes causes issues in schools with high numbers of children learning English as an additional language.
12. FALSE. More than 60% of youngsters in the youth justice system have SLCN.

## KIDS – working with disabled children and young people

KIDS is a national charity working towards a vision in which all disabled children and young people realise their aspirations, and their right to an inclusive community which supports them and their families. KIDS provides a wide range of services and promotes inclusive play and leisure nationally across the children and young people's sectors through workforce development and support.

The Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP) is government funded and is run by the KIDS National Development Department (NDD). Please visit our website or contact KIDS NDD for further information about inclusive play training, publications and briefings.



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## Resources

### The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

[www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm)

### All of Us - The Framework for Quality Inclusion:

[www.kids.org.uk/Shared\\_ASP\\_Files/UploadedFiles/kids/3DE5FD34-4566-4A0F-82E0-4498EBF529FF\\_AllofUs-TheFrameworkforQualityInclusion2008.pdf](http://www.kids.org.uk/Shared_ASP_Files/UploadedFiles/kids/3DE5FD34-4566-4A0F-82E0-4498EBF529FF_AllofUs-TheFrameworkforQualityInclusion2008.pdf)

### Let's All Communicate training and other courses:

[www.kids.org.uk/training](http://www.kids.org.uk/training)

### Requirements for Inclusion Form:

[www.kids.org.uk/information/100428/100623/104463/useful\\_resources/](http://www.kids.org.uk/information/100428/100623/104463/useful_resources/)

### The Bercow Report:

[www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00632-2008](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00632-2008)

### Inclusion Development Programme

Dyslexia & SLCN an interactive resource to support headteachers, leadership teams, teachers & support staff - <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/175591>

If you would like a copy of this briefing in large print or an alternative format, please contact the PIP Team.

KIDS NDD  
6 Aztec Row  
Berners Road  
London N1 0PW  
T: 0207 359 3073  
E: [pip@kids.org.uk](mailto:pip@kids.org.uk)  
[www.kids.org.uk](http://www.kids.org.uk)

