

Communication

Our ultimate aim is to teach our students functional, social communication skills, to enable them to effectively express their wants, needs, feelings and ideas to a variety of people throughout the day.

- The basic functions of communication are: to seek attention, greet, request, protest, make choices, comment, recur (wanting more of something) and reject.

Processing verbal information is difficult for students with ASD, visual aids can help improve understanding and expressive communication skills.

Our students require active teaching of cognitive and pre-communication skills as well as learning to use symbolic communication skills.

- Teaching pre-communication skills through intensive interaction

Joint attention: share a special moment with the student – e.g. share enjoyment of blowing bubbles together.

Pointing skills: teaching the student to point to items to make requests, then to comment, fade out the prompts so that he learns to point spontaneously.

Imitation skills: gross motor imitation: jumping; gross motor imitation with objects: pushing a car; fine motor imitation: clap hands, touch nose; oral motor imitation: blowing a kiss; imitating oral sounds: blowing raspberries; imitating animal sounds, speech sounds, words.

- Developing pre verbal communication skills and intentional communication:

Using proximal communication techniques: engaging students in playful, pleasurable non verbal interactions, encourages intentional communication – engage student in a motivating interaction, pause, and wait for the child to initiate 'more'.

Use students' motivators – e.g. rough and tumble play, tickles, swing, to encourage eye contact, initiation - requesting 'more' and joint attention – between adult and student



Intensive interaction methods – enter into the student's world, see reference books (Phoebe Caldwell, Dave Hewitt and Melanie Nind). We use these methods as a way in to engaging with our students throughout the day as well as during structured sessions. The starting point being imitation of the students' behaviours, movements, sounds, leading onto engagement where the student focuses outside of him or herself and responds to the adult, sharing a 'conversation' through his sounds/actions.

- Teaching symbolic communication skills

Symbolic communication strategies: Picture exchange, sign language, developing speech. PECs – using objects/pictures/symbols to make requests – exchange picture to get desired object. Symbolic communication can begin with knowing that an object represents something, leading on to photos, symbols, the written word and speech.

For non verbal students it is vitally important to teach them as soon as possible to use alternative communication methods: pointing/ signing/ PECs.

Please note that it is very important when teaching pupils to recognise symbols, that staff are aware of the implications of autism. Pupils who lack social, symbolic and abstract understanding may pick up on other clues that interest them about pictures and symbols. For example they may focus upon a colour or other extraneous feature. Then, if this feature or colour appears in another symbol, they may mistake it for the original. This can give rise to the pupil losing faith in the communication they are taught or adults rewarding inaccurate communication.

To this end, we will assess pupils, with speech and language therapists, in order to ascertain their understanding of symbols and pictures. In principle, we believe that the use of black and white symbols throughout the school is best. This avoids confusion on the part of pupils.

Students need to be taught how to use their most appropriate communication methods and need to be given plenty of opportunities throughout the school day to practise these. Children's communication skills need to be reviewed as their communication and cognitive abilities develop.

Encourage choice making – using communication books with photos/symbols to indicate their choices at snack time/playtime. These communication books can help students learn to build sentences, beginning with making a request with a single symbol, progressing to combining 2 concepts e.g. 'red car', then using 'I want' sentences. It is also very important that they notice and acknowledge the people with whom they are working. That adult is making themselves desirable through being the channel through which the student can get their most desired object or activity.





A major aim is to enable students with ASD to communicate spontaneously through gaining attention appropriately and the using a sentence structure to ask or comment. We use sentence strips for this.

Provide opportunities to encourage spontaneous communication, with lessening adult prompts. Be careful students do not become reliant upon adult prompts, use physical prompts and keep quiet as you can fade these much more easily.

Children must have an appropriate means of communication and be motivated by the situation to practise their communication skills. Repetition is key; frequent, high quality communication opportunities must be established throughout the school day. Students must also learn to communicate for a variety of purposes – to request a toy/an interaction/ a need such as the toilet and communicating to comment.



It is important to remember to teach students to communicate rejection as well as request, e.g. by offering a disliked option at snack time the student can learn to indicate 'no' in an appropriate way – by pushing the item away/signing/shaking head/using a symbol. Learning to answer yes/no to questions is taught through the use of signs/symbols and with a consistent approach.

- Role of the adult

Make yourself **AVAILABLE, DESIRABLE and PREDICTABLE**

All adults working with students with ASD should use **clear and direct language**.

Students with ASD struggle to understand verbal information, therefore a minimal speech approach is beneficial, removing unnecessary words, for example 'drink' rather than 'it's time for a drink which one do you want do you want this one or this one?'

For our verbal students with autism, be aware that they take language literally, so find it difficult to understand sarcasm or sayings, e.g. 'keep your eyes peeled!' in fact that could be a very scary thought for a student with ASD. Also be careful when using questions, are you really asking them a question? Or are you giving them an instruction you want them to follow? 'can you bring your work to the table?' 'work at the table'.

The adult plays a key role in developing and enabling students' communication skills, by: being a good role model, using appropriate key vocabulary and directly teaching students the skills they need in order to understand what communication is and how to use it effectively and in a range of contexts with a range of people.