

## Special Educational Needs and Disability Support Service

### Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

## Supporting communication and interaction development

When supporting a child at an early stage of communication, it is important to:

- **Notice** changes of behaviour
- **Interpret** what you think the behaviour change means, and
- **Respond** as if your child intends to communicate something.
- **Pause** at predictable times in the activity. Pause for at least 10 seconds. Some children need 15-30 seconds.  
This gives your child more opportunity to focus attention, process what is happening and respond. Pausing gives you opportunities to notice their responses.
- **Ask "More?"** and pause to see if your child reacts or anticipates.
- **Say "Finished"** at the end of the activity.

### Recording responses

Some professionals or support staff may want to use the Affective Communication Assessment or the Engagement Model to make notes of behaviour changes, in one session or over a few weeks. This can help you notice and interpret patterns of behaviour.

#### 1. Notice your child's responses – what to look out for

Notice what your child usually does when there are no activities happening. This will help you notice any changes. Notice changes in your child's behaviour, for example:

- Increase movements (head, arms, legs, whole body)
- Go still
- Tense or relax
- Change facial expression – smile/ frown
- Move head
- Move eyes or change blinking pattern
- Move finger/ hand/ arm, reach towards something, or pull towards themselves
- Move body, arm, or leg away or push away
- Change breathing, for example breathe faster or sigh
- Vocalise – different sounds, sounds, loudness or intonation
- Something else unique to your child

## 2. Interpret your child's responses

Remember the reason for your child's behaviour change may be something different than what you think. You will need to check your guess by watching reactions.

### a. What is your child responding to?

- The activity – if so which bit?
- Something happening inside them (e.g., sleepy, hungry, uncomfortable)
- Something else nearby (another sound, movement, or smell).
- Or is this a behaviour your child often does, even if nothing is happening?

### b. What do you think your child's change of behaviour means?

- Try to interpret what your child's behaviour changes mean. Sometimes it is easy to guess and sometimes it is more difficult to work it out. That is ok, you can change your guess.
- Use your interpretation to change what you do next. Respond as if your child is communicating intentionally, as if they mean it.
- Your child may be reacting or anticipating without trying to communicate. Responding as if your child means it helps them learn that they can change what you do. It can help children work towards anticipation or intentional communication.
- Say what you think your child might mean. This helps you be clear what you think and helps your child hear the words at the right time. It may help your child recognise those words in future. For example, say "More tickles."

## Interpreting your child's responses - examples

Every child is different. Your child may do something not listed here, or you might interpret their behaviours differently. It is important to talk to other people who know your child well to check out your interpretations.

- **React** "That's different," "that is new," "like," "don't like."
  - Your child's behaviour changes after something has happened.
  - For example, if you start, stop, or do an action differently.
  - Examples include increased movement/ vocalisation, going still, change of breathing, voice sounds or facial expression.
  - Some children's reactions will be different each time. They may need more time to develop at this stage, or to get to know the activity.
  - Some children develop the same reactions to the same things. We can interpret consistent reactions as starting to develop preferences, likes and dislikes.

- **Anticipate** “I know what’s going to happen.”  
Your child has the same reaction just before the same thing happens again, in a familiar, predictable activity. Their reaction may mean “like” (excited) or “don’t like” (protest) or something different.
- **Enjoy/ want** “I like that!” “I want that”.  
Your child may smile, look at you or use their voice. They may keep hold of something, exploring it with hands, feet, or another body part. If able to, they may reach towards something or pull it towards themselves.
- **Focussed** “That’s different.”  
Your child may go still, keep hold of something/ explore it, breathing patterns may change.
- **Excited** “Wow!”  
Varies a lot between children. Your child may shake head or kick legs, squeal, smile or laugh, relax, or go tense. Some children may do much more subtle things.
- **Protesting** “Oh no!”  
Change of your child’s behaviour indicating they do not like something that has happened or is going to happen. They may protest when an activity they like has stopped. Your child may change facial expression, voice sounds, body movements or go stiff/ tense.
- **Communicating with intention** “I want more,” “Stop.”  
A change of behaviour, plus doing something to involve you. For example:
  - Keeping hold of something **and** vocalising or looking between you and the toy
  - Moving your hand back on the toy after it has stopped, or
  - Pushing your hand or the object away **and** looking away (stop/ finished).



### 3. Respond to your child

When you notice and interpret a change in your child's behaviour, you can change what you do. See if your child responds in a similar way or does something different. By influencing each other, you and your child are making up your own pattern of interacting, building your relationship and creating more opportunities to develop communication, play and visual skills. For example:

- Pause for longer
- Hold object or your hand where your child can easily reach and explore it if they want to
- Repeat activity more times if your child is giving good responses, or they need more time to process what is happening.
- Change pace – faster/ slower
- Change action - firm / light touch
- Change equipment – for example try swapping a noisy foil blanket for a soft fluffy duster.
- Develop pattern of where and how you move the object around your child's body, so it is predictable, and watching for clues about what they like.

#### **How long should you continue doing the same activities?**

Some children need months or years doing the same or similar activities to develop consistent responses, anticipation, or intentional communication. It is a good idea to keep going with the same kinds of activities.

Other children need variety. They may lose interest in an activity for a few weeks or months but enjoy it again later, or prefer the same activity with different equipment, actions, or a new pace. Change the activity if your child seems bored or uninterested. Do not change the activity because just because you are bored.

#### **Have fun!**

Enjoy exploring and playing with your child and how they develop their responses over time.