

THE KEY SKILLS:
COMMUNICATION

Adapted from QCA (2001) *Developing Skills. Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties*. London: QCA. Pages 4-5

For pupils with learning difficulties, the key skill of communication is fundamental to participation and achievement in all curriculum areas.

The key skill of communication includes:

Communication skill	Examples
Responding to others	<i>through facial expression or gestures</i>
Communicating with others	<i>expressing preferences and needs</i>
Interacting with others	<i>through mutual gaze with another or joint participation</i>
Communicating effectively using preferred methods of communication with different groups of people	<i>one to one with a member of staff, in a small group of peers, or in a school assembly</i>
Communicating for a variety of purposes	<i>expressing feelings, forming and maintaining friendships, describing or commenting</i>
Communicating appropriately in different context	<i>the classroom, local shops , the workplace and the home</i>
Recognising and obtaining information	<i>photographs, pictures, symbols, text, recipe for preparing food from objects</i>
Recording and recalling information in a variety of ways	<i>through self-assessment sheets in behaviour management</i>
The application of emerging literacy skills	<i>recognising logos, symbols and information signs in the community</i>

For pupils with learning difficulties, communication takes place in a number of ways and involves all the senses.

Preferred methods of communication may include the use of:

Method of communication	Examples
Body language	<i>Turning towards or away, stiffening, relaxing</i>
Facial expression	<i>Smiling or grimacing</i>
Eye-pointing	<i>To make a choice or direct another's gaze towards an intention</i>
Objects of reference	<i>To signal events or to indicate choices</i>
Communication aids	<i>Hearing aids, Braille</i>
Photographs, pictures, symbols	<i>In a communication book; Communicate in Print, Clicker5</i>
Print	<i>Englarged font, coloured overlays</i>
Signing	<i>Makaton, Signalong, British Sign Language</i>
Information and communication technology (ICT)	<i>Switches</i>

Individual needs and interest need to be taken into account. Pupils may need specific focus, input and programmes from speech and language therapists, and/or English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers. Some examples of specific teaching approaches include Intensive Interaction and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

Opportunities for developing the key skill of communication can be provided across the curriculum as well as through English sessions and classes which focus on literacy. Further details are given in the accompanying English subject material.

Case studies

The case studies (below) show pupils learning to communicate in different ways. There are age differences and although their physical disabilities are similar, their learning needs are not the same and they require different approaches.

What advice would you give to other mainstream colleagues in respect of promoting communication and inclusion?

Case study 1 – Joseph

Joseph is a year 1 pupil who has cerebral palsy. He vocalises in response to adults but his sounds are not yet recognisable as words. In consultation with his parents and the speech and language therapist, he has been provided with a speech-input tool which helps him communicate his needs and ideas, organise them and make choices. A boy's voice of the same age is used to record the words and phrases that Joseph needs. He chooses them by pressing the right pad in response to requests and comments. The speech and language therapist supports staff and parents in helping Joseph to use the device and select the most appropriate words and phrases.

Case study 2 – Maria

Maria is a year 8 pupil in a unit in a mainstream school. Her communication needs are different than Joseph's but are similar to many of the pupils in her class. Like Joseph, she needs support to organise how she communicates. One of her targets in her individual education plan (IEP) is to organise her speaking and writing to produce clear descriptions and evaluations.

In science, the group are freezing and thawing various foods. Pupils have to identify and describe changes and record their findings. Maria is learning to describe the process in the correct order, identify changes and work with others to decide which foods are likely to freeze successfully. She needs extra help to order her thoughts in a logical way. Staff help her by the use of questions, prompts, examples, symbols and pictures, and by clustering ideas together.