



Chapter Three

Recognising children who have communication difficulties



Communication is individual. We are not all the same and will each choose to communicate in a way that works for us. Some children enjoy being in the limelight and will take every opportunity possible to show off their communication skills, and others will hang back, preferring to let others take the lead.

But do all children have communication impairments? Not necessarily. It is easy to make an assumption that, because a child prefers not to speak, they have difficulty communicating. They may just be shy, lack confidence and self-esteem or do not understand the communication being given to them and do not know how to respond.

There are number of specific impairments where you will find associated communication difficulties, such as autism, hearing impairments, neurological disorders, brain injury, learning difficulties, cerebral palsy and physical impairments such as cleft palates. However, for the majority of communication delays or difficulties the cause is unknown. It is estimated that 5% of school-aged children have some level of communication difficulty. Of these, 10% to 20% may require additional support.

A child's communication is considered delayed when they are noticeably behind their peers in speaking and language skills. Some children will have a greater level of understanding (referred to as 'receptive skills'), but have difficulties in responding (referred to as 'expressive skills').

There are many terms used to describe difficulties in communication, including 'speech impairments', 'language disorders' and 'communication disorders'. It can be confusing to know the difference and therefore know how best to support the child or young person.

The most important thing is to recognise the child first and foremost; he or she just happens to have difficulties communicating!

Speech impairments refer to difficulties in producing speech sounds in relation to articulation. This may include difficulties in voice intonation, volume or pitch. These concerns can be picked up in the early years and support mechanisms put in place, often in the form of speech and language therapy.

Language disorder is an impairment where the individual may lack understanding of words and has difficulty in using words in context with the correct meaning. Individuals may have difficulty in expressing ideas, concepts, feelings and emotions. There may be an inability to follow instructions, particularly where too many directions are given at one time. Others may not be able to follow what the individual is trying to communicate, as it seems disjointed.

Communication disorder tends to be used to describe children who have a wide variety of problems in language, speech and hearing or a combination of these three elements. The term is widely used and it is important to recognise that no two children diagnosed with communication disorders will be the same. Therefore, we need to adapt our own communication according to their individual requirements.

So, how do we recognise a child who may have communication difficulties? This is a difficult question to answer as there are so many variants. However, many children will display similar traits, including:

- A lack of engagement with others.
- Avoidance of social situations and/or have difficulty in social situations.
- Slow to respond to instruction.
- Difficulty with ordering and sequencing.
- Prefer visual clues or cues to support understanding of verbal commands.
- Prefer to be on their own.
- Prefer individual tasks rather than group work.
- May not enjoy story times.
- Find language difficult, both in speech and processing the spoken word.
- Low self-esteem and confidence.
- Limited facial expression.
- Occasionally bad tempered.





Jake has glue ear and is due to go to hospital for a minor operation. However, before his operation he has difficulty in hearing others talk, particularly quiet voices and low pitched voices. He is very conscious that he cannot keep up with conversation and misses a great deal of what is being said. He tries to make sense of the bits he has heard but often gets it wrong and is embarrassed to admit he cannot hear.

His class teacher is aware of his hearing difficulties and has placed him at the front of the class facing her. She tries to ensure he has been given clear instructions, and will sometimes provide him with a list of tasks so that he can double-check what he is meant to be doing.

The most difficult time is in the playground. He has isolated himself from other children, tending to play on his own. At one point, a lunchtime supervisor encouraged him to play with others, but thought he was being rude as he did not respond. Actually, he did not hear her and did not know she was there; she was standing behind him when she spoke.

At home, the television sounds like a gigantic buzzing insect, and Jake takes himself off to play on his PlayStation. He prefers his own company. Jake has lost a lot of his confidence and has become bad tempered. This is because he does not always understand what is required of him.

We need to take time out to consider how we are communicating. The teacher in the story above certainly adapted her approach so that Jake was able to understand what was required of him in class. But do we really stop to consider how a child or young person is hearing our communication?

In Jake's case, voices were heard as the noise of a 'gigantic buzzing insect'. This meant that he could not always isolate individual voices and make sense of the sounds. No one had considered asking him how he heard and what the best approach would be to support him. By using a child-centred approach we should be working with children to ensure we are providing the best possible support, adapting our communication to best meet their needs.



Rachel is on the autism spectrum. She was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome at 9 years old. She is a social child and enjoys the company of others. She does not always recognise the 'unspoken' communication given by other children. She prefers her own space and gets cross if others invade it. However, she will happily invade their personal space and will not realise she is upsetting them.

Her speech is excellent; in fact, she likes talking a little too much! Rather than spending time talking with people, she tends to talk at others, not giving them time or a chance to respond. Her understanding of language is fairly poor. She will use the wrong word at the wrong time and often gets the meanings of words muddled up. She tends to take things very literally and does not understand metaphoric language, innuendo or jokes.

Rachel will not recognise signals given by others, such as backing away, looking at their watch or hinting that they need to be elsewhere. She is oblivious to how others are feeling.

Rachel is undertaking some social communication training. Instead of speaking to others directly, she is having conversations via text on her mobile phone. This is supporting her to create individual sentences, to ask questions and to learn how to wait for answers. Her family and friends are helping her to do what comes naturally for others. She is learning to take turns during a conversation.

Many children need our help to identify what they can do differently in order to support their receptive and expressive skills and to recognise what is appropriate in relation to effective communication. For Rachel, it was about learning listening skills and being interested in what the other person was saying.

Often, children will want to interrupt and jump in as they think of something to say. Consider the suggestion on page 19, using the talking teddy. The child may just need a few simple boundaries in place to understand when it is appropriate to talk.

During this chapter, we have advocated hearing the child's voice; asking the child what would be best to support their understanding. We asked a young gentleman on the autism spectrum how he hears and understands voices. These are his own words:



"I like it when people talk to me; it makes me feel special. Sometimes, I don't know whether they are talking to me or someone else, and I ignore them. I need them to tell me they are talking to me first before they start saying what they want me to hear.

If there are lots of other people around or we are in a place where there is a lot of noise I can't always make out the words. Sometimes, their voice just becomes noise too and I only hear a part of the sentence.

I get muddled up if someone says something like 'Can you pass the salt?' I say 'yes' because I can, but I don't pass the salt because they have not asked me for it. Why can't they just say: 'Please pass me the salt'? It would be much easier.

The other thing I hate is when people use silly language. Why should it ever be raining cats and dogs? When I was little I thought I could get a dog if I caught a raindrop. I was really disappointed when I didn't get one.

Sometimes people do something with their mouths that is called smiling. I know it's meant to be when you are happy and I have learnt I have to do it back. But why do they do it? Why don't they just say: 'I'm happy today'? It would be much more sensible.

The best thing about when people talk is when they use words I don't know. I have to go back and look it up on the internet; then I use that word as much as possible."

We assume that individuals have heard what we have said, and have understood. This is not always the case. Have you ever had a conversation with someone and afterwards wondered what went wrong? You seemed to have 'crossed wires'. Crossed wires is metaphorical language about communication. Would that be understood by our young man above? Think about this story and what you would put into place to support his understanding of communication.

Often, children who have communication difficulties have low self-esteem and feel bad about themselves. Children who have low self-esteem may:

- Believe they cannot achieve something, and put themselves down
- Avoid trying new things
- Say sorry for things that are not their fault
- Go to others for instruction, rather than making their own decisions
- Decry the value of their own achievements
- Dismiss things, rather than showing emotion
- Be easily influenced by others

We need to support children to promote their self-esteem. Reflect on your day and evaluate how often, when and how you have praised a child. Remember that for some children social praise such as words and facial expression may have little meaning. Consider what would be an appropriate form of praise for the individual.

James is on the autism spectrum. He does not understand or value verbal praise. He is fascinated with a giant floor spinner. If he could, he would play with it twenty-four hours a day. When his teacher wanted to praise him, instead of just offering words and facial expressions she would give him time with the floor spinner and a five minute egg timer. James' reward was to allow him to undertake his favourite activity for five minutes. This meant more to him than social praise.

Simple ideas to support the raising of self-esteem include:

- Avoid criticising the child's actions. Re-term 'you' statements to 'I' statements: "I would like you to sit nicely at dinner", rather than "You never sit still", which immediately puts the blame on to the child, and the child will then become defensive.
- Teach the child about decision making, and praise them when they have made a good decision. We make decisions all the time, and the child may not know that they have actually made a decision. Look for opportunities to praise the child: "Good decision. I would have chosen that too." Praise the child if the decision is around self-discipline.
- Help the child to understand the problem that requires decision making and the options available to them. Let the child make the decision, and praise them once a choice has been made.
- Encourage hobbies and interests. Express an interest in the child and make them feel good about themselves.
- Look for opportunities for the child to help – by being given responsibility the child's confidence is raised – and praise once the job is done.
- Use humour and jokes with the child; never use sarcasm or laugh at the child.



Chapter Four Conversation: Thinking about speech and language



Definition of conversation:

‘Talk between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or news and information are exchanged’.

Cambridge Dictionary

Having a conversation is a two-way process. We need to give and receive, to hear and be heard. There is a great deal of difference between listening to the words and actually hearing what someone is saying. It takes skill to decipher messages and often requires us to ‘read between the lines’ to truly understand the message.

Have you ever had a conversation that you have walked away from, thinking ‘that did not go very well’? What went wrong?

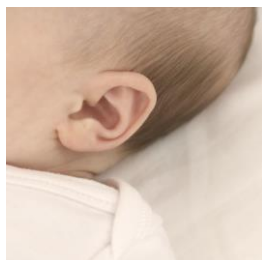
Perhaps you felt that your message was not heard or understood. Maybe the listener had other things on their mind and was not paying you the attention you felt your message required or deserved. The physical location of the conversation may not have been the best for the circumstance or the message you wanted to convey. The conversation may have been interrupted and you lost the thread of what was being said, or perhaps the listener did not recognise how you felt about something.

We each have our own preferences and will judge whether a conversation was easy, awkward or difficult. The art of conversation is a skill: the ability to listen, take in information, decide on an appropriate response and decide how to reply. Sometimes it is difficult to think of a response immediately and you walk away, thinking ‘I wish I had said...’

Silence is a very powerful tool; we don’t tend to use it much, as we feel it is uncomfortable. We fill voids with words, rather than offering thinking space or even allowing a few seconds for messages to sink in.

This is exactly the same for children and young people. They too can feel as though a conversation has not gone well. We asked a group of 10-13 year olds what made good conversations and what made bad conversations. These are their own words.

Conversations are good when:	Conversations are bad when:
- You feel the person has listened. - You are with friends. - Someone is actually interested in you as a person and what you are saying. - You are on your own with someone and not with loads of other people. - Someone asks you questions and wants to know the answers. - You are respected. - You have a common interest. - You look at each other. - People don't talk too fast. - People are truthful. - The person you are talking to doesn't always have to be right and say if they got it wrong. - People don't just say 'yes' and 'no'; they actually say something back to you. - Someone doesn't talk at you but talks with you. - You know someone has listened by asking a question about what you have said. - Someone doesn't always just agree with you.	- Someone seems bored with what you are saying. - You are bored with what someone else is saying, especially if they have a boring voice. - Someone shouts, swears or gets angry. Then it's not a conversation; you are just being told off. - Someone turns their back on you or turns away. - The person does something else, like texting or writing. They are not listening to you. - Someone dismisses what you say. - People don't let you have a chance to say anything. - People speak too quickly. - Someone asks you too many questions and you don't get to ask them any back. - Someone has an accent that I don't understand. - People are only interested in telling you about themselves. - A person won't listen to your views but tells you theirs.



Ernest Hemingway once said:
"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."

We can learn much from listening. Let's listen to these children's voices and learn!

This group of children were able to express how they felt about conversations. This means that most of them will also be able to hold a conversation quite well, providing information, listening to the response and reasoning an appropriate answer, comment or question back.

This is not necessarily easy for all children. Omar comes from Jordan; he has only been in this country for three months and is still finding English a hard language to learn. He gets mixed up when language is not clear. The following is a situation he recently found himself in.



“Omar, get ready to go out to play.” Omar stood up, walked over to the doorway, waiting to go outside. “Omar, don’t you want to go out to play?” said the teacher. “Yes,” said Omar, who was confused. “Then why haven’t you tidied away your books?” “I did not know I had to,” replied Omar. The teacher gave him a cross look. “You are cheeking me now,” she said. “Pull your socks up and get on with your jobs”. Omar looked down at his socks. He really did not understand why he needed to pull them up or why the teacher was cross.

You may be frustrated with the teacher in this story; she was a very poor communicator. The conversation used sarcasm and metaphorical language and there was an assumption that ‘get ready for play’ meant that Omar would know he had to put away his books. We need to be aware of how our words are heard by others, particularly those children for whom English is not their first language or those who misunderstand because of an underlying impairment such as Aspergers Syndrome.

“James, look at the time!” said his teaching assistant, Levi. James looked at his watch. “We are late! Get your skates on!” James looked around, but he could not see any skates to put on. “Where are the skates?” he asked. Levi laughed. “You are so funny,” he said. “Come on.” James could not work out why he was funny. He really did not want to follow; he did not know where they were going, what for or for how long.

He was worried. “Where are we going?” he said. “Where we always go at 10 o’clock on Tuesdays,” was the reply. James was still confused. He tried again. “Where are we going?” “You’ll see when we get there,” was the response. James started to cry.

Often, we are so engrossed in what we are saying that we do not pay any attention to whether the listener has heard and understood our message. We assume the meaning behind the words is understood, especially if the message has been given previously.

In this story, every Tuesday at 10 o'clock the teaching assistant would take James to assembly. However, James had been engrossed in something and had difficulty transferring his thoughts to what was happening next. There was no warning, no introduction, but a demand that he should follow her. He did not understand why he should do so. The assistant did not make it clear and, when questioned, did not pick up the clues that James was getting anxious and upset. James is a very literal thinker and takes statements as fact. Therefore, looking for his skates was an obvious response to the teaching assistant's words.

When communicating with others, we need to be aware of any underlying condition or impairment and make our conversation and use of language appropriate. Let's replay:

"James, please can you tell me the time?" James looked at his watch. "It's five minutes to ten," he said. "Can you tell me what happens at 10 o'clock on Tuesdays?" asked his teaching assistant, Levi. "No," said James. "It's assembly," said Levi. "We need to walk across to the hall now. We can finish off what we are doing after assembly." "Okay," said James, standing up and walking to the door.

A simple adjustment in language and approach made all the difference to James' understanding of the situation. In the first example, we left James starting to cry. Remember that all forms of behaviour are forms of communication. We just need to look behind the behaviour and see what the communication is saying!

Mrs Webster looked down at the young man sitting in front of her. "I was not impressed with your behaviour today," she said. "What have you got to say for yourself?" Before giving the young man a chance to respond she continued, raising her voice: "And the swear word you used was not appropriate language. You behaved appallingly and I will be sending a letter home to your parents." Leo tried to respond: "When Mrs Smith took away..." "I am not interested in your excuses, Leo," Mrs Webster interrupted. "Why do you always want to have the last word?"

Leo raised his chin; he was beginning to get angry. Mrs Webster would not listen to his side of the story at all. He picked up a book and threw it across the room.

This was not a conversation. Although a question was asked by Mrs Webster, no opportunity was provided to give an answer. Obviously, Leo was going to get upset, and his behaviour was born of frustration. The message behind it was: 'You are not listening to me'.

As an adult have you ever been 'spoken to'? How did it make you feel, especially if the 'talker' was standing over you? Perhaps belittled, frustrated, angry, depowered, not listened to. Why should it be any different for a child or young person? Be aware of 'speaking to' someone, rather than engaging with them. The aim is to create a dialogue, rather than a monologue.

In the previous short case studies the adults are at fault. The children were not given adequate information, no time was given for them to respond and the adults were not interested in finding out if they had understood the messages given. Leo tried to respond to a question, but his words were dismissed before he had a chance to say them. Mrs Webster was all too happy to tell Leo her views, but would not let him speak.



Jason has ADHD; he has difficulty in processing visual and audio information at the same time. He will look at you but not listen, or listen but not look. If he is asked to do both, he gets anxious and upset.

Leah, Jason's key worker, recognises this and makes sure that when she has a conversation with him she does not force him to look at her. Jason enjoys walking and talking. If there is any issue to discuss, or simply for the enjoyment of chatting, they go for a walk and enjoy being together.

Swimming is Jason's favourite out of school activity. Often, Leah will start a conversation with an open question about the last time he went swimming. This puts him at ease and shows that Leah is interested in him. If Leah hears Jason mention something new, she reflects it in an informal manner: "Wow, Jason, you can do a whole length of the pool underwater! That's great!" Jason will nod in agreement. He knows that Leah has heard and is pleased.

If Jason is upset about something that has happened, Leah is not afraid for there to be a moment of silence. She asks an open question and waits. Because Jason feels confident and trusts her he will eventually respond, and Leah can help him make his own decisions by offering careful guidance, rather than telling him what to do.

Go back and take another look at the list written by children of good and bad conversations. Challenge yourself. How many of these areas are you good or poor at?

One of the most common faults in communication is being poor at listening. We are constantly being bombarded with sensory information in the form of sounds, visual stimuli, movement, thoughts and other distractions. All of these areas, and more, diminish our listening skills and stop us from focusing fully and concentrating on what is being said by the individual.

There are a number of listening enemies we need to be aware of when working with children and young people.



1. **Judgemental listening**
2. **Jumping ahead listening**
3. **Distraction listening**
4. **Emotion-based listening**
5. **Attraction-based listening**

Judgemental listening. There are times when we prejudge a situation, and listen based on that judgement. If we are working with a group of children where one particular child is normally in the centre of any trouble, we often assume that this particular child will be the instigator of a situation before we fully hear the story. Be aware of prejudging what is being said; every situation needs to be looked at afresh.



Jumping ahead listening. Remember the story of Charlotte. Few people had time to listen to her speech, particularly because it was delayed through her stammer. People assumed they knew what she was going to say and jumped ahead. This is very common; the electrical circuits in our brain work far faster than our speech, and our minds can be thinking two or three sentences ahead of our speech. Don't jump ahead and assume you know what someone means. Check it out, ask a question and reflect your understanding. Do not interrupt, but allow the person to complete what they are saying.



Distraction listening. Sometimes known as casual listening. This is where other things are attracting our attention while we are trying to hold a conversation. We do not pay full attention and only get half of the message or the listener feels that they are not important to you.

You may have become frustrated when trying to hold a conversation and the other party is tapping away on a mobile phone, playing a computer game or listening to music. Have you ever walked around with the phone against your ear while having a conversation? Or perhaps you are on the phone but are still tapping on the keyboard?



This is the most common of listening enemies. We need to be aware of distraction and try to minimise it so that we fully concentrate on what is being said and the individual who is talking remains important to us and knows they are being heard.



Emotion-based listening. Often, we relate what we hear to an emotion. There is an old saying: 'Seeing things through rose tinted spectacles'. On occasion we may be hearing things and putting our own inflection on the meaning of the words based on our emotions. This relates to all emotions, including love, anger, frustration and guilt, to name but a few.



If we are cross with the speaker, we are unlikely to hear what they say in a positive manner. We may decide to interpret their words in a particular way, which is not how the speaker intended them to be heard. Be aware of this when working with children; we may unintentionally be listening through our heart rather than our mind.



There are times when we just do not feel 'connected' to a child. On an emotional level we are worlds apart. Be aware of how your body language is giving off signals. Have you ever had a conversation where the body language is not matching the words being spoken?



Attraction-based listening. This is one you may not be aware of. We are all attracted to different people. When going into a room of strangers for the first time you may choose to move closer to people you are attracted to.

This may be people who are tall, dark haired, people with brown eyes or perhaps a particular gender. We all find certain traits more attractive than others. Often, we cannot put our finger on it and explain why; it is just the way we are.

When working with a group of children and young people the same thing applies. You may not recognise that you are drawn towards certain children, as we try to treat everyone individually. However, when having a group conversation you may find yourself unwittingly listening more to one child than another. This is perfectly natural, but we need to be aware of it and give everyone an equal chance to be heard.

Rachel is a lunchtime supervisor. Many of the children attending the local school live in her street and she knows them well.

One child attending the school, Adam, has a reputation for bullying others. Rachel is aware of the family and the fact that the child has little discipline at home and little in the form of social skills.

When an argument happens on the playground involving Adam, Rachel has to make herself listen to both sides of the story. It would be easy to jump to conclusions and focus on the words being spoken by the children she is attracted to rather than Adam.

Rachel has to concentrate. She is at risk of judgemental listening based on previous experience, and of emotion-based listening as she is aware of other children's dislike towards Adam.