



Creating a communication supportive environment

We often talk about a communication supportive environment but what does this actually mean and look like in practice?

A communication supportive or communication friendly environment is one that promotes and supports children's language and communication skills. It is an umbrella term for describing key features of the environment and the way practitioners interact with children. It will look slightly different in early years settings and in school environments. This is because practitioners will be using a range of strategies to support children adapted to their level.

How do you know these help children's language and communication?

A communication supportive environment is not a new concept in Early Years, as Enabling Environment and the role of the practitioners in developing this is well established. We also have evidence about why and how communication supportive approaches support children's communication and learning. The Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme and research around Effective Preschool Provision in Early Years (EPPE project) found that the ways adults interact with children are vital for developing communication skills and self confidence. More recently, [the Early Language Development Project](#) (ELDP) has been supporting practitioners to reflect on the ways that they interact with children with positive results.

[The Better Communication Research Programme](#) (BCRP) has looked into how education environments support children's language and communication. This led to the development of [Communication Supportive classroom tool](#). This concluded that a communication enabling environment covers 3 aspects:

- The environment
- The role of the adult supporting language interactions
- Opportunities for supporting language interactions

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This draws together the themes of the enabling environment and the key elements of effective practice for practitioners. Although this is aimed at Reception upwards, it's useful to think about these 3 aspects and the learning environment across all age phases.

What should the environment look like?

A communication supportive environment has:

- Cosy quiet spaces can give children a chance to think and talk together.
- Minimal background noise - trying to compete with songs or music in the background can often make it harder to listen and concentrate for young children. You can always make music or singing into a game or activity if you want to.
- Resources labelled with pictures and words to help children to be more independent in accessing resources and organising themselves.
- Pictures or photographs so that children can self-register and to let them know the timetable for the day (see our [Factsheet on visual timelines](#))
- Clear and consistent routines - how does the environment help children to know what to expect and when?
- Opportunities to have something to talk about! The activities and opportunities you provide are great conversation starters. Children are more likely to engage when they are interested and involved in something that excites them or they love doing. Having a range of opportunities opens up their worlds, engages them and also gives them a chance to have new experiences and learn new words.
- Open ended activities as these are accessible for children whatever their language levels.
- An asking friendly environment where children and young people are encouraged to seek clarification when needed: please say that again; what does... mean; I didn't understand
- Opportunities to engage in structured conversations with peers as children get older.

What should practitioners be doing to create a communication supportive environment?

There are some key strategies we can use to help children when we play and talk with them:

Follow children's interests - what they're saying and playing with

Why? This can support their attention and listening skills, enabling children to stay at activities for a longer time. Using this strategy also shows them that you are listening to them and valuing what they are saying and what they are doing. By following their interests during open ended activities you are giving them time and space to think and communicate.

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For older children having conversations based on their interests shows you are listening and valuing what they say.

Get involved - join in the play

Why? By getting involved with children's games and conversations you are engaging with their world and showing them you value what they do and what they have to say. You are building a rapport with them, which means they are more likely to want to talk with you and trust you. This helps develop relationships and support social and emotional development.

Joining in with play also gives you a chance to model how we play and talk together, taking turns, sharing and listening.

Adding language as you play alongside

Why? Children need to hear language in context for them to learn new words. Hearing the word 'train' over and over again as they play with it allows them opportunities for repetition and multi sensory learning.

Wait for children to respond

Why? Children can often need time to respond. They are trying to take in what you have said, make sense of this and then think of an answer. They then need to think of the words, put these together (if they are speaking at this level) and then co-ordinate the muscles to say the speech sounds. This can all take time - often about 10 seconds. Waiting for children also shows that you're listening and responding to them. It also shows that you're following and valuing what they're interested in.

Expanding on what they say

Why? This can be a really useful strategy for younger children who are beginning to combine words and say longer sentences as it gives them the language model for the next stage in their language journey. For example, if a child says 'car' you can add a word so that it becomes 'big car' or 'fast car' or 'drive car'. For children who are moving on to saying sentences you can add a word to expand this e.g. 'big car' becomes 'yes, you're driving a big car'.

Breaking down instructions

Why? This can help children to focus on one instruction at a time. So, 'wash your hands' wait then 'sit on the carpet'. Or, 'Finish the sentence you are writing, then tidy your books' wait then 'go and get your PE kit'.

Checking children have understood what you've asked them to do

Why? Checking understanding is a good way of ensuring that they are listening and understand what's been said.

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How can I create opportunities for children to talk and work together?

For older children having a **talking partner** or working in structured groups can help children to think through problems and rehearse what they're doing to say before they feedback to a larger group. This may take some time to set up and support before they can do this independently.

Reflecting on practice

Take a learning walk around your setting and look at the environment from a child's point of view. Does it make sense? Does it have a variety of different spaces for different purposes and different types of conversations? Do you make the most of opportunities for talking and listening?

You may already be using many of these strategies intuitively or through experience. However, it's often useful to reflect on which strategies you use consciously as this can help to try different strategies with different children.

It's also useful thinking about how you know you're using these strategies and whether you can fine tune your skills. One key element that can impact on practice is having someone video you and either watch it back together or alone. Once you have got over the fear factor this can be really useful for reflecting on practice. Interestingly, the BCRP found that it was easier to make changes to the physical environment and more challenging for practitioners to develop the ways that they talk and interact with children.

How do you plan to make the most of opportunities for communication throughout the day?

Almost all events, encounters or activities within the day can support speech, language and communication, so a communication friendly environment looks to make sure all these opportunities are planned for and used. Alongside this, activities specifically designed to focus on communication should be planned.

Links

[The Communication Trust](#) – Making your place great for communication

[The Better Communication Research Programme](#) Communication Supportive classroom tool

[Talking Strategies KS2](#) – Ways to improve communication skills in the primary classroom

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