

Top tips for supporting children with social communication difficulties in early years settings

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Top tips for supporting children with social communication difficulties in early years settings

Make information visual

Children with social communication difficulties may need to be actively taught what other children learn intuitively. Model and show them what you want them to do to support understanding. Use visual cue cards – objects or reference, photos, symbols or key words – to act as reminders and discreet prompts. Use visual timetables. Use '1st this, then that' task management prompts to support understanding of expectations. (Examples available from the CCN team). Actively teach children to ask for help and say 'I don't know what to do etc. Very simple Comic Strip Conversations can be used to support social understanding. (Examples available from the CCN team).

Always prepare for change

Use visual timetables to prepare for changes to activities or staff. Use visual calendars (easy to make up using Publisher) to show what is happening and when; i.e. at Christmas. Prepare for trips by making up a photo booklet of where, when, what will happen, who with etc. Encourage children to ask questions. Let them know that you don't know what's worrying them and that they need to tell you. Allow additional time for relaxation and chilling-out during times of change. Remember – change = anxiety for children with social communication difficulties.

Consider language, communication and processing needs

Always consider behaviour as communication. What is the child trying to tell you through their behaviour? Allow additional time for processing of information, especially verbal information. Simplify language as necessary; speak slowly, give instructions in sequential order, use gestures and visual aids to support understanding. Don't assume understanding. Good expressive language skills do not necessarily mean good receptive language skills and understanding, and a skill learnt in one situation will not always be transferred to another situation. Check for understanding by asking key questions and recap and simplify as necessary. Children with social communication difficulties may think literally. If you ask 'do you understand?' they may well say 'yes' even if they don't. Ask specific questions and give specific instructions. Don't negotiate and keep choices simple. Use 'do this or this'. Remember, increased anxiety = impaired communication skills. When a child is upset or anxious, use visual information to support understanding.

Consider the impact of sensory differences

Many children with social communication difficulties may have sensory differences which can impact on their ability to cope in busy settings. Look at the environment from a sensory perspective i.e. 'light, heat, noise, smell. If a child is distressed, consider whether something in the environment could be unsettling them.

Collaborate with colleagues

Remember, every child is different, and each brings their own unique challenges and strengths. Confer with colleagues; discuss, ask for help and learn from each other. Parents often understand their child's differences and difficulties best. Ask and listen to them.

Some key strategies to support communication, understanding and learning

- Call child's name first to gain attention and ensure they are listening.
- Speak more slowly; reduce the language used; use key words and simple phrases.
- Give one direction at a time and in sequential order.
- Avoid open ended questions i.e. 'Would you like to ---?' - be prepared for 'No'
- Allow time to process and respond. If you need to repeat, use the same words.
- Keep non-verbal signals simple and clear
- Teach skills in context.
- Use visual cues to support understanding.

Key strategies to support social understanding and interaction

- Allow time for 'getting to know you' and work at child's level of functioning.
- Use child's interests to support access to activities
- Be aware of sensory overload and allow for 'chill time'.
- Prepare for changes and support understanding visually.

"The key to helping a child ... is to always make sure you tell them very clearly what is going on. I can breathe such a sigh of relief when I know exactly what is going on and why."

Luke Jackson 'Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome'

Useful resources

- Early Years Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) for Autism
- Early Years Transition Toolkit
- [Do 2 learn \(opens in new window\)](#) for some super examples of visual resources.
- Ann Croft, Senior Specialist Teacher, Autism/Complex Communications Difficulties Team