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## Social Communication Skills

Communication is not just what people say to each other with words. It is also body language, facial expression and tone of voice. All of these things combined are communication. Some children may have difficulty understanding the messages we give to each other without speaking, such as the expression we show on our face, tone of voice or gestures such as waving, pointing or shrugging shoulders. They may also have difficulty using these communication methods and knowing how to use language in a range of different social situations.

### Understanding Social Communication Skills

#### Eye contact

A child who is able to give eye contact naturally will look at a person when they are making a request and when playing with them, especially when wanting to share the enjoyment of the toy they have found. However, some children who have difficulties with their social communication, will avoid eye contact and move their parent's hand to where they need help rather than look at their parents and pointing to what they want.

#### Body language

Most children will use body language to communicate something to another person. They will position themselves at an appropriate distance and use their body and gestures to communicate their needs and wants. Some children, with social communication difficulty, do not find this a natural thing to do and may appear that they are unaware of someone else in the room and may either sit far away from others or climb on someone to get to what they want even if this is a stranger.

If you point somewhere children quickly learn to look to where you are pointing. Likewise if you suddenly look at something behind a child they will naturally turn to see what you are looking at. Children with social communication difficulties may find it hard to interpret another person's body language. They will benefit from being taught social rules directly to help them learn.

#### Seeking someone to communicate with

A child will learn at a very young age that they need to find someone to help them if they are not able to do something. When a child is still unable to move they will do this by simply looking at a parent or by crying and then when someone comes to them they might pass them the item they need help with. When a child can move they will go and find someone and indicate that they need help. A child with social communication difficulties may not recognise that other people can help them and so give up on a task or become upset until someone comes over to help them.

*This advice is only to be used alongside therapy and with support and guidance from a Speech and Language Therapist.*

### Responding to social communication

Some children will respond to social communication well. If they are smiled at they will often smile back in return. Also if someone pulls a cross or unhappy face they will interpret this that they have done something wrong or something has happened to make someone upset. A child who does not find this an easy thing to do might respond in ways that you would not expect e.g. if another child falls over, hurts themselves and is crying, a child who can not interpret this might laugh, ignore the child altogether or just be distressed by the noise the hurt child is making.

### Using words to communicate

Children who are good at learning words also need to learn that by using these words things happen. If they want to request something they need to use the word that is linked to the thing they want in order to get it. Some children, however will say lots of words but only to themselves and use these words in a repetitive way and in the same tone of voice that they once heard them. When they want something they might not have learnt to use the word needed. Children sometimes need to use pictures in place of words to teach them the skills of directing their communication to an adult before they will use words functionally to communicate.

### Things you can do to help



*Bubble play* – Blow some bubbles and then place the lid on the pot and wait. If your child wants more bubbles they are likely to either sit looking at the pot of bubbles or reach for them to try to make them blow again. They may try to move your hands without giving you eye contact to make you blow them again. Wait and position yourself close to them to get in their line of sight. When you have gained eye contact for a few seconds reward this by blowing bubbles. Repeat this several times waiting for eye contact to indicate that your child wants the bubbles to be blown.

*Ball Rolling* – You might need two adults to initiate this simple interaction. One adult should sit with/behind the child and the other person sit opposite. The other person rolls the ball to your child and then the adult sitting with/behind your child should take your child's hands and help them roll the ball back again. You are aiming for the child to eventually take part in simple turn taking interactions rolling a ball back and forth.





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*Wait for requests* – Try to make situations when your child needs to initiate interactions with you rather than you anticipating some of their less essential needs. (Always ensure they eat well, are kept safe and have all essential needs met). If you think that they might be interested in playing with a new toy, get the toy and hold it. When your child decides that they want the toy, attempt to get eye contact with your child rather than simply putting it in front of your child. The same strategy can be used when you are happy for them to have a non essential snack. Have the food ready near the child but not in a place that the child can just help themselves e.g. put it in a box with a lid or on a shelf. Wait for the child to indicate that they want this item and then use strategies taught in therapy to help improve the way your child requests this item e.g. waiting for eye contact, pointing or using a picture.

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