

FOSTERING COMMUNICATION

WITH YOUR CHILD

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PRESUME POTENTIAL

Communication skills are fostered when children have meaningful interactions with their environment and their partners. These interactions can be complicated by challenges with physical skills, vision, and hearing. You can foster rich communication for your child by presuming potential and supporting physical and sensory challenges during motivating and meaningful, everyday interactions and routines.

SET UP FOR SUCCESS

Obtaining the right screenings and evaluations for your child's developmental needs is the first step to support her access to communication and learning opportunities. Work with your medical team to identify which of the following screenings or evaluations may be best for your child's profile and remember, evaluation is an ongoing need for children with developmental challenges, so you may wish to have these areas evaluated more than once throughout your child's lifetime.

- Hearing evaluation for potential hearing loss or trouble processing auditory information. Some hearing assessments require responses from your child, others can be done without the need for your child to actively participate.
- Vision evaluation for potential visual impairment, including cortical visual impairment (CVI). Working with a teacher of the visually impaired (TVI) and/or a vision therapist may be helpful as you strive to maximize your child's access to his world.
- Motor and sensory processing evaluation with physical and occupational therapists.
- Communication evaluation with a speech-language pathologist to develop a plan for building on your child's strengths to foster communication skills, with and without the assistance of technology. You may also wish to pursue augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) evaluation to help identify tools and strategies to assist with communication in the absence of speech.

RECOGNIZE YOUR CHILD'S SIGNALS

Children with physical challenges may communicate in subtle or unconventional ways. It is important to continue to recognize the ways in which your child may be communicating already, and build on these strengths. These signals may not always seem intentional, but through recognition and response, you can shape them to be so. Some of the signals your child may be using include:

- *Gaze (i.e., using eye movement and eye contact to communicate)*
- *Sounds (e.g., crying, grunting, using pleasure or displeasure sounds)*
- *Facial expressions (e.g., smiling, grimacing, closing eyes)*
- *Movement (e.g., moving a finger, arching back, extending body)*
- *Gesture (e.g., reaching, pointing, shaking or nodding head)*
- *Behavior (e.g., throwing items, biting, squeezing, scratching)*

BE RESPONSIVE

Communication happens in many ways, and all ways are valid, especially when children are learning to communicate in the presence of physical limitations. By responding consistently to your child's attempt to communicate with the above signals or others, you are helping him develop trust in the communication process and to build confidence in you as a reliable communication partner. Respond to your child's signal by letting him know that you understand what he is "saying", such as through a spoken reply. You can also respond by honoring what your child is asking for in his communication through action, such as by providing more of a desired action or discontinuing an non-preferred routine when possible. Here are some examples of what a recognize-respond interaction might look like:

CHILD	CAREGIVER
During a preferred tickle routine, lifts the index finger to indicate "more".	<i>Spoken: "I saw your finger go up! Here comes more tickles!"</i> <i>Action: [Provides more tickles, stopping again for another communication opportunity]</i>
During a non-preferred hairbrushing routine, the child grimaces and makes a displeased sound.	<i>Spoken: "I hear you, I think you don't like hairbrushing. Let's do a countdown from three and we can be all done with brushing".</i> <i>Action: [Finishes a short period of brushing and then stops].</i>

ENHANCE THE MESSAGE

In addition to recognizing and responding to what your child is already communicating with her body, you can teach her new ways to communicate that offer more clarity, less effort, or more versatility. Although it may be difficult for your child to develop spoken language, she can learn language through use of pictures through forms of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), such as communication boards, books, and devices. The best way to teach your child this form of "visual language" is to model AAC as you speak. Your speech-language pathologist can assist with determining what AAC tools or strategies may be most supportive of your child's needs and how to best begin using these tools as part of her overall communication system.

RESOURCES

Explore these resources for more information on communication and AAC.

American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA), <https://www.asha.org/public/>
The Communication Matrix Community <https://communicationmatrix.org/>
Closing the Gap <https://www.closingthegap.com/>
AACcessible Foundation <https://www.aaccessible.org/>

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