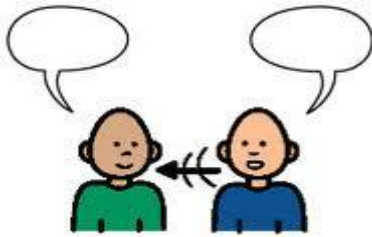




## Functional Communication

**Why do we communicate? Is it to ask for something we want or need? Is it to tell someone an important piece of information? Is it to have a conversation with a friend? Communication is made up of all of these elements. It is an all-day, every-day activity!**



During this time of change and uncertainty that we all feel, significant emphasis is placed on communication. Communication can take many forms. For example communication through news updates, posters in shops to advise us of guidelines to follow, communication with a family member to check that they are ok, communication about how we feel. During this time, we can reassure ourselves and each other that this will pass and we will come out the other side

stronger. However, for some of our children they may not have the skills to communicate their feelings or understand the changes around them. They may want to ask why they are not in school, why can they not play in the playground, why are we at home more.... Or they may want to express themselves - I feel sad, angry, confused. When someone does not have the skills to communicate these things effectively this in turn can lead to anxiety, frustration and sometimes more challenging or concerning behaviours. This can cause stress and frustration for all of the family. Now more than ever we need to promote consistency and equip our children with the skills to communicate their wants and needs. We have put together some tips and strategies for setting up a communication friendly environment with the goal being to alleviate the need for frustration that may develop into something more challenging.



## Functional Communication Training (FCT)

Communication takes on many forms. One common way we communicate is by the use of language or verbal communication. The most fundamental concept in language is that words have the power to make things happen and get an individual what they want! As young children develop they learn to utilise their communication skills to gain access to things that they want in their environment. This can often

start out as non-verbal communication, such as pointing to the items they want or pulling mum or dad over to the toy on the shelf, before developing the verbal language skills to actually ask mum or dad for the toy.

Individuals with language difficulties may require additional supports to enable them to communicate clearly. Often when an individual cannot communicate clearly challenging behaviour emerges. All behaviours that challenge are a form of communication. If your child is unable to communicate using verbal language, we can teach them to communicate using an alternative communication system, such as picture exchange, sign language, or alternative communication devices. Teaching your child a more appropriate behaviour, such as functional communication, will enable them to effectively get what they want, but in a more appropriate



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and efficient way. For example, using their functional communication skills to request a break during a difficult activity or to request a favourite item, or to appropriately gain someone's attention. It is important to identify the function or purpose of the child's inappropriate behaviour so that we can then teach the most appropriate replacement behaviours that will serve the same purpose.

Here are some examples of alternative communication systems to consider when choosing the most effective form of communication for your child:

## Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

- What is PECS? <https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs/>
- Make your own PECS book <http://www.educateautism.com/make-your-own-teaching-aids/make-a-pecs-booklet.html>
- PECS Cheat sheet – See Appendix 1

Lámh <https://www.lamh.org/>

## Grace App

- Guide to Grace App <http://www.graceapp.com/guide-to-grace-app/>
- Lisa Dominican TED Talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYe2Vp6YxK4>

## Tips for Effective Communication

### • Motivation

It is essential that your child is motivated to communicate with the people in their environment. The goal of an effective learning environment should be to identify naturally occurring motivation, capture it, and use it to help your child to learn to communicate more effectively. If your child is consistently motivated to attempt a new skill, such as functional communication, and they find that the successful completion of that skill is consistently met with a positive experience, such as gaining access to their favourite food or movie, they will have an ever-increasing desire to use this new skill again.

### • Setting up the Environment

An environment that is conducive to teaching communication skills is one in which we:

#### 1. Create lots and lots of communication opportunities!

Arrange for communicative opportunities by creating situations in which your child is likely to want something so that we can teach them how to communicate in order to get it

#### 2. Practice, practice, practice!

Arrange for the item to “disappear” long enough for your child to need or want the item. This can be done in a fun and playful way by hiding the item and prompting the learner to request it.

#### 3. Be Prepared!

Organise the environment so that items are not easily accessible. For example, put favourite toys on a shelf so that they are visible but out of reach. By ensuring that the environment is set up in a way that creates continuous opportunities for your child to



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communicate with others throughout their day, it will enable them to learn the value of using their functional communication skills to gain access to what they want or need.

- **Consistency**

It is important that everyone your child is communicating with are doing the same thing. Your child must learn that it is only a particular form of communication that will be accepted by everyone and that other less functional forms of communication (i.e. behaviours that challenge) will not result in access to their preferred outcomes. In many situations, it is just easier to give the child what they need or want. However, if we don't create continuous opportunities for functional communication with others and instead, we constantly anticipate their needs and wants, then we cannot teach effective communication. Once we have created one communication opportunity and taught communication with it, arrange for the next communication opportunity. Teach communication **ALL** day!



## Appendix 1

### Phase 1: The physical exchange

Determine the preferred items and activities of the child (possibly food or drink initially). Prepare pictures of these items (computer generated pictures or symbols, photographs, line drawings). When a new phase of the system is being taught two adults work with the child. One adult is the communicative partner (CP) and the other is the silent, physical prompt (PP).

Place the desired object (e.g. popcorn) in view. Place the picture between the child and the popcorn. As the child reaches for the popcorn, the adult (PP) helps them to pick up the picture and release it into the open hand of the other adult (CP), who has the popcorn. As soon as the child releases the picture into the adult's hand, the adult says 'popcorn' and immediately gives the child popcorn. It is important that the adult does not ask 'What do you want?' or prompt the child to pick up the card until the child has initiated the communication. To aid generalisation, the two adults switch roles and use different settings and pictures. Physical prompting is gradually reduced. Eventually the child will independently hand the picture of the popcorn to the adult in exchange for popcorn.

### Phase 2: Increasing spontaneity and range

The distance between the child and the adult is increased. Pictures are moved further away from the child and eventually into a communication book. The child at this phase learns to go to their communication book, pull the picture out, go to the adult and release the picture into the adult's hand.

### Phase 3: Picture discrimination

The child is taught to discriminate between two and then more pictures. The child will then request an item by going to the communication book, selecting the appropriate picture from an array, going to the adult and giving them the picture.

### Phase 4: Sentence structure

The child is taught to build simple sentences on a strip using the 'I want' picture followed by the picture of the item being requested. The whole sentence is handed to the adult.



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## **Phase 5: Responding to 'What do YOU want?'**

The child is taught to respond to the question 'What do you want' by completing the sentence strip. Up to this phase the child initiated the communication.

## **Phase 6: Responsive and spontaneous commenting**

The child is taught to respond appropriately by labelling or commenting to questions such as 'What do you want?' 'What do you see?' 'What do you have?' and other questions at random.