

learning links



Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 31

Communication – a total experience

By Janette Biffin, Early Childhood Educator & Jane Purcell, Speech Pathologist

As adults we communicate in a diverse range of ways. We can make choices about how we communicate based on our preferences, ways of learning, what and how we have learnt before (learning styles) and what is available to use at the time.

We use our mobile phones to send text messages, pictures in cookbooks to choose what we want to cook, recognise the golden arches of McDonalds, read signs about changes on our roads and make different facial expressions to communicate our feelings.

Have you ever thought you'd have trouble talking if you had to sit on your hands?

Adding to what we say by using our hands, facial expressions, tones of voice, loudness and body language is vital. In fact, some of us would be lost for words if we were asked to sit on our hands.

Children, like adults, have different abilities, ways of learning and communicating.

Learning Links' Early Childhood Services uses a Total Communication approach to support the varying learning and skills of all children.

Using a Total Communication approach can involve listening, speaking, gestures or hand movements, Makaton, facial expression, photos and pictures. Another name for a Total Communication approach is Alternative and Augmentative Communication.

By using a Total Communication approach for children we are mirroring the diverse ways in which we communicate as adults.

All children at Learning Links' Preschool are exposed to a Total Communication approach. It aims to give children increased opportunities to understand what is said to them and to communicate their wants, needs, thoughts and feelings.

Children learn that communication can happen in many different ways, for example, you can use your hands to talk or point to a photo to get something you want.

A Total Communication approach can also assist children in developing social skills.

Picture charts can show how to ask for a turn in a game, a 'wait' sign to remind them to wait until it is their turn and pictures to help them know what to do when they're angry. When we support children in this way we can reduce frustration that can often be expressed in other ways such as biting or hitting.

For children who have difficulties in communicating a Total Communication approach can be particularly important. Life can be very frustrating for families who cannot communicate with their child and equally as frustrating for the child who cannot communicate with them.

A Total Communication approach increases the participation of children who may not be using words. One way of doing this is to show pictures of songs, games and activities. These can allow children to make choices and demonstrate their preferences and competencies.

Makaton (hand gestures) can also be of great benefit to children. Children can use it as a positive tool to help them get what they want.

Early exposure to a range of Total Communication options can create a language-rich environment. By immersing children in spoken, written and visual forms of communication such as pictures and Makaton, we help children make connections between what is said and seen.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

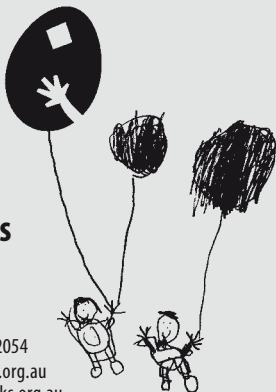
Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

Learning Links

Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Tel: 9534 1710 Fax: 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au
Website: www.learninglinks.org.au



Enquiries regarding this Information Sheet should be directed to Robyn Collins
Tel: (02) 9534 1710 Fax: (02) 9584 2054 Email: rcollins@learninglinks.org.au

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When introducing a Total Communication approach it is important to incorporate children's interests and things that motivate them. Later we can include choices that we as adults would like children to know and act on. These might include listening and looking at group time.

Another way of helping children is to include Total Communication in everyday activities such as during morning tea or lunch. Children can be encouraged to participate in mealtimes when they have individual placemats showing pictures of their favourite foods. Making the activity fun and decreasing pressure can also help. By using pictures or Makaton in everyday activities we are making Total Communication part of a child's life.

Please contact Janette Biffin or Jane Purcell on (02) 9534 1710 if you would like further information about a Total Communication Approach.

Total communication – a mum's perspective

A preschool mum, Leanne, offered some feedback on total communication in the preschool. Her daughter has been attending Learning Links' preschool for 18 months. She is now five.

Do you think being exposed to a total communication approach is helpful and why?

Yes, it allows my daughter to not only communicate with children who may have communication difficulties, but also to communicate her own message and ideas to others in a variety of ways. If I can't understand her she will use gestures or take me to it. It also helps with solving problems and working out another way of getting me to understand her and vice versa. She also recognises and accepts differences in other people.

How many and what Makaton hand gestures does she know?

Probably more than I think. She knows gestures related to routines, needs and interests. Things like help, animal, insect, finished, more, play, group, drink, eat, toilet, washing hands, please and thank you. If she doesn't know one, she makes it up.

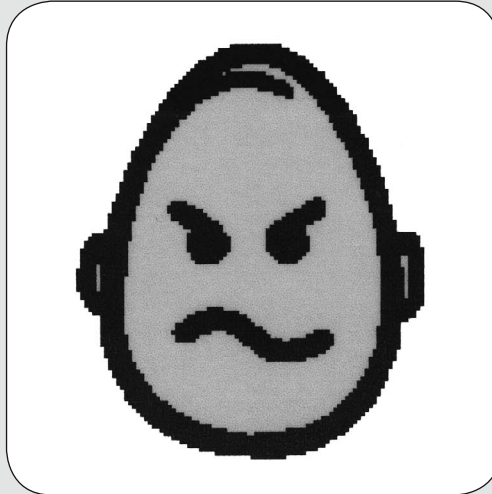
What does she think about the use of Makaton objects, photos and pictures in the preschool?

It's part of the preschool. She doesn't see it as unusual. She may have mentioned a couple of times that some children are still learning to talk and they use their hands.

How do you feel about the Total Communication approach in the preschool?

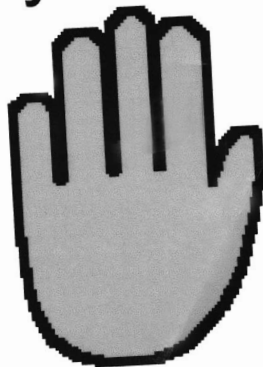
Total Communication enables all children to communicate with each other at the level they are at. It gives all children a voice and that's important.

When I'm Angry



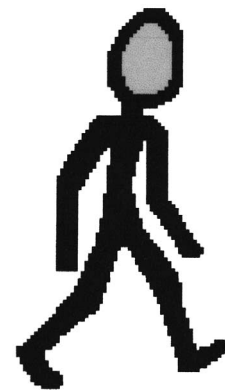
1

Say "STOP"



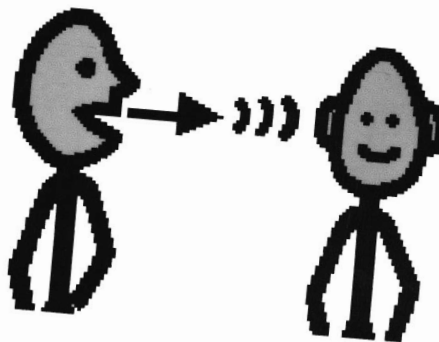
2

Walk away



3

Tell a teacher





Communicating when speech doesn't come easily: Using Makaton at Learning Links

By Jane Purcell, Speech Pathologist

Most of us take speech for granted. Speech and understanding unfortunately don't always come easily. Some children have difficulty saying and understanding words and they find it hard to communicate their thoughts, wants, needs and feelings.

Understandably this can be extremely frustrating for the child, their friends and family.

Learning Links uses a total communication approach to help children in this situation. Total communication involves things such as pictures, gestures, facial expressions, photos, Australasian signing, Auslan (the language of the deaf) and Makaton signing to help facilitate the development of each child's communication skills.

Words are just one of a number of things adults use to communicate. To get our message across most of us use a combination of words, tone, loudness, gestures, body language and facial expressions.

Total communication for children is simply a mirror of adult communication, and Makaton signing, an important part of this approach.

What is Makaton and why is it used?

Makaton is a vocabulary that is represented by 350 signs (hand movements) and symbols (line drawings). It was developed in the United Kingdom and introduced into Australia in 1977.

As part of a total communication approach, Makaton gives a child opportunities to communicate and actually assists in sound and word development. In essence it gives them a way to get their message across, when producing speech is difficult.

Speech therapy can take some time to help make a child's speech understandable, so giving a child a way to communicate as soon as possible is vital.

By giving children with little or no speech a way of actively interacting with others, it also helps reduce frustration and improves a child's sense of well being, self-esteem and their relationships with others.

If a child's speech isn't clear, they can use a sign (or several signs) in conjunction with speech to help get a message across. Similarly, an adult can use Makaton to help a child follow directions or understand concepts such as 'big and little'.

Makaton is widely used with children with Down Syndrome and more recently, children with severe speech delays and verbal dyspraxia. It is not used with children who are deaf.

Some things to consider when using Makaton.

Learning Links uses Makaton signing to give children opportunities to communicate their wants, needs, thoughts and feelings independently and have these understood.

All children at Learning Links' preschool learn Makaton so they can communicate effectively with one another. One of the most important factors in Makaton's success is a commitment to use Makaton among people regularly communicating with the child.

Preschoolers enjoy learning about other ways to 'talk' – they see talking hands on television shows such as Sesame Street and Playschool and can learn that communication involves more than just words.

When choosing Makaton signs to use with your child, it is worth remembering that a small number of signs a child can use independently is better than a large number they can imitate but do not use to spontaneously communicate.

Signs that are of interest to them and used daily will motivate your child. Choose signs that are easy for your child to make with his or her hands and are appropriate for their developmental level. For instance, for a child who is two years old, signs for toys or food are more relevant than those for colours.

Sometimes children have difficulty making specific signs with their hands and it is important that the 'listener' makes an effort to understand what the child is trying to communicate. If your child is having difficulty with some signs, perhaps you can take photos of your child making the signs to help them see what they are doing.

Children often also make up signs that aren't in the Makaton book but are important to them, showing their creativity and inventiveness.

When using Makaton signs, we always speak the word(s) at the same time to encourage speech. Children show us when they no longer require the signs by using their speech clearly and confidently without signing.

Learning about Makaton and Total Communication

If you would like to learn more about Total Communication (including information on courses) please contact Learning Links on (02) 9534 1710.



Makaton Resources

The following books and videos are available for loan from Learning Links:

- *'Everybody's Favourite Nursery Rhymes For Australasian Children'*. Video featuring Julie Anthony, Benita Collings, Monica Trapaga, Humphrey B. Bear and others. Produced by The Variety Club of Australia. Telephone The Variety Club of Tasmania on (002) 23 1886 or (002) 44 7074 for details.
- *'Early Use of Total Communication'*, An Introductory Guide for Parents. Book and Video. Betsy Gibbs and Ann Springer, 1995. Available from Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Phone (03) 9383 7277 or Mobile 019 945 282.

For a list of Makaton Representatives and books contact Kerry Clear at Makaton Australia, Special Education Centre, University of Newcastle, NSW 2308. Telephone: (02) 4921 6293.

The following Web Sites may also be useful:

- <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/meom/Research/virart/educn/Live.html>
- <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/allindex/indexm.htm>
- <http://www.tased.edu.au/eddiv/equity/voices/difvoice/glossery.htm>
- <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/infosite/symbols.htm>
- <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/support/spandl.htm>

The mailing and email address for information and resources on total communication is:

Tina Detheridge
Literacy@widgit.com
<http://www.widgit.com>
Widgit Software
102 Radford Road
Leamington Spa
England
CV31 1LF

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www.learninglinks.org.au

Early Childhood Services

– all enquiries to Head Office

School Age Services

– contact your local branch

Family Services

– contact your local branch

All other enquiries

– Head Office

Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Telephone: (02) 9534 1710
Preschool: (02) 9533 3283
Facsimile: (02) 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au

Northern Suburbs Branch

2 Alfred Road
PO Box 634
Brookvale NSW 2100
Telephone: (02) 9907 4222
Facsimile: (02) 9907 4244
Email: nsb@learninglinks.org.au

Western Suburbs Branch

Unit 7/9 William Street
PO Box 1026
Fairfield NSW 1860 (2165)
Telephone: (02) 9754 2377
Facsimile: (02) 9755 9422
Email: wsb@learninglinks.org.au

Southern Suburbs Branch

10 Railway Parade
Penshurst NSW 2222
Telephone: (02) 9580 4888
Facsimile: (02) 9580 4788
Email: ssb@learninglinks.org.au

South West Sydney Branch

88 Shropshire Street
PO Box 42
Miller NSW 2168
Telephone: (02) 8783 7111
Facsimile: (02) 8783 7222
Email: sws@learninglinks.org.au

Eastern Suburbs Branch

1/20 Silver Street
Randwick NSW 2032
Telephone: (02) 9398 5188
Facsimile: (02) 9326 5364
Email: esb@learninglinks.org.au