

1 MINUTE GUIDE

Safeguarding Committee
effective communication



Effective communication forms the fundamental bedrock for cultivating robust relationships, nurturing a secure environment, and supporting the holistic development and learning journey of every child and young person at Witham Prospect School. **Recognising** the diverse needs and communication styles prevalent among our young individuals necessitates an **adaptable, patient, and empathetic approach from all staff**. This guide delves into key principles and specific strategies to achieve this, fostering an atmosphere where **every** voice can be heard and understood.

PRIORITISING ACTIVE LISTENING

A primary pillar of effective communication lies in prioritising active listening. To genuinely connect with children and young people, it is imperative to be fully present, minimising distractions and offering undivided attention. This involves not only hearing their words but also observing their tone, body language, and facial expressions to grasp the complete message they are attempting to convey. It is crucial to allow them to articulate their thoughts fully without interruption, and a simple yet powerful technique is to briefly paraphrase or reflect back what you understand them to have said – phrases like "So, you're feeling frustrated because..." can demonstrate that they have been heard and aid in clarifying meaning.

USING CLEAR, SIMPLE, AND CONSISTENT LANGUAGE

Complementing active listening is the consistent application of clear, simple, and consistent language. Communication should always be tailored to the child's developmental level, meticulously avoiding jargon, sarcasm, or overly complex phrases that might cause confusion. Messages should be delivered directly and concisely, stripping away any ambiguity. Consistency in the language used, especially when referring to rules, routines, and expectations, is paramount, as this predictability significantly reduces anxiety and aids comprehension. Furthermore, for children and young people who benefit from visual reinforcement, supplementing verbal communication with visual aids such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), visual timetables, or even simple gestures can greatly enhance understanding.

EMPHASISING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Beyond spoken words, non-verbal communication plays a critical role in conveying messages and building rapport. Maintaining open body language, such as avoiding crossed arms, and ensuring facial expressions radiate warmth, calmness, and approachability are essential. The tone of voice is equally significant; a calm, reassuring, and even tone should be consistently employed, steering clear of shouting, rapid speech, or a demanding cadence, even when setting boundaries. Awareness of personal space is also vital, as some children may prefer more distance, while others might benefit from closer proximity when comfortable. While offering eye contact is often a sign of engagement, it should never be forced, as some children find direct eye contact overwhelming; observing their cues is key.

ENCOURAGING AND EMPOWERING

Where appropriate, offering limited choices can provide a sense of control and encourage engagement (e.g., "Do you want to read this book or that one?"). Positive reinforcement is also highly effective; acknowledging and praising effort, progress, and positive behaviours with specific feedback can significantly boost a child's confidence and motivation.

VALIDATING FEELINGS AND BUILDING TRUST

A crucial aspect of fostering trust and positive relationships involves validating feelings. Acknowledging a child's emotions, for instance by saying, "I can see you're feeling angry right now," or "It sounds like that made you sad," demonstrates empathy and ensures they feel heard and understood. It is important to remember that validating feelings does not equate to condoning negative behaviour. Building and maintaining trust relies heavily on honesty and consistency: staff should follow through on promises and, if unable to do so, provide clear explanations. While reassuring children that their shared information is confidential, it is equally important to clearly explain safeguarding boundaries, making it understood that any information indicating a risk to themselves or others would necessarily need to be reported.

MANAGING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

When faced with challenging conversations, maintaining composure is paramount, as a staff member's emotional state can directly influence that of the child. If frustration arises, taking a brief pause, if feasible, can be beneficial. It is essential to focus on the behaviour itself, rather than labelling the child (e.g., "Hitting is not okay" instead of "You are a naughty child"). Clear boundaries and consequences should be communicated calmly and firmly, with a consistent approach across all staff members. For older children, where appropriate, involving them in the problem-solving process to find solutions to issues they are encountering can be empowering.



UNDERSTANDING AND UTILISING AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION (AAC) MODELLING

A specialised and highly effective communication strategy is understanding and utilising Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Modelling. AAC encompasses a broad spectrum of techniques, from gestures and signing to symbols, word boards, communication books, and iPads, all designed to support or replace spoken communication. Modelling, within this context, involves staff pointing to words or symbols on an AAC device or visual aid as they speak. This practice is crucial because AAC users, much like speaking children, need to witness their communication system being actively used. Just as a child hears a word approximately 500 times before they speak it, AAC users require consistent exposure to their system in action. Therefore, modelling should occur as often as possible, either directly on the young person's system (if permitted) or on a similar device or visual printout. When starting, the focus should be on modelling key words without strict adherence to grammatical correctness (e.g., "I go shop bananas"); grammar can be refined as the individual progresses. Critically, modelling should be done without expectation, as some individuals may need over 100 exposures to a word before independently using it. The aim is to model a rich, "colourful language" that enables social interactions (greetings, jokes), expressing needs and wants (requesting, protesting), sharing information (describing, telling stories), and making requests.

UNDERSTANDING AND HELPING WITH ECHOLALIA

Echolalia, the repetition or imitation of heard phrases, is experienced by around 75% of autistic individuals and can range from single words to full scripts. It can be immediate (echoed immediately) or delayed (repeated later), and interactive/functional (used to convey a message) or non-interactive (for self-stimulation or calming). When supporting a person with echolalia, it's beneficial to reduce questioning and instead focus on using statements, commenting, and narrating. Allowing for silence gives the individual time to process language and for spontaneous communication to emerge. It is vital not to attempt to eliminate or extinguish scripts, as they are inherently meaningful, often tied to emotional experiences or high intonation. Staff should avoid taking scripts literally, instead probing deeper for the underlying meaning. Always acknowledge and accept scripts as valid communication, even if the meaning isn't immediately clear, by smiling, nodding, or repeating the script back. Additionally, modelling expected responses is a key strategy; if a child uses a script to request something (e.g., "Nemo has found it!") , staff can model the appropriate phrase (e.g., "I want toy") to help build the association.

Supporting Children's Early Communication Skills (Speech and Language UK): This article provides practical tips for fostering early communication skills in children, including getting to their level, using simple language, and allowing processing time. <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/help-for-families/resource-library-for-families/supporting-childrens-early-communication-skills/>

AUTISM TOOLKIT (South Gloucestershire Council): This comprehensive toolkit offers strategies for communicating effectively with autistic people in a school setting, covering language, visuals, and environmental considerations. [CLICK HERE](#)

Using Visuals (Just One Norfolk - NHS): This resource explains the benefits of using visual aids to support communication and understanding for children, especially those with language processing difficulties or additional needs. <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/speech-language/using-visuals/>