

Communicating With Children Guidance

Remember:

Children communicate through play, behaviour, mood, appearance and presentation as well as through language. All of these are ways in which a child will try and get a message across to others. Always look beyond the presenting behaviour to the meaning beneath.

It is important to remain fully aware of the impact you have in both your approach to communicating with children and your response to a child's communication. The smallest gesture or facial expression can mean a great deal to a child.

Always go at the child's pace – this means you need the ability to put aside your own or your organisations agenda and only move as quickly or as slowly as the child is ready to do.

Start from where the child is – take into account the child's age, stage of development, ability and expectations and ensure your communication approach is coherent with these.

Establish an agreement – clarify your role with the child, what you are going to be communicating about and why, and what will happen with this information.

Be comfortable – while it is important to ensure children have access to communication methods and materials suitable for their individual needs, these also need to be methods and materials you are competent and comfortable using yourself.



Provide options – try to ensure children have choices and decisions to make, such as where and when to discuss something. This will empower the child and limit the risk of restricting or influencing the child's communication.

Be consistent – the child should be able to predict how you will present yourself regardless of what is being discussed. Keeping appointments, being reliable and always doing what you say you are going to do are crucial in building trust.

Use rituals – being able to predict what is going to happen helps children feel secure which will, in turn, aid communication. You can help by building in little rituals such as always beginning with the same opener.

Use appropriate language – keep language simple and direct. Don't use complex sentences and keep questions to a minimum. When discussing sensitive topics such as abuse and neglect, always check what terms the child uses and use these rather than introduce adult terms which may be unfamiliar, confusing or even frightening.

Resist fixing, minimising or negating – give children opportunities to express difficulties without assuming you have the answer and suggesting solutions. Like adults, children need to ventilate too. Don't dismiss comments or feelings that appear unimportant from an adult perspective, strive to give equal attention to whatever range of things a child is raising. When children express very strong emotions like hate or make extreme statements like "I want to die", never negate these by telling the child they don't mean what they say. Explore the feelings instead.

Use active listening - match your body language to the child, use minimal responses, reflect the content and feeling of a child's communication and listen to the whole child.

Avoid interpretation – guard against interpreting children's communication. Always try to clarify your understanding by checking with the child. Where interpretation is necessary, exercise caution and ensure any recording of the communication makes it clear where interpretation has been used.