



Communication in the early years: An introduction



ECE resources

Communication is a collaborative process that develops from birth.

There is no one way that children learn to communicate, but research has shown that it is significantly influenced both by the social and cultural environment surrounding a child and by individual factors such as their interests, dispositions, health and wellbeing. Communication is about more than just spoken or written words, and it encompasses many forms of shared understanding and expression. Communication is crucial to children's holistic development, and research evidence supports the pivotal role that teachers play in facilitating the development of children's communication skills in educational settings.

What is communication?

A process for sharing meaning

Communication is a collaborative process through which two or more individuals connect and share meaning around thoughts, ideas and feelings.¹ Learning to communicate with others is one of the most important but complex social tools that children will develop, and is a key foundation to learning, development and wellbeing for all human beings. Children's communication development starts at birth – indeed, there is evidence that it may begin in utero. It is shaped by significant people in their lives and inextricably linked with the cultures they experience.

A process for giving information

Communication also involves sharing information. Children might express themselves in a range of ways such as talking, gestures, sign language, picture symbols, drawing or writing. In some cultures, using facial expressions or 'eye talk' like an eyebrow lift might also convey unspoken messages. Infants and toddlers communicate using a variety of forms of expression including gesture, vocalisations, noises and touch before they can use words and sentences.

A process for receiving information

Communication also includes the ways in which children comprehend or make sense of meaning in a given situation. Children learn to do this by engaging with others through looking, listening and gaining an understanding of language. They also develop a social awareness of how people interact in context using both spoken and unspoken forms of communication.

What are the key aspects of communication?

While communication and its development need to be viewed within situated, cultural contexts, there are key aspects of communication that all communities have in common, including **speech, language, literacy and communicative competence**. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably but actually refer to different but interrelated facets of communication. These facets have their own processes that children learn about as they experience social interactions with others. Understanding these different aspects of communication can support teachers in recognising the potential contribution that every child brings to their interactions in educational settings.

Speech

Speech is a verbal means of communication that involves the **articulation of sounds** like 'b', 'k', 'ch' and 'f'. Articulating individual speech sounds and combining sounds into words is a process that requires precise neuromuscular coordination involving placement of the lips, tongue, teeth and palate as well as breath control. Voice quality, intonation (the musical rise and fall of our voices), fluency and rate of speech also enhance how effectively a speaker can make their message understood.

Each language has specific sounds (**phonemes**) or sound patterns that are characteristic of particular languages. Understanding the rules of how sounds and sound combinations go together (**phonological awareness**) pertains to the branch of language development involving the sound system of languages called **phonology**. Children's ability to use sounds in words is a gradual process that starts at birth, if not before, and is influenced by the sounds that infants hear people speaking in their immediate environment. Infants also start experimenting with making sounds from the day they are born, and then subsequently learn to articulate and refine sound and sound combinations into syllables and words throughout their interactions with others in the early years.

Language

Language is a **socially shared code or system of symbols** (such as signs and words) for thinking and communication with others.² Every culture in the world has languages that continue to evolve within their social, historical and cultural contexts. Spoken language is one form of communication, although languages also exist in other non-spoken forms (such as sign language or written language). Language has different modes such as **receptive language**, which refers to a child's comprehension of words, phrases and sentences (spoken, written or signed), and **expressive language**, which refers to a child's ability to use words, phrases and sentences (spoken, written or signed) to get messages across to others. The words that a child understands or can use are referred to as their **vocabulary**.

Language development can be thought of terms of the three major components of language – form, content and use:³

- **Form refers to the structural aspects** of language, including phonology (sound units and sequences), syntax (word order and relationships) and morphology (the internal organisation of words)
- **Content refers to the semantic system** of rules governing the meaning or content of words, phrases and sentences
- **Use refers to the pragmatic aspects** of language as a social tool, with conventions around how language is used in real-life contexts

Children develop language in different ways and at different rates. For example, it is common for children who are **bilingual** to take a little longer to speak fluently, or to frequently switch language codes while processing the different languages they hear and speak across their home and educational environments.⁴

Literacy

Literacy is another important component of communication development. Traditionally, the term literacy referred to written language involving skills in reading and writing and using print symbols like letters and numbers. Today, researchers talk about **emergent literacy**, which refers to the notion that young children develop skills in reading and writing at home or in early childhood settings, well before the formal process of teaching children to decode or encode print begins at school. Conversations, vocabulary, comprehension, print knowledge and phonological awareness are all important aspects of literacy development that underpin the ability to communicate using written language.

In today's digital age, some research literature extends and challenges the notion of literacy as focused only on reading, writing and print, and draws attention to other kinds of texts that use a range of technologies and involve images, gesture and sound.⁵ In this sense, literacy or literacies might be reconceptualised to move beyond the individual, cognitive process of encoding and decoding print, and encompass the ways in which children learn to communicate meaning through a wide range of multimodal signs, symbols and media in order to engage with communicative partners in different social contexts.

Communicative competence

Communicative competence recognises children's linguistic knowledge and skills and emphasises their ability to use those resources effectively in sharing and understanding meaning with others in social situations.⁶ The notion of communicative competence aligns with the **pragmatic component of language**, in which a child's communicative efforts are viewed in terms of their intention, purpose or function within social contexts.⁷ When children engage in social interactions, they develop an understanding of what, where, and with whom to communicate for certain purposes, as well as how to adapt their communication style to suit different audiences or contexts. Communicative competence acknowledges a child's linguistic form and content and the ways in which they are able to use those resources, as well as others such as gesture, facial expression, reading, writing or drawing, to communicate effectively.

Why does communication matter?

Research shows that children's competencies in language and communication underpin their holistic development and wellbeing. Communication skills are vital not only for children's cognitive and conceptual development but for their social, emotional and cultural awareness and understanding.

Cognitive development

A child's learning depends on communication skills such as being able to understand what another person is saying, as well as thinking, responding, and interacting with others in a range of verbal and non-verbal ways. All areas of the curriculum in early childhood education and school contexts involve some form of language or communication, and research has consistently demonstrated the role of oral language in underpinning children's cognitive and literacy development, with strong correlations between early oral language and later learning areas such as reading comprehension.⁸

Socioemotional development

Responsive interactions with adults and peers are pivotal to supporting young children develop social and emotional skills in a variety of ways. Language and conversation help children to reflect on, regulate and express their emotions, to understand how or why other people might have different perspectives, and to learn how to develop friendships with other children.⁹

Sociocultural understanding

Learning how to use different language and communication modes helps children to learn about their own culture and the cultures of others. Interactions at home and in education settings allow children to learn the system of symbols related to their particular languages and cultures, but also to develop competencies in how to use those skills effectively and respectfully in a variety of social and cultural situations.

What influences the development of children's communication skills?

There is no one correct or universal pathway through which children develop their communication skills. For centuries, theorists have debated how human beings learn the symbols of their cultures, particularly

in the field of children's language development. Dichotomies such as the well-known **nature versus nurture debate** are still evident in the research literature today. Most current literature appears to support the view that the development of language and communication depends on a combination of both individual and environmental factors, and that social relationships are key to supporting children to learn the language codes of their cultural communities.

Individual factors

Individual factors include a child's interests, natural disposition and learning preferences, all of which shape the communicative opportunities and purposes that drive a need or desire for the child to communicate. Some children are simply more talkative or expressive than others! A child's overall health and wellbeing can also underpin their energy levels and motivation to communicate. One individual factor that can have a direct impact on speech and language development is **hearing**, which can affect a child's ability to listen and perceive sounds and words, in turn affecting the way in which the child might learn to say sounds and words. Hearing and listening also underpin children's ability to share and sustain their attentional focus during language and learning activities in early childhood and school contexts.

Social Factors

Social factors also provide an important foundation for the development of communication. A communication-rich environment that allows for a range of forms of expression such as verbal language, drawing, writing, body movements, music and pictures can enhance children's creativity, comprehension and meaning-making. Responsive communicative partners, both adults and other children, who are available and engaged with the child during play and learning situations provide opportunities and support to extend the child's learning and development in everyday situations.

Research suggests that responsive adult communication incorporates planned, unhurried interactions that follow the child's interests and leads, while also responding in ways that reinforce, model and extend aspects of language and communication to build on where the child is at.¹⁰ Building on the languages and communicative patterns children bring from home to their education contexts is crucial for valuing and sustaining the growing cultural and linguistic richness of our communities.

It is remarkable to think that young children are developing in all the complex areas of communication concurrently, and that most learn to do so quite naturally through engaging in responsive, reciprocal interactions encountered with adults and other children in their everyday home and education environments. The role of teachers is critical in supporting children's communication development to flourish in early childhood and school settings. Teachers have a powerful impact through the communication environment they provide as well as through the nature of their interactions that facilitate children's speech, language, literacy and communicative competencies.

References & Further Reading

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