

Oxford Craniofacial Unit

# **COMMUNICATING WITH A CHILD WHO IS IN HOSPITAL**

**Information for parents and carers**

When your child is in hospital there are many ways you can spend time with them that can help their communication develop. Your child may need to rest if they are tired or not feeling well, but there may also be times when they want to play, other times when they want a cuddle or even would just enjoy sharing a story together.

When children are in hospital, it is important to encourage their communication, just like you would at home. The best way to encourage your child's communication is to talk to them. Your child will be listening, even if they do not always seem like it.

## Ideas for communicating with your child in hospital

- Just like you would at home, you can talk to your child about things you are doing.
- Try to set aside some special time each day to talk and play with toys and picture books. During this time, try to reduce distractions by turning off the TV or radio and closing the curtains.
- Hospitals can be noisy places and sometimes it can be tricky for a child to know which sounds to pay attention to. It can be helpful to talk about any sounds around, such as machines that you hear, or the cleaner mopping the floor.
- You may be able to take your child for a walk around the ward and hospital and talk to them about the sounds you hear and the things you see.
- Looking out of the windows at the cars or animals you may see is also interesting.
- You can introduce your child to new words when you are looking at pictures on the walls, the people you meet and food in the restaurant.
- Picture books and toys can be a great way for you to think about things to talk about and let your child hear new words.

- If your child has visits from family and friends, encourage them to play and talk to your child. Your child will benefit from interacting with a variety of people.

## Where can I play with my child?

Hospitals may have specific areas where you can play and talk with your child. These areas tend to have fewer distractions and are child-friendly areas. Ask the nurse or play specialist looking after your child if there is a playroom on the ward. Your child may be well enough to use outdoor play areas with supervision.

## Where can I find toys and books for my child?

Ask the nurse or play specialist looking after your child if there are any toys or books that you may be able to use with your child.

**Bookstart** is a national organisation that provides free packs of books to children aged between 0-12 months and 3-4 years.

There are also books for children with additional needs:

- Bookshine for deaf children
- Booktouch for blind and partially sighted children
- Bookstart Star for children with conditions affecting their fine motor skills.

Website: [www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk)

## Top tips for communicating

- Choose a time when your child is settled, calm and is not hungry or tired or feeling poorly. Choosing the right time makes for a positive playtime and will maximise your child's learning.
- Watch and listen carefully; your child is communicating with you all the time. They may send you a message with a look, a facial expression, by turning their head away to show they don't like something, or looking with interest at a book. As you respond to your child's communication attempts, they learn that what they say or do is important.
- If your child is learning to make sounds, listen carefully and allow them enough time to finish talking. When they have finished, this is your chance to acknowledge that you have heard what they said. You could repeat the sounds back to them, pause and give them a turn to communicate again.
- Before you start speaking, be sure that you have your child's attention.
- A nice way to encourage your child's communication is to give them choices of toys and activities. This gives your child a chance to learn to choose and think (e.g. 'Would you like teddy or a story?'). When you say this to your child, hold up both options so they can make a choice.

Remember, when your child is developing their communication skills, they may communicate their choice to you by a look, moving their head or reaching. When they communicate their choice, be sure to talk to them about their selection (e.g. 'Teddy, you want teddy. Good choice!').

- If your child is using words, you can help them to use more words by adding to what they've said (e.g. if they said 'Car' you might say, 'Yes, car. Big car.').
- Imitating your baby's noises, such as blowing raspberries and

making kissing noises, encourages them to develop oral motor skills. It helps with development for making speech sounds and encourages turn-taking.

- Any time is a good time for learning to communicate. In addition to your special daily play time, everyday routines provide a great opportunity for communication. Times such as nappy changes, bath or wash time and feeding time provide good opportunities to learn to communicate.

## Bath or wash time

### **Language learning opportunities:**

- Body parts, e.g. Sing, *"This is the way we wash your toes, wash your toes, wash your toes..."*.  
Repeat with different parts of the body.
- Action words, e.g. splash, kick, stand, sit, wriggle, turn, lift, find, hold.

### **Concept learning opportunities:**

- Wet and dry, e.g. "You're all wet", "Let's get you dry".
- In and out, e.g. "Get in the bath", "Time to get out of the bath".

## Nappy changes

### **Language learning opportunities:**

- Body parts, e.g. Say, *"Where is your hand? ... Oh, there is your hand."*
- Action words, e.g. put, lift, stand, sit, turn.

### **Concept learning opportunities:**

- On and off, e.g. "Jumper goes on", "Shoes come off".
- Up and down, e.g. "Lift your foot up", "Put your arms down".

## Music and songs in hospital

Music activities help children to learn to listen, pay attention, concentrate and follow directions. We can create music anytime and anywhere and it's lots of fun!

When your baby is young, you will direct the show, providing the music and words, and helping your baby do the actions. After many, many, many repetitions, you can encourage your baby to take an active part.

Some hospitals have specialists called Music Therapists, who provide special sessions to encourage communication and bonding between a parent and a child. Ask the nurse who is looking after your child if your hospital has a Music Therapist. If not, there are still plenty of songs you can sing yourself with your child.

## Singing with your child

- **Don't worry if you don't sound great**, your child will respond to the rhythm of your speech, and the love and affection with which you sing. The most important thing is to sing slowly and clearly.
- **Use lots of actions** with your songs, as this encourages your child to copy. Remember your child will copy actions first, the words will come later.
- **Make up words to familiar tunes**, so your songs have more meaning for your child. You can put your child's name in the song to personalise it. For example, "Jack on the bus goes up and down...".
- **Older babies and children like to use instruments** – you may like to make them, for example an empty yoghurt pot and a spoon make a great drum; or a bottle filled with rice or a set of measuring spoons make a great shaker!
- **Use pausing**. For younger children this will help them learn to anticipate, for older children it will give them the chance to fill in the missing word or action. For example "Twinkle twinkle, little ...".

## Further advice

If you have any concerns or questions about your child's communication development, please speak to their Speech and Language Therapist.



If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

Author: Sarah Kilcoyne, Principal Specialist Speech and Language Therapist  
August 2018  
Review: August 2021  
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
Oxford OX3 9DU  
[www.ouh.nhs.uk/information](http://www.ouh.nhs.uk/information)

