

Oxford Craniofacial Unit

COMMUNICATING WITH A CHILD WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

Information for parents and carers

Talking and listening to children from the moment they are born helps them develop good language and communication skills. This enables children to listen and express themselves well. It also helps them to learn and develop friendships.

Many children with a visual impairment develop normal speech and language skills. A child with visual impairment can also use their other senses to support them to learn to communicate. The verbal information you give to support what your child hears, touches, smells and tastes is essential to their learning.

Help your child learn about the world around them

A child with a visual impairment can often hear a sound, but will need help from those around them to learn the source of the sound, or what has caused it. For example, a child might hear somebody ringing a bell, but not be able to see the person shaking the bell or where they are.

Your child will draw on this sensory information to build a 3D image in their mind. When you talk to your child, this will help them to build an understanding of the world around them.

By encouraging your child to use their other senses, you can enhance their language learning and also bond with your child.

How can I help my child learn to communicate?

Children with visual impairment may be more tuned in to information coming from sound, touch, taste and smell. Your voice and commentary about the world around them is a way that your child can increase their understanding.

As your child may not be able to see your facial expressions, it is important to use different tones of voice to convey emotion. Remember to still keep your voice calm and gentle, as their hearing may be more sensitive.

When you communicate with your child, getting down to their level will help them develop an awareness of where you are and allow them to communicate directly to you.

When you come into a room, let your child know you are there. Also, let your child know when you leave a room. This can help your child to grow confident in knowing who is around them.

Children with a visual impairment learn about the world around them by using their hands and touch. Engaging with your child and letting them touch your face, as you name the parts of your face, helps your child develop an understanding of body parts, which are often some of children's first words.

Giving your child a chance to feel you speak, by placing their hand on the side of your face near your nose and lips, will help them to experience what happens when somebody speaks. They will feel the vibrations through your cheek. This also gives your child an opportunity to feel the different lip shapes when making sounds such as 'm' and 'b'.

Talking to your baby

By chatting to your child throughout the day, you are giving them an example of speech sounds. Spending time talking to yourself while you go about your daily activities can give your baby more experience of hearing you make speech sounds correctly.

As you do activities around the house you can narrate what you are doing (e.g. 'It's time for a bath. I'm going to turn the water on. Splash! Wow, that is cold! Now to add some bubbles!'). You can have fun and use made up sounds. Your baby will like hearing you speak and connecting the words you say with the sounds they hear (the sound of water running and the word 'water').

Some ideas:

- Make your voice go up and down in pitch and volume.
- Make funny sounds (blow raspberries, smack your lips).
- Allow your child to feel you making these sounds as you make them, by placing their hand on your face.

Babble with your baby

When you hear your baby make a sound, you can repeat the sound back to them. This lets your baby hear the sounds they are making and tune into their own speech sounds. Let your baby feel your mouth moving with their hands, or on their skin. For example, blow a raspberry and let your baby touch your lips to feel the vibration.

Turn-taking

One of the first steps in learning about communication is beginning to take turns in conversation. You can do this with your child by letting them make some sounds, then saying something, then pausing to allow your child to take their turn again.

Learning to listen

You can teach your child to tune in to the speech sounds and noises they hear. You will need to explain the sounds and noises

that your child hears, as they will not have seen what made the noise. You can do this by going on a listening walk and naming the sounds that you hear (e.g. birds in the tree, dog parking, bus beeping).

When you are at home, you can direct their attention to sounds like the telephone or the vacuum cleaner. You can ask, 'What's that noise?' then let them touch the item that made the noise. You can do the same if there is a smell in the environment, for example 'Can you smell this flower?'

Change the sound of your voice

When you make sounds, change the pitch and tune in your voice so that your baby can listen and copy. You can make this fun by doing this in play.

For example, when you swing or bounce your baby up and down, vary the tune in your voice to match the word, so your voice goes up when you say 'up' and down with 'down'.

Starting talking

Encourage your baby to make sounds. Babies at an early age usually won't be able to copy sounds perfectly. It is more important for you to provide a clear example of the sound and this will encourage your baby to join in.

Teach new sounds

Encourage early speech sounds, particularly gentle lip sounds such as "muh, buh, puh". Use words like "peep-o", "pop!" and "mummy", or imitate animal sounds, for example, "moo", "baa" and "miaow".

You can also make up nonsense strings of sounds, for example 'mumumum' or 'boobooboo'. If you make the sounds, your baby will want to join in.

Pop bubbles while saying 'pop, pop, pop' and play hiding games, saying 'peep-o'.

Activity ideas

Naming movements and actions

When your child is doing a movement, gently place your hand on theirs and talk through what they are doing. For example, when your child is having a drink, guide your child's actions and tell them they are having a drink.

Vibrations

Children with a visual impairment tune into resonance and vibration, such as the vibration from a drum or a beach ball. Taking turns to use the drum or beach ball (with your hand guiding your child's hand) will help your child learn about taking turns, which is an important skill to learn when having conversations.

Mealtime

At mealtimes, talk with your child about the food they are eating, the texture, smell and taste ('This is hot, it feels soft and lumpy'). This way you are helping your child learn new words and also to understand what they are eating when they are unable to see it.

Let your child start the conversation

Giving your child a chance to start a conversation is a positive way for them to learn to be active in their discovery. Give your child options (e.g. a choice between two toys), so they can think and choose. If your child starts an interaction (e.g. reaches for a toy) encourage them and talk to them about what they are doing.

Looking for talking

Encourage your child to turn their head towards you when they are communicating. This will help your child to develop social interaction skills. Over time, this will become a habit and will help them to interact with others.

Encourage awareness of facial expressions

Encourage your child to be aware of facial expressions and that these have meaning attached to them. You can do this by letting your child touch your face when you smile or frown.

Encourage your child to smile. If you smile when talking your child will hear the smile in your voice. By telling your child that it is nice to smile, you are encouraging their development of social skills and giving them a way of communicating their feelings using facial expression.

Sharing books

Sharing books together is a useful way of giving your child a chance to hear language. Choosing books with textures relating to the story can help your child link the book to the words that you are saying.

Organisations such as 'Booktouch' provide books for blind and partially-sighted children. For more information, visit www.bookstart.org.uk.

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**

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