# Everyone Communicates

Typical communication methods, types of difficulties
children may experience & useful tools

# Introduction

Not everyone can use words and talking but everyone communicates their basic needs, desires and refusal, at some level. As a communication partner, we need to understand how to recognise all types of communication. We are so used to communicating with speech that we can tune out the subtle communication that children may present non-verbally.

There is much that can be done to facilitate more effective communication through the provision of simple tools and approaches. Non-verbal, visual communication is a powerful means to communicate. For example, providing photographs or symbols to help with the understanding of a medical procedure. They can also be used to express feelings or to explain and describe levels and types of pain.

There are many factors that affect a child's communication abilities. Every child with a learning disability will have some difficulties with communication as part of their global learning needs.

There are a number of conditions which also frequently present particular communication difficulties as part of the symptomology or picture:

- Autistic Spectrum Disorders including Asperger's Syndrome
- Down's Syndrome
- Cerebral Palsy
- Fragile X
- Congenital Syndromes e.g. Treacher Collins Syndrome
- Conditions that present with Cleft lip/Palate
- Severe Epilepsy

Every child is unique and will have a unique set of needs regarding their understanding, self expression, sensory skills, social skills, physical skills. Using the **Communication Pathway and Assessment** in this Toolkit will help to make each child's needs clearer.

Some children with learning disabilities are easy to identify, but others do not present so easily. Children with Autism for example, may present with more subtle difficulties.

Generally, using visual communication to support spoken communication with any child with a learning disability, will provide a bridge between the child and the communication partner.

It will help to overcome the barriers and potential misunderstandings that can occur when you rely on spoken language to communicate complex or difficult news.

There are many tools to assist the provision of visual communication.

When using a tool you need to consider both what visual communication you will use (e.g. photos, drawings, symbols, pictures, signs) and how you will use it (e.g. passport, Talking Mat, communication boards and cue cards).

A child may have a preference or may already use a system of visual communication.

There are several other considerations:

- Drawings work well for more complex abstract communication.
- There are many symbol sets commercially available and a resource pack of graphic symbols has been designed for this toolkit.
- Photographs work very well to represent people, places, equipment, medical procedures and steps in a sequence.
- Signs (e.g. Makaton) need to be taught formally, but natural gestures will help e.g. pointing to focus a child's attention to the photos/pictures you wish them to look at, or using simple everyday gestures to help understand instructions.

Tools that have been developed to support complex communication include:

- **Talking mats** (Page 7)
- **Communication Passports** (Page 8)
- **Hospital Passports** (Page 9)
- **Social Stories** (Page 10)
- **Communication Technology** (Page 11)
- **Low-tech solutions** (Page 12)

# Talking Mats

This approach has been developed by Speech and Language Therapists to support discussion, understanding and expression of complex information. It involves using photos/pictures or symbols and placing them onto a mat in a structured way.

The child is encouraged to express their own opinion and be in control of the communication themselves. The approach is particularly conducive to counselling type communication, in which abstract, emotional or difficult concepts can be explored with some objectivity.

Training is available to learn how to use this approach and is available on request from a number of organisations.

More information about Talking Mats can be obtained from the following website:

www.communicationmatters.org.uk/ page/talking-mats

# Communication Passports

Communication Passports are clear and accessible. They are particularly useful as they detail a child's communication skills and needs. Typically, they also contain information about a child's general skills, needs, likes, dislikes, activities, hobbies, family and friends, (all the information about a child that is useful for communication partners to know), whilst the pictures and photos contained within are a useful conversational prop.

Many children with learning disabilities may already have a communication passport and asking parents or the child for access to this would be useful. The development of a communication passport could be part of any support/care package and referral to the Speech and Language Therapy service for advice about developing a Communication Passport might be required.

## Hospital Passports

Many hospitals have now developed Hospital Passports, which contain valuable information about a child's health needs and treatment plans. It is recommended that every child should have a Hospital Passport.

Children and young people with communication needs and their parents should be given access to any communication passports available. They should be supported to complete them and encouraged to use them during their journey through medical services.

Healthcare staff need to appreciate the purpose and value of this document, and understand how it can help both the hospital staff, the patient and their families when receiving care and support.

Information about communication and hospital passports can be obtained from:

www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/communication-passports

# Social Stories

This is an approach developed by Carol Gray (Gray, C.A. (1994) 'Comic Strip Conversations' Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons), to support children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders to understand complex, abstract, social communication.

It is a method of using sequenced drawings/cartoons to explain steps in a process or phases of understanding an abstract concept.

This approach is very useful for communication situations where complex information needs to be provided in a more concrete and simplified way.

It is recommended that this approach is only used by trained people, which can be provided to teams or individuals and is referenced within the Resource List in this Toolkit.

www.thegraycenter.org/home

www.autism.org.uk
search 'social stories'

# Communication Technology

There are many voice output devices that can be used to assist children to communicate who have little or no verbal communication.

Some children with Cerebral Palsy for example, may be using technology in every day life. Other children may require technology at various stages during illness.

There are specialist services available to support children who require assistive technology. There is also an electronic resource in the Toolkit called picTTalk© to facilitate emotional expression with children and young people. Please contact your Speech and Language Therapy team for help and advice.

# Low Tech Solutions (paper based)

This is the use of visual communications to support understanding and self expression across a range of activities and environments.

The possibilities are limitless here but the most common forms are boards and cards. There are many resources created already that can be used or adapted, (for example, the Widgit Symbol Resources Health Care Pack).

References to companies and resource sites are available within this Toolkit. Again, please contact your Speech and Language Therapy team for help and advice.
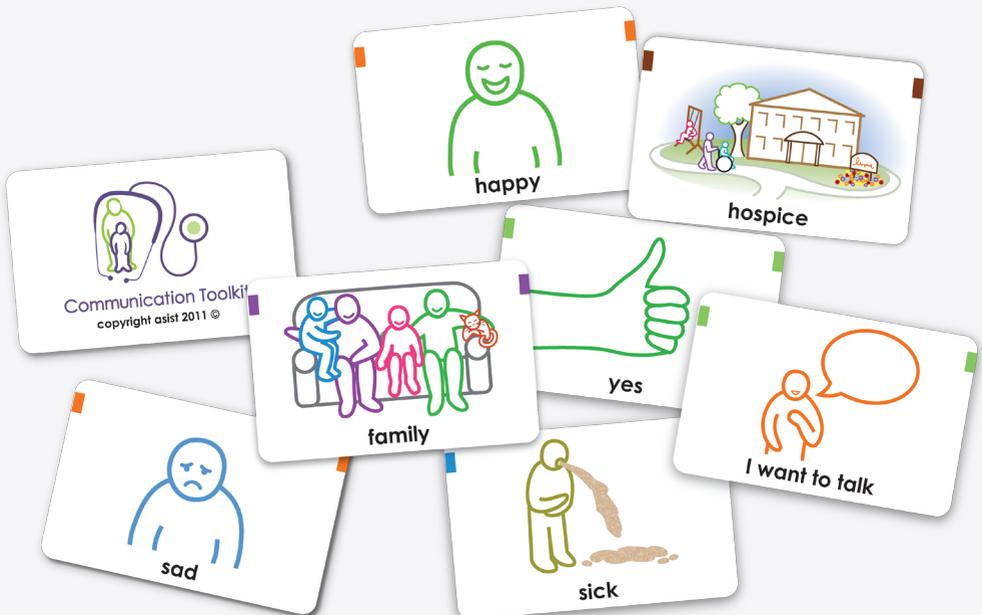
# Contact

Sue Read

Professor of Learning Disability Nursing,

School of Nursing and Midwifery,

Keele University,

Clinical Education Centre,

UHNS, NHS Trust,

Newcastle Road,

Staffordshire, ST4 6QG.

01782 679653

s.c.read@keele.ac.uk

Keele University

Reach

Clear communication by Reach part of asist

April 2011                    First Edition