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# Learning for Life early years

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## Early communication for children with complex needs

information for childminders



About cerebral palsy.  
For disabled people achieving equality.

Some children with cerebral palsy – and this includes children with hemiplegia – have complex needs and will be at a very early stage of communication. This may be irrespective of age. This information has been written with childminders in mind, but may also be useful for a number of different early years settings. It may be helpful to read alongside the Early Years information sheet on Communication in the series “Including children with cerebral palsy in early years settings”.

As a childminder you will have a great deal of experience in listening to and encouraging children’s early communication. These are the same skills you will use with children with complex needs. Complex needs can refer to a mixture of any of the following: physical needs, learning needs, behavioural needs, medical needs and sensory needs.

It is important to use parents as an ‘information centre’. They can pass on information from the child’s Speech and Language Therapist and relay any questions you may have. However, some younger children may not have a Speech and Language Therapist and will benefit greatly from the right experiences.

## Use what you already know

- Use consistent language
- Consider how many key words a child may understand in a sentence
- Use body language, facial expressions and so on
- Talk, talk, talk all the time
- Respond to the child’s early communication – crying, laughing etc
- Remember the importance of play in the development of communication
- Make it a fun experience for both you and the child
- Consider attention span
- Play games to develop attention span
- Work on developing eye contact
- Encourage taking turns
- Involve other children where possible, especially siblings
- Create opportunities for communication
- Children are children whatever the differences there after

Think about how any baby or young child develops their early communication skills. You will be using the same tools with an older child with complex needs. It is important to consider the child’s age and level of understanding alongside their level of language/communication development.

## Choices

One of the most important areas of development in early communication for children with complex needs is choice making. To enable a child's development through choices is very easy. It doesn't require lots of work, but more a mindset to always consider choices such as different foods, drinks, toys, videos and music tapes. This starts with asking a child which they want from two objects, held apart, that they must reach for, point to or look at.

Some children may not yet understand how to make a choice or what a choice is. Always accept their first answer and give them that choice, even if a child has only fleetingly looked at it. It is important that they learn the consequence of their choice. If you offer a child the choice of two different drinks and they indicate one when you know that the other is their favourite don't give them their favourite, give them the one they chose.

Choice making can progress to choosing from an increasing number of objects or pictures/photos or eventually a symbol system. When a child is ready to move on from objects you can start to introduce choosing from labels, pictures cut out of magazines or photos. Once a child becomes accustomed to choosing, try making one of the options 'something else' so they can learn that they can choose something you haven't chosen for them. Later on a Speech and Language Therapist may provide a symbol system.

Helping children learn to make choices teaches them to take control of the world around them and to want to communicate.

## Other aspects to consider

### **Positioning for communication**

Children with complex needs will probably need serious consideration given to positioning. This may involve specialist seating. It certainly means that they need to be able to lift their heads to see what/who they are looking at and that they may need to be able to use a hand to point. They need to be comfortable, consider whether they have sun light/lights shining in their eyes. When supportive seating is being introduced for the first time sessions need to be kept short but fun, gradually extending over a period of time. Speak to parents, their occupational therapist can advise on this area. If there are any visual difficulties you may need to consider lighting and/or positioning. Similarly for any hearing difficulties positioning will be important.

### **Equipment and toys**

You don't need to have lots of expensive equipment. Specialist seating usually comes with the child. Specialist toys are not necessary. An empty box can be a toy. You may need to give time to manually assist the child to play with toys that they cannot access alone. Remember to relax and have FUN as with any child he or she will pick up on your anxiety. As for any concerns you may have ask the advice of the child's parent/carer as they are the ones who know and understand the child the best. If they cannot help you they will probably be able to point you to a professional who has contact with the child. For ideas on toys see *Play Talks* produced by Scope, see details below.

## **Sign language**

Some children may be starting to learn to use simple sign language (such as Makaton). However, it is unlikely that a child with complex needs will use this as their primary method of communication. Simple sign language is an excellent tool for teaching and reinforcing language. Parents/carers will happily show you the new signs they are introducing to their child.

## **Objects of reference**

Some children may be introduced to objects of reference. These are to refer a child to a particular thing, for example, a spoon attached to a photo of lunch to refer to lunchtime. If a child is using objects of reference, parents/carers will explain their use to you.

## **Child protection**

It is important that the child understands the meaning of right and wrong, yes and no. It won't help a child to become part of his or her community now or in the future if this message is denied to them. Whatever their impairment, they need to understand what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Do not make an exception because of the child's ability; this helps no one, least of all them.

It is vital that the child is helped to understand the meaning of yes and no with regards to any child protection issue within any setting. An excellent resource to support this area is Listen Up, produced by Mencap, see details on page 7.

## Communication resources to aid inclusion

The following first two resources will provide you with the next stage of information and guidance. They are essential for any childminder who wants to learn more about this subject. There is additional information on organisations and websites of interest.

**Supporting Communication Through AAC** (alternative and augmentative communication). This can be downloaded free of charge from the Scope website. It is a complete programme for AAC. Module 7 refers specifically to the Foundation Stage. It is worth also looking at the other modules including Module 9, which covers children with profound and multiple learning difficulties. [www.scope.org.uk/education/aac.shtml](http://www.scope.org.uk/education/aac.shtml)

**Play Talks pack** contains fun ways to promote communication through play for children under five who have additional needs. It consists of colour-coded factsheets and a CD-ROM and costs £18 including postage and packaging. To order a copy, call 020 7619 7342 or email [publications@scope.org.uk](mailto:publications@scope.org.uk)

The pack contains information about useful organisations: the following are a selection:

**Communication Passports Template** – Communication passports were developed by Sally Millar as a simple and practical guide to help everyone understand people with additional difficulties.

They contain personal information about the person's needs, how he/she indicates yes or no and so on. They value the person, giving them a voice along with a choice, providing positive problem-solving solutions. In doing so they help new people quickly understand their needs.

**Scope Early Years** has developed a communication passport template focusing on the child. It comes in three different sizes and assists parents/carers and professionals working hand in hand with the child to make a start creating their own individual communication passport. They are available on the Play Talks CD-ROM and can also be downloaded free of charge from [www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears/](http://www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears/)

For more details about communication passports contact Sally Millar, Call Centre, University of Edinburgh, Paterson's Land, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ. Tel 0131 651 6236. [www.callcentrescotland.org.uk](http://www.callcentrescotland.org.uk)

**1Voice Communicating Together** is run by parents for users of low-tech and electronic communication aids and offers information and support. [www.1voice.info](http://www.1voice.info)

**First Steps**, Communication Matters c/o The Ace Centre, 92 Windmill Road, Headington, Oxford OX3 7DR. Tel 0870 606 5463. [www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk)

**The Talking Point** is a collaboration of three communication organisations to make the informative website [www.talkingpoint.org.uk/info.asp?type=9&item=1481](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/info.asp?type=9&item=1481)

In particular it provides information on adapting the environment.

**The Aidis Trust** provides specialist computer equipment to disabled people of all ages to aid their communication.

1 Albany Park, Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset BH17 7BX. Tel 01202 695244. [www.aidis.org](http://www.aidis.org)

**AbilityNet** gives advice on using computers through assessments, workshops and courses. It also has an extensive list of communication aid assessment centre/services. Tel 0800 269545. [www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)

**Listen Up.** Helping children with a learning disability complain about the services they use contains a variety of resources that enable children to express their views. It is produced by Mencap and can be ordered from the website. [www.mencap.org.uk/html/listen\\_up/listen\\_up.htm](http://www.mencap.org.uk/html/listen_up/listen_up.htm)

A mention of any product, treatment, therapy, web link or event does not constitute endorsement by Scope.





## For more information about cerebral palsy and Scope services

Contact Scope's Cerebral Palsy Helpline for information, advice and support. Copies of all Scope's factsheets, including a glossary of terms relevant to cerebral palsy, can be downloaded from the website or obtained from the Cerebral Palsy Helpline. Referrals to Scope's Community Teams and services can be made through the Helpline.

Cerebral Palsy Helpline, PO Box 833, Milton Keynes MK12 5NY

The Cerebral Palsy Helpline hours are:

Monday – Friday 9am to 9pm, weekends 2pm to 6pm

Tel 0808 800 3333

Fax 01908 321051

Email [cphelpline@scope.org.uk](mailto:cphelpline@scope.org.uk)

Scope's website address is [www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

Scope acknowledges the help and support of everyone who has been involved in the production of this information.

This factsheet can be made available in other formats if required e.g. large print or tape.

Scope is able to offer a telephone interpreting service to people whose preferred language is not English. We have information on Scope and cerebral palsy available on audiotape in a number of languages. Please contact Scope's Cerebral Palsy Helpline for more details of these services.

## For more information about hemiplegia and HemiHelp services

HemiHelp provides information and support to children and young people with hemiplegia and their families.

HemiHelp, Unit 1, Wellington Works, Wellington Road, London SW19 8EQ

The HemiHelp Helpline hours are:

Monday – Friday 10.00am to 1.00pm

Helpline 0845 123 2372

Email [helpline@hemihelp.org.uk](mailto:helpline@hemihelp.org.uk)

HemiHelp's website address is [www.hemihelp.org.uk](http://www.hemihelp.org.uk)