

20 great ideas to help you create a communication-friendly environment.

1. Use the right level of language

Use the words children understand as the basis for your conversations. Pushing a child's development by using language too far beyond their current capability doesn't work. It can, in fact, be counterproductive.

It's helpful to understand what the next stage of the child's development entails. That way you reduce the risk of either holding a child back or pushing them too hard. For example, if a child is comfortable using short sentences, then they are ready to move to the next stage, when you can start using longer, more complex sentences.

If you realise that the language you are using is too advanced, think about ways to simplify it. For example, break down a complex sentence into simpler chunks. Instead of giving a long list of instructions, divide it into steps.

2. Get down to the level of the child

Conversations are easier with children if you get down to their eye level, which may well mean squatting on the floor when you talk with them.

3. Keep the atmosphere fun

Remember to have fun with language. Try to make your time together enjoyable and relaxing. You want the children to associate communication with pleasure rather than stress.

4. Use a child's name before giving instructions

Remember to attract the attention of a child before you speak. Wait until you have their attention before giving instructions.

5. Give children time to respond

Children process language slower than you, so allow them plenty of time to think and formulate a response – even if it seems like a very drawn-out process to you.

7. Eliminate distractions

Children generally find it harder to focus their attention than adults, so make it easier by eliminating as many distractions as you can. Simple measures, like turning off the TV and radio, or finding a quiet corner to talk in, can make a huge difference.

8. Use visual support

Use drawings, symbols and photographs to support the development of a child's language. For example, picture cards or clippings from magazines are a great way to reinforce vocabulary.

Create visual timetables to familiarise children with important sequences, like the tasks they need to do in the morning before school.

6. Be a role model for the language you want to hear

Children learn best from the adults around them. They pick up on the way we use language and listen to them. One of the best ways to support children's language and communication development is to be a good role model for the language, listening and conversation skills you would like to see in the children.

9. Praise achievements

When a child does well at a language task, praise them. Make sure the praise is specific. Rather than simply say: *'Well done,'* be more detailed – *'I loved the way you described your new friends. They sound very nice.'*

10. Encourage children to admit when they are confused or unclear

It's important to let children know it's okay for them to say if they're unsure about something. In fact, it's essential for learning. Respond positively if a child says: *'I don't understand.'*

11. Offer comments rather than ask questions

It's very easy to ask too many questions. Rather than stimulating conversation, questions can actually inhibit it. They can make a conversation feel like an interrogation.

An alternative approach is to comment on what the child is doing rather than ask direct questions. So instead of asking: 'Why didn't you paint the tree green?', you could make a comment like: 'I see you've painted the tree red. That's an interesting idea.' Another example. Instead of asking: 'Why haven't you eaten your fish fingers?' you might simply comment: 'You've eaten all your beans but you've hardly touched your fish fingers.'

12. Create opportunities for conversations

Get creative. Make deliberate mistakes for children to correct. Set up situations where they have to communicate to get what they want. Encourage children to take control. Get them to tell you what to do, even at a very simple level. 'John, what do you think I should do with this shopping?' The more varied the situations the better. Get them to talk with lots of different people - shopkeepers, neighbours and so on.

13. Tell children what skills they are practising

On the instruction page for each activity, the cartoon character Boo Cat highlights the skill being taught by the game. While it's important for the children to have fun, what helps make the learning 'stick' is to get them to understand why they're doing what they're doing and what skills they are practising.

14. Talk about what's going on in their world

It's important for children to talk about the things that interest them. Sometimes their choice of topic may be boring for an adult, but it's good for children to feel listened to. Use their favourite topics as a way to expand and develop their communication skills.

15. If you let them watch TV, do it together

There's a lot of debate about TV and how much children should watch. Sharing a TV programme with children can easily provide the basis for conversation as well as give you the chance to explain the things they are seeing on the screen. You could also incorporate favourite TV characters into the activities. ('Guess which cartoon character I'm thinking about?')

16. Mistakes are a good thing!

It's important to let children know that mistakes are OK. If they get the answer wrong, they can be encouraged with 'Good try' or given some specific information, like, 'You're right. The koala bear is an Australian animal, but it's not the one that jumps. Have another think.'

17. Encourage conversation

For quieter children, research has shown that some things help encourage conversations more than others. These are the most effective things adults can do:

- Make encouraging noises ('Wow!') or comment on what the child is doing ('The paint is dripping.')
 - Say something about themselves ('I went on holiday to the seaside.')
- These work less well:
- Asking too many questions
 - Asking children to repeat themselves

18. Don't just give instructions, make it two-way

It's easy to allow instructions to dominate our conversations with children. 'Get your coat on.' 'Come and get your dinner.' 'Put your toys away.' 'Get your book out.'

Language has many other uses, like praising ('Fantastic!'), questioning ('What did you do at school today?'), commenting ('I see you're making a rocket'), negotiating ('OK, five more minutes play, then bed time') or clarifying ('Do you mean yesterday or tomorrow?'). It's good to have a balance in the different ways we use language.

20. Respond positively to curiosity

Anything that builds a child's sense of inquisitiveness is worth pursuing, since curiosity is the engine that drives learning. Be particularly careful to react positively to questions.

19. Name the emotion

If a child is experiencing a strong emotion, name it so they can start to build their own vocabulary of emotions. Try to connect the emotion to an event or experience to reinforce the idea that feelings don't come from out of the blue. So, for example, you might say: 'You're feeling angry because your toy was left out in the rain.' When children realise that someone recognises how they're feeling, this often has a strong calming effect.