

Teach children to be successful communicators- staying safe

In the coming days school staff will be facing possibly the biggest challenge of their careers – ever.

Like almost everyone, they have spent large amounts of time at home, coping with stringent restrictions on daily life, with the ever-present worry of becoming unwell themselves and continual concerns for loved-ones.

Now it's time to leave the sanctuary of home and prepare to pick up the threads of professional life in a world that has changed. There will be competing priorities and so many questions:

- Who are the most vulnerable children and what are their needs?
- How are we going to meet those needs?
- For some children, will ground gained before the lockdown have been lost?
- How can we even begin to make up for so much lost time?
- How can we keep ourselves and the children safe?

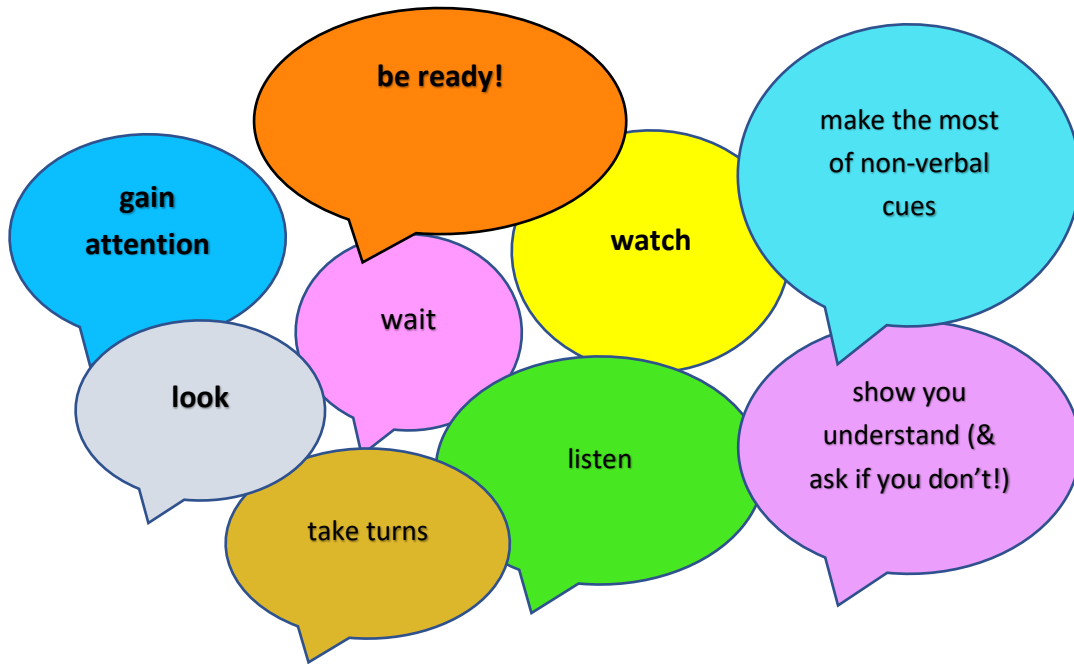
... and all this within the context of social distancing.....

Managing this is the first significant challenge. Children are hard-wired to interact and – particularly for the younger ones – invading others' personal space is an important part of communication! It might well be a focus of debate – which of these evils will cause the most damage – the risk of Covid 19 or the impact on social, emotional and communication development?

In order to get this right, staff should consider *actively teaching* effective communication 'at a distance'. Gone are the opportunities for a child to nudge a friend to gain attention or a member of staff to take a child by the hand to guide him or help explain something.

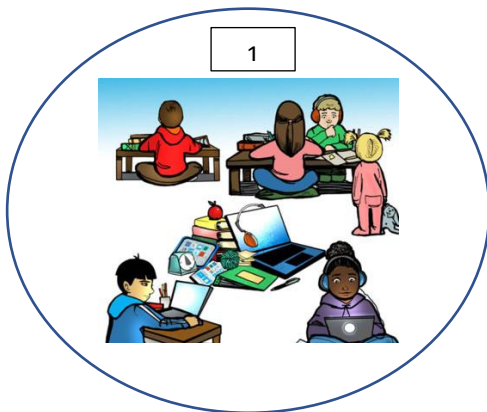
How to be a successful <i>safe</i> communicator. As a minimum, we want children to	
Be ready	Practise 'good sitting'
Know how to gain attention	The other person needs to <i>know</i> that you want to start a conversation. Call his/her name!
Be able to take turns	Roles change as we take turns to be the speaker and the listener
Show they can watch, wait, look & listen	This is how we know when it's <i>our</i> turn. It also helps us to know if what we are saying is reaching the listeners: are they bored? Have they understood? Can they actually hear you? Have you been talking for too long and it's time for someone else to take a turn?
Speak more slowly	Sound travels fast, but it's not immediate
Be able to show they have understood (affirmation)	'OK', nod and smile
Clarify	... and ask for an explanation if not!
Use and pick up on non-verbal cues	Help get your message across by using gesture and changing

In theory, communication 'rules' should be embedded in us all

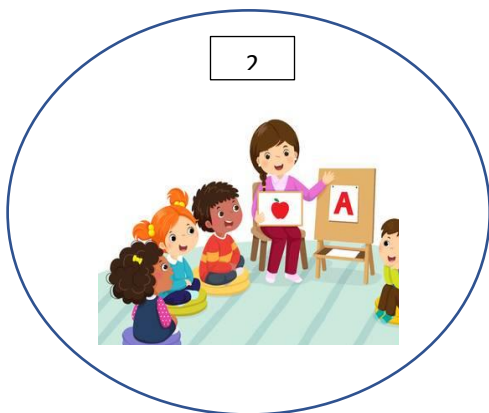


With the best will in the world however, we know that isn't always the case! We are used to interrupting, talking over others, using non-verbal means to control the interaction or move things along.

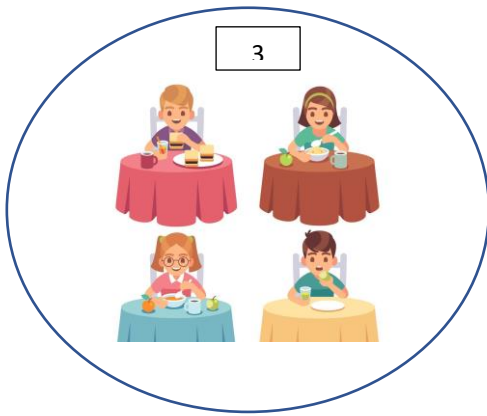
We also need to remember that children will be communicating in *different types of situations*. Here are some typical examples:



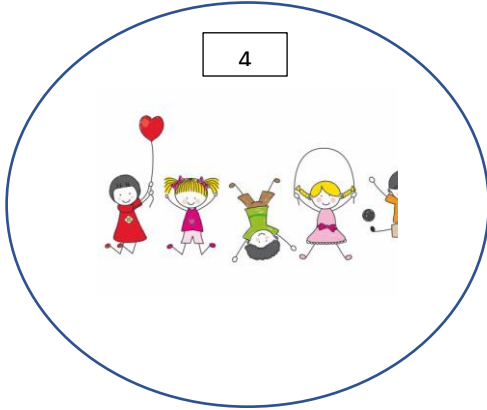
The quite closely-controlled and supervised classroom interactions between adults and children which probably won't be very far removed from the kind of interaction expected prior to social distancing (putting your hand up, responding to a question etc)



Small group work where children will communicate with each other and an adult: they will talk about their work, ask questions, comment, explain etc. This is the kind of situation where a child might typically and instinctively nudge or touch his/her neighbour to start an interaction. Now children **will need be spaced further apart** and it's time to encourage other ways to get the ball rolling.



Lunch times have a foot in both camps 2 & 4: there *will* be supervision but it's likely to be less and children will be spaced further apart. We *absolutely* want to continue to encourage conversations as this is an important part of social interaction when we sit and eat together. Perhaps the make-up of the small learning groups will be followed through into the dining hall – this would help to maintain the message.



The largely unstructured (and far less closely supervised) interactions which accompany free play. This is probably the biggest risk area: the focus is on fun and movement and it's easy to forget the new 'rules'!

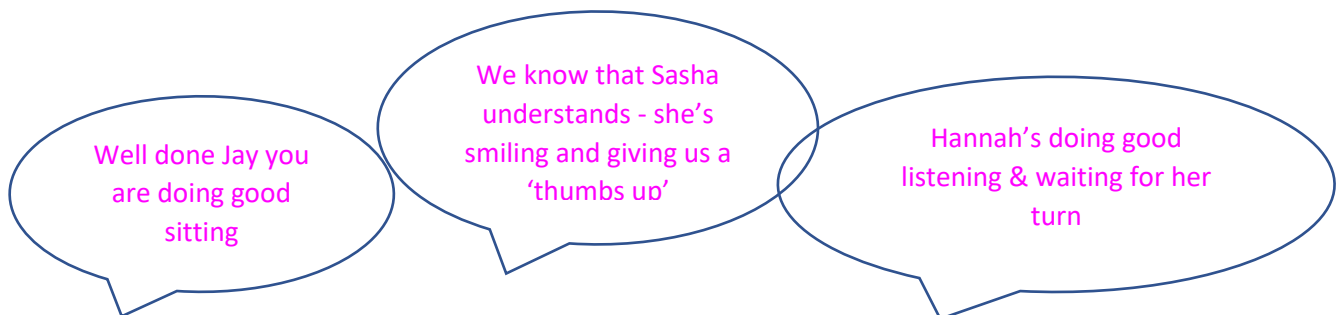
Let's look more closely at those *speaker-listener roles*. What do children need to know?

'Good sitting'	Gain attention	Speaker	Listener	Speak slowly
Know when to take turns		Show they understand and ask if not


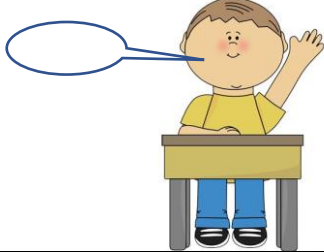



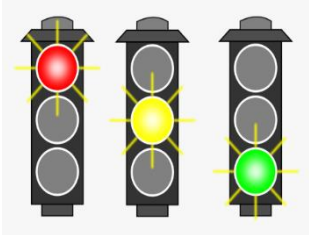

Teaching these things might initially look like a challenging thing to do – and not something you would normally even consider. In the ideal world children learn this by example and if they need reminders, then so be it! But now in the aftermath of Covid 19 we can't afford to 'hope for the best': we need to get it right first time.

Therapists teach 'speaker-listener rules'. This is usually part of therapy for children for whom this doesn't come naturally but it can also be part of supporting all children with poor attention and listening skills.

As with any kind of behavioural change, tackled systematically, practised by role play and supported by visual cues and prompts, outcomes are good. You are the best teacher: be a good role model, prompt a child to confirm that s/he understands (or not) and give lots of praise when children get it right.



Poor communicators become better ones, good communicators become even more skilled and, most importantly of all, everyone stays safe.

Help children to learn by using		Visual prompts
'Good sitting'	being <i>still</i> , watching and waiting	
Gain attention	put your hand up, say the name of the person you want to speak to	
Speaker	looking + talking + using non-verbal cues	
Listener	looking and listening (no talking!)	
Speak slowly	remember, sound takes time to travel	
Know when to take turns	it's hard to talk and listen at the same time	
Show they understand	so the speaker knows when to carry on	
... and ask if not	children need to know its okay to ask for help	