The means, reasons and opportunities model of communication

Introduction

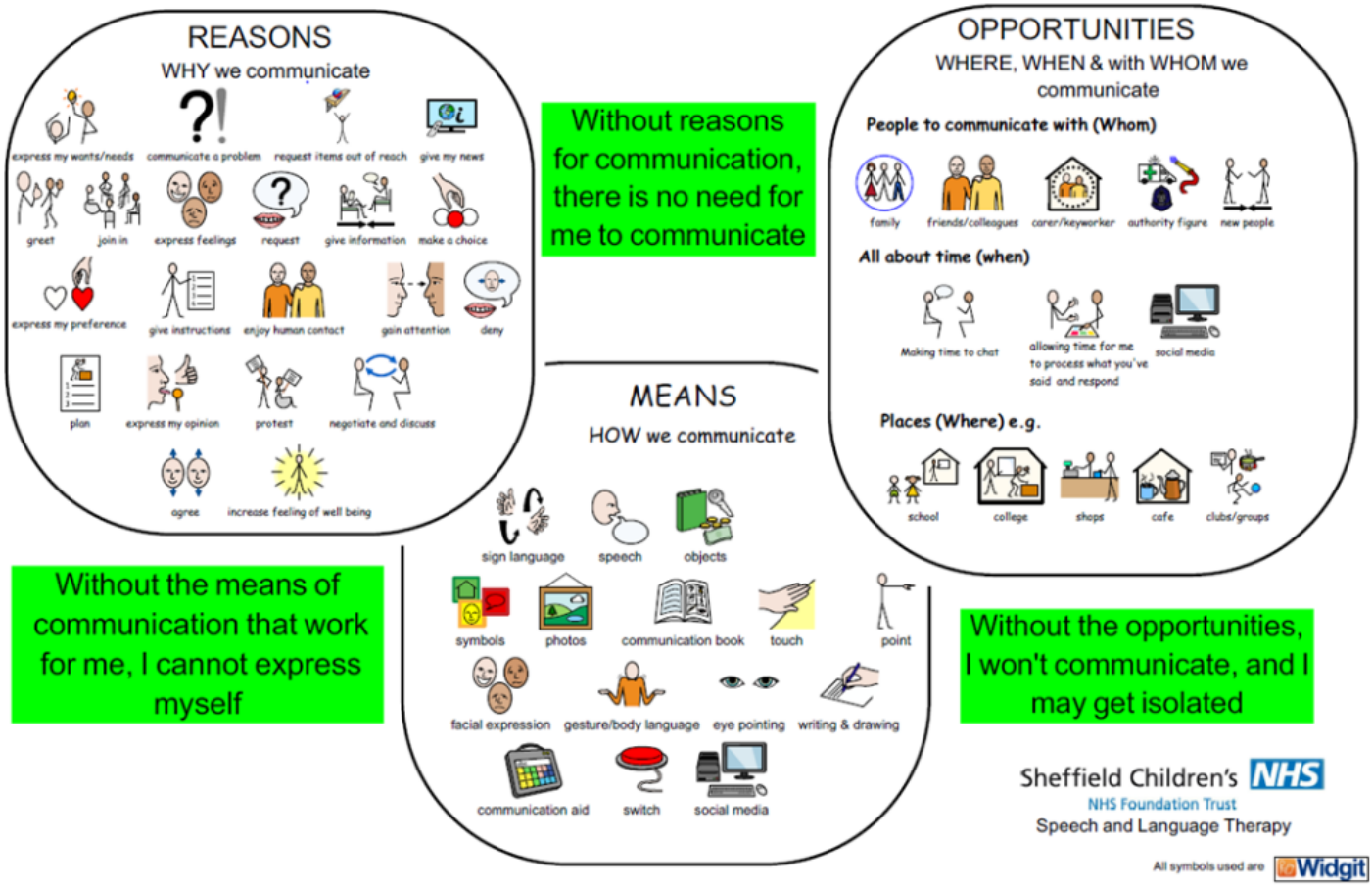
People with a learning disability may communicate in a range of different ways. Some people use spoken language, some people may communicate in other ways, such as signing, objects, pictures, facial expressions, or body language. Often, it is a combination of all of these. Lots of people with a learning disability find it harder to understand and remember what people say.

There are 3 things we all need to communicate:

- Means or a way to communicate
- Reasons to communicate
- Opportunities to communicate

This is called the 'means, reasons and opportunities model' and is a useful way to think about how we can support the communication skills of children and young people with a learning disability. It can be helpful to think about your child's communication using this model.

MEANS, REASONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNICATION



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All symbols used are Widgit

Means

Means refers to how we communicate, including things like talking or signing, and using gestures such as pointing, looking, reaching, pushing something away, and eye contact. This could be more subtle cues such as smiling or frowning. Lots of children and young people use pictures to help them communicate. This may be paper-based or using a powered communication aid or tablet.

Does your child have a way to show you what they want? Could you help them use objects, photos, signs, gestures, or pictures to tell you their needs and wants?

Reasons

Reasons refer to **why** we communicate. There are many different reasons why we want to communicate. Sometimes it is for social reasons, for example saying “hello” in greeting. Sometimes it is to protest or say no to something that is about to happen. It might be to share information, such as telling people our news, to request something, like asking for a drink, or to comment on something we can see.

Does your child have things that will motivate them to communicate? For example, if everything they need can be easily reached, they have no need to learn to ask for it. It can be very easy to anticipate your child’s needs because you know them so well, however, this can take away a reason for communication. Often, we need to create reasons for communication. This might include offering a choice between two objects so your child can look or reach what they want. It might be pausing in a game or song they are enjoying so they have an opportunity to smile or look at you to indicate ‘more’. For some children, it might be putting a motivating toy out of reach or doing something silly like giving them a plate for their yoghurt rather than a spoon. In this way, they have lots of reasons to communicate.

Opportunities

Opportunities refer to where, when and with who we communicate. For example, this might be at school or at home, at snack time, at playtime, and with people such as family, friends, or teachers.

Are there lots of opportunities during the day for your child to communicate? It may be helpful to think about a typical day and where, when, and with who your child has a chance to communicate.

‘Special time’ can be a great way to build more opportunities into the day. This is 1 on 1 time with your child, where the TV and radio are switched off and you play together, joining in with what your child wants to do.

Changing how we talk to our children and young people

One of the best ways to help a child's communication develop is to think about the way we talk with them and make a few simple changes.

- Follow their lead. It is easy to fall into the trap of always telling children what to do and directing their play. Instead, try joining in with what they are doing and letting them lead. Join in with their movements, actions, and sounds.
- Comment on what they are doing. Name the objects they are looking at and the actions they are doing. Describe the objects and actions and model everyday words such as "more" or "less".
- Break information down into small chunks when you are speaking.
- Use gestures, objects, photos, and pictures when you are speaking. Children with a learning disability find it easier to understand things they can look at than spoken words and sentences on their own.
- Give your child lots of time to process what you have said before moving on. Children with a learning disability need extra time to listen, remember and plan what they want to say.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Children need to hear words lots of times before they can use them in their own talking.
- Extend their sentences. Repeat back what your child has said, but add another word or idea. For example, if they say, "dog", repeat back, "Dog is running" "Big dog" "Dog and cat".
- Give choices instead of asking questions. For example, it is much easier to answer, "Do you want fish fingers or sausages?" than "What do you want for dinner?". Some children and young people will need choices of objects or pictures. Some will respond by looking at the one they want, some may point or others may say the word.

Additional resources and information

Speech and Language Therapy's Weekend Words (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeYfyH0krKg&list=PLMIZqixhKCwsc2JPQXnTC-H5G2l4KGffb)

Makaton (https://makaton.org/)
Makaton is used to support children and young people with a wide range of communication needs. In Makaton, signs are used alongside speech and only the main words or ideas in the sentence are signed. Makaton can give children a means of communicating and can help spoken language develop.

Intensive Interaction (http://www.intensiveinteraction.org/)
Intensive interaction involves spending time with your child and tuning in to their movements, facial expressions, eye contact and sounds. This helps children and young people develop early interaction and joint attention skills and how to enjoy being with other people.

Talking Mats (https://www.talkingmats.com/)
Talking Mats is a way of using pictures to help people with communication difficulties express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Widgit Symbols (https://www.widgit.com/)
Widgit Symbols are used widely across education and health settings in Sheffield. These are pictures that represent words. Symbols can be used to help understand and support children and young people to communicate.
You can create your own symbol resources using the InPrint software or Widgit Online (http://www.widgitonline.com/)

Widgit Health (https://widgit-health.com/) has lots of resources to support children and young people when they are accessing healthcare.

Contact us

For more information please contact the Speech and Language Therapy Service at Flockton House on 0114 226 2333.

Disclaimer

Please note: this is a generic information sheet relating to care at Sheffield Children's NHS FT. These details may not reflect treatment at other hospitals. This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your healthcare professionals' instructions. If this resource relates to medicines, please read it alongside the medicine manufacturer's patient information leaflet. If this information has been translated into another language from English, efforts have been made to maintain accuracy, but there may still be some translation errors. If you are unsure about any of the guidance in this resource or have specific questions about how it relates to your child, always ask your healthcare professional for further advice.