

# Play Talks

Fun ways to aid communication

“Communication falls into the same category as food, drink and shelter – it is essential for life and without it life becomes worthless.”

Anne McDonald, campaigner



“You are the best game in town and the best toy in the house.”

Monte Ball, parent and psychiatrist

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# Introduction

## Communication through play



### **Why it matters**

Some children with motor difficulties can have complex needs. In the early years there may be health issues, concerns about sitting, walking, head control, hand use and/or behavioural problems.

During a child's early years there may be involvement from a number of professionals, however the communication needs for that child may not always be addressed.

Parents at this time can feel overwhelmed and those whose children cannot talk may think that their child will never be able to communicate. Early play is essential for the development of communication and language skills.

Communication, however, is **not** just about speech. Communication is accomplished in many different ways, with our hands, eye contact, body language, crying and laughing.

Newborn babies are able to communicate. Parents know when their child is happy or sad, hungry or thirsty. They understand their child often through instinct but also by the child's crying, body language and gestures.

**This pack has been designed to offer help to parents/carers and professionals to find practical ways for a young child with movement difficulties to communicate through play.**



Play is an activity for everyone. It heightens the focus on the child's positive capabilities, skills and interests. Through play children learn about the world around them. They learn to communicate, interact with others, develop their own identity and build on their social skills enabling them to prepare for adulthood.

Play can take place wherever you are. Toys help with building muscle strength, improving coordination, reaching and communication. All this can be done in the name of **fun**.

All toys must suit the child's stage of development and age. If it is too simple a child will become frustrated and lose interest. Any child has the right to dislike an activity or toy.

Some children with special needs may require your physical help, to play with the toys. In some cases simple adaptations to the toys are all that is needed. Access is often the key issue for a child with physical difficulties. This is covered further in the factsheet 'Useful tips' (page 3).

Play allows parents to enhance their children's abilities. Play reinforces what the child can do; it sends a message to all involved that the child is a child first and foremost.

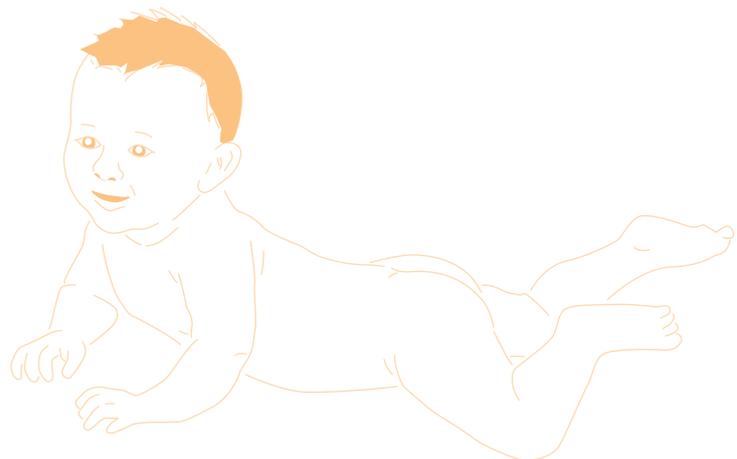
Children are the best teachers of play – not only are they good at it but also they are genuinely excited about sharing with others. Disabled children are no different. In fact, because they sometimes lead the activity, play can be wonderful for family fun.

Remember toys are not essential for play. An empty box that once housed a toy can become the toy. The one important factor is it must be **fun**.

Children should be encouraged to celebrate difference and foster their natural curiosity whilst engaged in play.

The following pages offer ideas on playing with your child, which in turn will help their communication. But the all-important message is about having fun and enjoying your child.

**Remember your child is unique.**



Some children with physical difficulties may need help and encouragement with toys and activities. Other children may need a physical prompt to help them play with a toy – for example, putting your hand over their hand to touch a toy.



When a child has movement difficulties, how a child can access toys and communicate is a crucial issue.

**It is essential you seek advice as early as possible from your child's Portage worker, physiotherapist, occupational therapist or speech and language therapist.**

## **Positioning**

Some children may need specialist seating. Children need to be in a safe, supported position that facilitates hip, trunk, head and neck control. In this position children should be able to look at a surface and where possible, bring their hands forward to indicate their needs and choices. They will need to have their most useful hand free for pointing.

If the child is going to be able to play and communicate, he needs to be able to get into and hold a good position without adult support.

If the child is going to rely on his eyes to look at pictures or symbols, he needs to be in a stable position where he can focus and move his eyes over the surface the pictures or symbols are on.

Children who have not been accustomed to using supportive seating may not automatically accept that this is advantageous!

When introducing supportive seating make the activities very pleasant and short. Keep toys or play activities for these periods so that the child begins to look forward to the sessions in the chair. Remember, even supportive seating can become uncomfortable for the child, and frequent changes of position are needed.

Positioning needs will vary depending on the task or activity that the child is undertaking eg. a big soft toy can make an excellent prop when a child is lying on their tummy. Some children can find it hard to reach out and grasp toys and need to be supported by holding his hand, wrist or elbow to play. Contact your occupational therapist for advice.

### **Eyesight**

Children without speech cannot tell you what they don't see and many with physical difficulties will be unable to point accurately to tell you what they do see. Even when the child has good vision they may have difficulties with visual perception.

Children without speech or with physical impairments may need to have their vision tested by specialists.

Ask your GP, health visitor, teacher of visual impairment or Portage home adviser (where available).

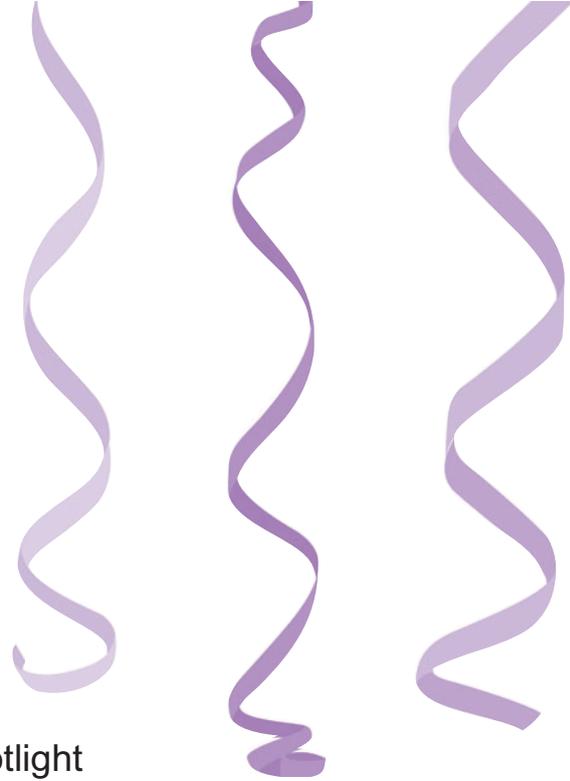
### **Lighting**

A child with very limited movement may not be able to adjust his or her position when the natural light available moves around the room. Remember children who have fixed seating, or who rely on adults to help them move, do not have the ability to make the small adjustments throughout the day to maximise comfort or vision.

To improve lighting for children:

- Try using matt or non-reflective materials.
- Check lighting is good and that there is no reflected glare.
- Where natural light is available, check throughout the day for glare.
- Don't just check for glare, check the line of sight to the supporting adult.

For further reading, see Scope's parents information leaflets (contact the Scope Response number below).



### **Vision enhancement for babies**

- Hang bright, shiny, colourful objects from the side of the cot. Use lighting such as a spotlight to shine on the objects to make them more visible.
- Use bright shapes with obvious outlines.
- Objects that are plain coloured against a contrasting background, or having a simple two- or three-colour pattern, are easier to see than multi-coloured objects.
- Hang a mobile either to the left or right above the cot, on the weaker side, or alternate if the baby has equal sight on each side.
- Hang coloured ribbons or streamers where there is air movement.
- Hang a few pictures or simple photographs around the room. Whilst we have the skill to focus on what interests us and in doing so ignore other things, this is a skill that has to be learnt by the baby and you need to make this simple.
- Place the baby in different positions at different times, and in different parts of the room, changing the view and its simulation.
- Remember your appearance plays a significant part of the child's stimulation – dress according to what you want to achieve. For example, make-up, or a wig, may draw attention to your face, whereas it is easier to see objects against a background of plain dark clothes.
- Position your child in a suitable upright position if his physical needs allow, with the use of a supportive chair to meet his needs.

- Gradually position yourself in the child's line of vision, talk or sing together, while gradually moving to left or right. Encourage him to follow your face. Help him along by gently guiding with his hand.
- Hold coloured objects in front of his eyes, so that skill in focussing develops.
- Put a bright shiny toy on a contrasting blanket or sheet. Pull it slowly a short distance either side of the middle, to see if the child's eye will follow it.
- To encourage an interest in his hands as an early part of body awareness, use coloured socks as mittens perhaps with bells attached as alerters.





Making time for play is important for all children, especially those who have no verbal communication. A child can only learn that communication is possible if others are willing to communicate with them. Every youngster needs to develop two-way communication – not just speech skills.

## **Physical closeness/contact**

Hold your child's hand, touch his face, call his name and help him to turn to you. Once he does know his name, try calling it from a little distance away and then from another room.

Make sure he looks at your face when you are talking to him. Watching your lip movements and facial expression will help him to understand.

Position yourself so the child can look directly into your eyes. When your eyes are in line with your child's, you will notice a lot more about your child's facial expressions and level of interest.

By being face to face you show your child you are interested in what he is doing or saying and become more aware of what you do and say.

React to your child's smiles, laughter, frowning by copying them; comment on your child's feelings in an appropriate tone of voice such as, "Oh dear, you look cross." Try to use the same language each time using clear simple phrases.

## **Eye contact**

Good eye contact is important for social interaction and helps children pick up more information through facial expression and gesture. If necessary, gently move your child's head to look at you or towards an object you are looking at.

## Attention span

A good attention span is important before children can begin to concentrate on and understand language.

Here are some suggestions:

- Talk to your child. Don't worry if you repeat yourself. Children must hear a word several times in different situations to learn.
- Always talk about things that are happening now, not yesterday.
- Vary your intonation and facial expression to help keep your child's attention.
- Sing, even if you are off-key – your child won't mind. Traditional nursery rhymes are great but made-up silly songs are just as effective.
- Make funny faces in the mirror and make funny sounds such as 'ahh/oo', 'ma-ma-ma', 'ba-ba-ba'. Encourage your child to do the same. Try to work on one sound at a time but make it as natural as possible.
- Respond to any sound your child makes by pausing, looking at them, imitating their sounds and so on but don't force your child to copy sounds. Make your voice interesting by calling their name in different voices by whispering, singing and so on.



- Make appropriate noises when playing with toy animals or cars, such as “Ahhhh, poor teddy he’s hurt”, or “Mmmmmm, ice cream!”

- Make sounds to accompany actions, saying, for example: “bang, bang” (when banging saucepans); “knock, knock” (when knocking on the door or table); “splash, splash” (in the bath); “ring, ring” (to accompany the toy telephone or sound of the doorbell).

- Use visual clues. For example, show him a cup at drinks time.

- Always use the child’s name first to get their attention. For example, there is very little mileage in “Look at the door, David.” David may respond but his attention was only gained in response to his name; he will not be aware of what was asked of him. Instead say “David, look at the door.”



### **Imitation and turn taking**

Early turn taking comes about as a result of adults imitating babies and young children who learn to anticipate this, wait for the adult to copy and then do it again. Eventually this leads on to the child imitating new actions introduced by the adult.

Imitate whatever your child does, sound, facial expressions, gestures or actions (providing it is an acceptable behaviour). Then **wait** for the child to join in. Don’t be afraid of silence – don’t always feel you have to keep talking ‘at’ him. Always allow your child plenty of time to respond to your communication or express something of their own, rather than jumping in too soon or anticipating their needs.

### **Giving choices**

Offering choices is an excellent way to develop communication skills. This is not the same as giving your child a free choice – you may feel your child is always making their own choices by pursuing their own choice of play/activity but is not communicative.

Your child may at first only be able to communicate choice by looking at the thing he wants, reaching for it or pointing to it. Later he may use a word or phrase to choose what he wants.

Always show your child the objects they need to choose. Try to include choices as part of everyday routines. Always make the choices something you can deliver:

- Do you want the red or blue (jumper, car, crayon)?
- Do you want juice or milk?
- Do you want the ball or car?
- Do you want to go to park or play in the garden?

Some children may at first seem unwilling or unable to choose. Try giving choices of something he likes, such as food or drink. After showing him the objects, you must take whichever one he looks at first as his choice, even if you think he would have preferred the other one. For example, “Well done, you looked at milk so you will have milk today.” Be consistent and your child will learn he can have a choice.

It doesn't matter if you know which one he'll choose, the important thing is he communicates what he wants before you give it to him. As your child becomes accustomed to making choices you can increase the number of items offered. If your child can reach out and touch, try labelling four of your fingers with choices. Leave the thumb blank as an option for 'something else'. If your child is eye pointing try using photos or symbols Velcroed to a car mat, putting one each in a corner and one in the centre (leaving one as the 'something else' choice).

## **Praise**

When your child has attempted to communicate, try to reward him immediately, perhaps with a cuddle or a clap. Do not point out mistakes.

Sometimes your child may indicate he wants something that you know he doesn't like. If this happens give him the one touched and wait for him to communicate his refusal. Give him the choice again and help him to touch the one he wants. There will be times when your child wants to do something you don't want him to do. Acknowledge communication but still make it clear you are saying no. For example, “You want to go out? I'm sorry we can't go now.”



### **Opportunities**

Try to find ways of creating opportunities for your child to make requests or refuse things. Pause an activity and ask, “Do you want more? Shall I do it again?” Don’t continue until you get a response.

### **Gestures**

Children usually learn simple gestures before they use words, such as waving bye-bye. Use natural gesture as much as possible when you talk to your child and respond to their movements. Some children with physical difficulties develop movements in a effort to communicate that may be confused for behavioural problems – they might stick their tongue out for drink and open their mouth for food, or arch their back when they don’t want something.

## **Tell them about their world**

When children begin to explore their environment we name things they touch or move towards, as in “Don’t touch that radiator. It’s hot.”

Children who cannot explore on their own need to be told about their world. Talk to your child as you go around the house.

- Count the stairs as you go up and down them.
- Ask him: “Where’s the light?” When he looks at the light, tell him more about it or offer to turn it on or off. If he doesn’t look, turn it on or off and name it again when he looks towards it.
- When you dig vegetables, ask him to look at the carrots or potatoes.
- When you go into fields ask him where the horses, cows or dogs are and praise him when he looks for them.

*This factsheet was compiled with thanks to the Speech and Language Therapy Department, Ashton, Leigh & Wigan Primary Care Trust.*





Overleaf is a list of suggested activities to help your child's communication through play. Try to stay relaxed and don't feel you have to do it all at once and remember:

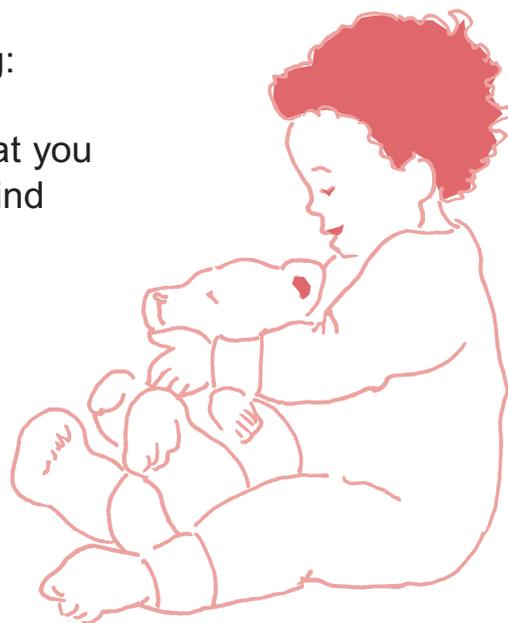
- Play somewhere quiet (turn the television off).
- Go at your child's pace.
- Make games and activities appropriate for your child, otherwise he will soon lose interest if the activity is too difficult or lacking excitement.

**When possible include siblings or other same-age children in the games.**

## Eye contact

To promote good eye contact, try the following:

- Play ball games, wait for your child to look at you before you throw the ball. Hide the ball behind you until you get eye contact then give the child the ball.
- Play peep-bo games. Encourage your child to look at you by calling their name.
- Hold a squeaky toy near your face and make a noise. Stop the noise and wait for eye contact before you start again.
- Make funny faces or wink at your child and wait for them to look and copy you.
- Comment when your child smiles, laughs, frowns by copying them and comment on their feelings in an appropriate tone of voice, for example, “Oh dear, you look cross.”
- Stay close to your child when communicating with your face near and clearly visible. Touch your child’s face and body – point out arms and legs and so on as you get dressed and encourage them to touch you.



## Copying play

If possible have one doll or teddy each so that your child can copy your play with or without your help.

- Pretend to feed them and give them a drink.
- Make them jump, run or turn somersaults.
- Dress, undress them and put them to bed.
- Wash them and brush their teeth.
- Sit them on a toy car or hide them.

## Pretend play

Pretend play or role play helps your child to learn that objects and actions can represent real-life situations and encourages imitation, attention, understanding of words and memory skills.

Using a tea set or real cups, pretend to:

- Have a drink or eat from a bowl.
- Brush and comb hair.
- Play shops.
- Let or help your child to take pretend cups of tea to others.



Other pretend ideas include:

- Use old clothes to dress up.
- Build a pretend house from boxes and a sheet held up by two chairs and act out daily scenes, such as washing clothes.
- Use dolls or teddies to act out bedtime, tea parties, nurseries/schools, hospitals.
- Baskets, handbags, little shopping bags.
- Play 'Simon Says' game.
- Sing songs which involve actions such as 'Wheels On The Bus'.

### **Attention span**

To improve your child's attention span, try:

- Building towers.
- Matching objects.
- Inset puzzles/picture matching games.
- Reading stories/story tapes.
- Lift-the-flap books.
- Sorting things by colour, shape or size.



### **Word play**

Word play can take place when the adult is occupied with washing up or ironing and so on.

- Personalise nursery rhymes and stories to include the child's name, family members, best friends, animals and interests.

- Rhymes such as 'Incy Wincey Spider' can grow in speed, loudness and roughness to the level that the child enjoys.
- Even very young children enjoy absurdities and will enjoy helping you make up funny stories about family members, such as Gran speeding off in her Ferrari to outdo Lewis Hamilton on the racetrack!

### **Hand play**

Add bath foam (one that suits your child) to a bowl of water or the bath and encourage splashing, clapping, blowing, patting into shapes, smearing it on a mirror, you, plastic toys and so on.

Fill a bowl with coloured water, jelly, thin coloured cornflour paste, dried beans or lentils, sand or rice.

Try objects that float (too big to swallow) such as plastic toys, soaps, sponges, homemade shakers (clear plastic bottle filled with a few brightly coloured beads). Also try toys that sink as they gradually fill with water.

### **Touching and shaking**

Sew small toys onto the back of a pair of old gloves cut to cover the wrist and fist with no finger holes. Sew on noisy or bright materials, talk about them and make them dance or tell a story. Bells and other noise-making toys are available, often on Velcro bands to fix to wrist or ankle.

### **Interactive toys**

There are many toys available that involve pressing a switch or pulling a lever to activate. Sometimes the child can quickly lose interest. Your child will enjoy these toys more and for longer if you share the excitement of the activity with them. Borrowing toys from your local toy library can help to keep costs down.

### **Playing with other children**

Encourage your child to mix with other children. Playing with others is important for all youngsters as it helps them practise sharing, taking turns, waiting for attention, listening and so on.



## **Physical play**

Young children love physical games such as rolling, tickling, crawling, pulling and pushing. Young children are rarely as fragile as they look and, providing there are no medical reasons why not, most children can join in these games.

### *Floor sardines*

You need three or more players. One child lies on a mat. Another child lies down as close as possible. The third child tries to get in the middle. The winner is the one who stays in the middle for a count of 10.

### *Logs*

Each child lies on a mat. The other children roll the child to a marker. The child being rolled resists. The winner is the one that is most difficult to roll.

### *Happy feet*

Children are paired and in bare feet. Choose a way of moving, such as rocking, bottom shuffling, walking on each other's feet. You move around, touching your feet to as many other pairs of feet as you can.

### *Start and stop*

This version of statues puts the child "in charge" of other children and adults. The child can use their voice or look at something (such as a card) or use gesture or voice output, a communication aid or communication book to tell everyone else to start and stop movements.

## **Play through sensory experience**

All children will enjoy these activities but they will be especially useful where children have very high support needs.

### *Smell*

If you are thinking of using essential oils as part of this sensory play, check their use and effects (please seek advice for children with epilepsy who may need to avoid certain oils). There are many scratch and sniff products available. These are great fun but often have a short life-span.

Also try:

- Cooking is a great way to experience smells. Offer your child a few spices to smell and ask which one should go into the dish. (You will know which ones to offer!) You might offer some really inappropriate ones to see what the reaction is!

- Massage – make this a playful experience and involve singing, rhymes and simple finger play.
- Messy mixing – children like to create smells, good and bad! Using household items that the child can handle safely let the child mix up smelly potions. If the child cannot handle the items they can choose which ones are added and be helped by another child or adult to do the mixing.

### *Sights*

- Shiny paper, such as sweet wrappers and tinfoil, can be cut and dangled to move in the breeze.
- Most children enjoy watching fibre-optic lights and lava lamps but must be positioned away from the child if they get hot. These can also be operated by switches.
- Use small torches in a darkened room. Cover the lamp with coloured film for more effects. Catching the beam of the torch is a simple game that can be played with one or more than one child.



### *Sounds*

- Most children love music and it may be fun to develop a tape or CD of each child's favourite music.
- Homemade and bought instruments that can be shaken, banged or blown are great fun. If the child cannot hold an instrument they may be able to have one attached with Velcro straps to wrist or ankle.
- Banging saucepans and shaking beans in bottles can be as much fun as playing an expensive instrument.
- Many electronic keyboards make a wide variety of sounds and require very little pressure to operate.

### *Touch*

- Not all children are happy with unfamiliar textures.
- Feely box. The child touches an object in a box where he cannot see the shape. This can be a game where the child tries to name the object or an experience where the child experiences touch without vision. There could be a series of boxes with pairs of objects for matching games.

- What touched you? Three objects, each with a distinctive feel, are placed on a tray. The tray is shown and the objects handled. The tray is removed and the adult gently touches the bare skin on the child's leg or back with one of the objects. The child has to choose which one it was.

### **Other play opportunities**

All children need to play with each other and have the chance to mix socially. Local libraries usually have information on:

- Baby and toddler groups.
- Playgroups and opportunity groups.
- Activity-based groups such as Tumble Tots.
- Some commercially-run soft play areas allow parents access with their child.
- Baby swimming groups.

More advice and help may be available from your speech and language therapist, Portage adviser, health visitor, early education placement or educational psychologist.

### **Specialist provision**

**Conductive Education** provides a holistic, positive learning environment using everyday activities to help children achieve practical goals. Scope has factsheets and a School for Parents Network.

**Hydrotherapy pools** may be available in health centres or special schools and nurseries.

**Kids** – information services focusing on inclusive play.

6 Aztec Row, Berners Road, London N1 0PW. Tel: 020 7359 3635

Email: [enquiries@kids.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@kids.org.uk) [www.kids-online.org.uk](http://www.kids-online.org.uk)

### **National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries**

68 Churchway, London NW1 1LT. Tel: 020 7255 4600

Email: [admin@playmatters.co.uk](mailto:admin@playmatters.co.uk) [www.natll.org.uk](http://www.natll.org.uk)

### **National Portage Association**

PO Box 3075, Yeovil, Somerset BA21 3FB. Tel: 01935 471641

Email: [info@portage.org.uk](mailto:info@portage.org.uk) [www.portage.org.uk](http://www.portage.org.uk)

**Play Helps** is a website full of information about how to make toys for disabled children.  
[www.playhelps.com](http://www.playhelps.com)

**Portage** is a home-based service that helps parents play and learn with their child. Ask your health visitor if this or another similar service is available in your area.

### **Pre-school Learning Alliance**

The Fitzpatrick Building, 188 York Way, London N7 9AD. Tel: 020 7697 2500  
Email: [info@pre-school.org.uk](mailto:info@pre-school.org.uk) [www.pre-school.org.uk](http://www.pre-school.org.uk)

**Rebound therapy** involves specialist use of trampolines to give children free movement. Ask your physiotherapist or local social services if there are any clubs near you.

### **Schools for Parents Network**

For details, please contact Scope Early Years, The Wharf, Schooner Way, Cardiff CF10 4EU. Tel: 02920 662 405  
Email: [earlyyears@scope.org.uk](mailto:earlyyears@scope.org.uk) [www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears](http://www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears)

Or contact Scope Response Tel: 0808 800 3333  
Email: [response@scope.org.uk](mailto:response@scope.org.uk)

**Sensory rooms** may be available in local special needs education or nursery provision. Find out from your local education authority if any are available to young children.

**Specialist swimming clubs** for children with additional support needs. Your local social services department can tell you if there is one near you.

**Toy libraries** lend toys and some more specialised items for free. Contact the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries below.

**Tumble Tots** offers classes for all children up to school age and encourages development of various skills for an active lifestyle. Tumble Tots, Bluebird Park, Bromsgrove Road, Hunnington, Halesowen, West Midlands B62 0TT. Tel: 0121 585 7003  
Email: [info@tumbletots.com](mailto:info@tumbletots.com) [www.tumbletots.com](http://www.tumbletots.com)

*This factsheet was compiled thanks to the Speech and Language Therapy Department, Ashton, Leigh & Wigan Primary Care Trust.*

Many off-the-shelf toys work well with children who are disabled, but making small modifications and adaptations can make some more accessible. There are ways to adapt toys by developing new play materials, altering a traditional toy, changing game rules and setting up situations to promote play. Adaptations do not need to be expensive or high-tech in order to work well. There are many simple adaptations that make a world of difference allowing children of all abilities to use them.

## **Adaptations can:**

- Allow for discovery.
- Increase a child's opportunity to be successful.
- Enable a child to become a full, active participant.
- Address the individual needs of the child.
- Promote and facilitate enjoyment, personal power and control.

Adaptations can enhance the quality of a child's life by developing self-confidence and the need to push his or her limits. With the aid of simple adaptations, play partners can be less directive. By adapting toys, we are not lessening the challenge for the child, but rather allowing the child access to the toy. When adaptations are necessary, first think about the following list and then create the best possible adaptations for the particular child.

Remember that play is as unique as each child, so adaptations need to be tailored to the child.

Think about...

- What is meaningful to him (ie. his level of understanding)
- What has the child shown interest in playing with?
- What skills does he have?

- How is the child able to physically manoeuvre objects?
- What is his or her frustration level?

### **Stabilise**

Steady play materials by attaching them to a surface. Cut a carpet tile or door mat to fit the child's tray. Velcroed toys will then stick to it.

- Use a C-clamp to attach a puzzle or playhouse to a table or wheelchair tray.
- Put one side of a Velcro strip on the floor of a playhouse (as a carpet) and the other side on the bottom of plastic people and furniture.
- Screw suction cups onto the bottom of toys.
- Place self-adhesive Velcro on each square of a board game and on the bottom of the play pieces.
- Use anti-skid rug material under a toy to prevent sliding.
- Blu-Tack also works well to hold down paper for drawing and painting.

*Things to look for in shop-bought toys:*

- Toys that have suction cup bottoms.
- Toys that snap or stick together (such as Lego blocks and bristle blocks).
- Toys that have a wide, short, flat base.

### **Enlarge**

Make items bigger so they are easier to see. Make parts of toys bigger so they are easier to grasp and handle.

- Screw dowel rods onto puzzle pieces for a larger handle.
- Screw rectangular pieces of wood onto a crank knob.
- Use fish tank plastic tubing instead of shoelaces for lacing.
- Attach foam hair curler to handles (crayons, pens and so on).
- If your child still struggles to hold pens or crayons, cut the fingers of an old woollen glove and stick Velcro on the palm and crayon.
- Make colour copy enlargements of lotto games or memory game pieces.

*Things to look for in shop-bought toys:*

- Large push activators.
- Large handles on craft items (stamps, paint brushes).
- Large, wide keys on keyboards.
- Large on and off switches.

### **Remove unnecessary features**

Consider the goal and take out unrelated elements.

- For shape recognition activities, have objects that are the same colour.
- Introduce only one concept at a time (eg. colours, numbers, shapes).

*Things to look for in shop-bought toys:*

- Toys with only one activity.
- Toys that do not overwhelm with too many steps to do or buttons to press.
- Toys that teach only one concept (eg. colours, numbers or shapes).

### **Remove distractions, simplify backgrounds**

- Place a light-coloured toy on a dark cloth or towel and a dark-coloured toy on a light cloth or towel to highlight the toy and assist the child in focusing.
- Paint a puzzle board a solid colour to highlight the individual puzzle pieces.
- Select a play space that is appropriate (turn the TV and radio off, have good lighting, choose a simple room with few distractions).

*Things to look for in shop-bought toys:*

- Simple toys with simple pictures.
- Puzzles without busy backgrounds.
- Beginner books with only one large object picture on each page.

### **Look at safety of toy and durability**

- Laminate any paper items (game cards, lotto pieces, books).
- Replace nails with screws.



- Pad corners.
- Make pull cords less than 10 inches (250mm) long.

*Things to look for in shop-bought toys:*

- Thick board books.
- Games with plastic playing pieces (rather than cardboard).
- Toys with large pieces (if a child may put small objects in their mouth).



### **Other things to consider**

Some children have very little muscle strength and may get tired very quickly.

- Toys, which give a big reward (light, sound, movement).
- Low-effort toys.
- Lightweight toys.

### **Switches for battery-operated toys**

Switches can be expensive but allow a child to access many things. Electronic stores have a range of off-the-shelf switches that may be suitable for your child but it is important he is properly assessed. Contact your occupational therapist for advice.

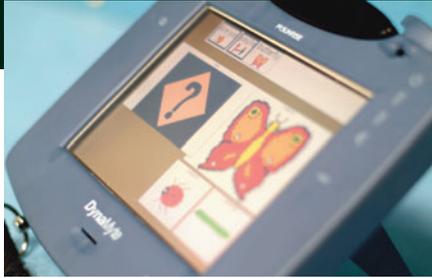
Once you know what switches are suitable for your child you may be able to use parts from local electronic stores. Think about the toys you own and how you might adapt them.

### **Computers**

Getting the right switch access could also help your child to play on a computer. Many software programs can give a better auditory/visual response from using a switch on a computer than any toy.

Note: Please take care when adapting toys. Adapted toys should only be used with appropriate adult supervision. Information can be found on the Ace Oxford website on its resources page [www.ace-centre.org.uk](http://www.ace-centre.org.uk) or [www.oneswitch.org.uk](http://www.oneswitch.org.uk) or [www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk).

*This factsheet was compiled with thanks to:  
National Lekotek Centre, USA [www.lekotek.org](http://www.lekotek.org)  
Barry Morgan, Equality at Playtime*



Finding the most suitable communication system for a child who has little or no useful speech can be difficult. Some parents think because their child cannot talk they cannot communicate. Often a non-verbal child may be able to indicate 'yes' and 'no' in a non-conventional form, such as sticking their tongue out for 'no'. Other children with good hand control may learn sign language.

**But whatever your child's communication needs it is essential you seek advice as early as possible from a speech and language therapist, physiotherapist and occupational therapist.**

Nearly everyone assists their communication in some way by waving arms, gestures, facial expressions or other body language. Where speech is delayed, difficult to understand or non-existent, these extra ways of communication become even more important.

## **Unaided communication**

An unaided system does not involve any external materials or equipment:

- Gesture or sign.
- Hand or eye-pointing.
- Facial expression.
- Body position, posture and movement.
- Vocalisation.



We all use unaided communication unconsciously when speaking. For example, we use facial expression to express surprise, pleasure, disgust or anger.

Physically disabled children may not be able to use the full range of unaided communication, but they still express the same feelings, albeit

in a modified manner, such as going into extension spasm with excitement.

### **Aided communication**

Augmentative communication refers to techniques, symbols and strategies (often referred to as low-tech aids) that are needed to aid children with a communication need. This includes signs, symbols and text. Using photos of people and pictures out of catalogues (Early Learning Centre, Argos and so on) can help a child to make choices and provide a permanent visual cue for your child. It is more difficult to find pictures to illustrate words such as more or finished. There are several graphic symbols available. Talk to your speech and language therapist for advice.

### **Technological devices**

There are lots of voice output communication aids (Vocas) available from devices that will speak one response to sophisticated displays that change when you select a button. Your child may need a Voca as well as signing and/or symbols. Careful assessment is needed to meet your child's needs before any device is bought. Contact your speech and language therapist for advice.

### **What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)?**

This is a means by which an individual can replace spoken words. Communication may range from a movement or behaviour that is interpreted as meaningful, to the use of a code agreed between people where items have specific meanings ie. a language.

### **Funding**

As yet, there is no national policy for funding speech output devices. Various areas have joint funding procedures, so health, social services and education fund devices. Many local education authorities have purchased devices as the need has been clearly stated in the child's educational statement.



*Please visit [www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears/play.php](http://www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears/play.php) for the latest list*

## **AbilityNet**

A charity which gives free advice on using a computer to disabled adults and children. It also provides individual assessments, workshops and courses.

Tel: 0800 269 545

Email: [enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk)

[www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)

## **Afasic**

\*Charity for children and young adults with communication impairments.

2nd Floor, 50–52 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DJ

Helpline: 08453 55 55 77 (Local call rate)

Tel: 020 7490 9410

Email: [info@afasic.org.uk](mailto:info@afasic.org.uk)

[www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)

## **The Aidis Trust**

This trust provides specialist computer equipment to disabled people of all ages to aid their communication.

3 Gunthorpe Street, London E1 7RQ

Tel: 020 7426 2130

Email: [info@aidis.org](mailto:info@aidis.org)

[www.aidis.org](http://www.aidis.org)

## **Arcos (Association for Rehabilitation of Communication and Oral Skills)**

Arcos provides assessment and practise in using high-tech communication equipment.

Whitbourne Lodge, 137 Church Street, Malvern, Worcestershire  
WR14 2AN

Helpline: 0845 1228697

Tel: 01684 576795

Email: [arcos@globalnet.co.uk](mailto:arcos@globalnet.co.uk)

[www.arcos.org.uk](http://www.arcos.org.uk)

## **ASLTIP (The Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice)**

ASLTIP provides information about independent speech and language therapists.

Woodside, Coleheath Bottom, Speen, Princes Risborough,  
Bucks HP27 0SZ

Answerphone: 01494 488306

Email: [asltip@awdry.demon.co.uk](mailto:asltip@awdry.demon.co.uk)

[helpwithtalking.com](http://helpwithtalking.com)

## **The British Dyslexia Association**

This group campaigns and provides support to break down barriers and enable dyslexic people to reach their potential.

98 London Road, Reading RG1 5AU

Helpline: 0118 966 8271

Tel: 0118 966 2677

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

[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)

## **BILD (British Institute of Learning Disabilities)**

BILD provides information, publications and training and consultancy services for organisations and individuals.

Campion House, Green Street, Kidderminster, Worcs DY10 1JL

Tel: 01562 723010

Email: [enquiries@bild.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bild.org.uk)

[www.bild.org.uk](http://www.bild.org.uk)

## **Communication Aid Assessment Centres**

AbilityNet has an extensive national list of communication aid assessment centre/services.

Tel: 0800 269 545

Email: [enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk)

[www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)

## **Communication Matters**

UK chapter of ISAAC, the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication.

c/o The Ace Centre, 92 Windmill Road, Oxford OX3 7DR

Tel: 0845 4568211

Email: [admin@communicationmatters.org.uk](mailto:admin@communicationmatters.org.uk)

[www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk)

### **Contact a Family**

A national network of parent-based support groups covering a wide variety of impairments.

209–211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN

Parents Helpline: 0808 808 3555 (Freephone)

Tel: 020 7608 8700

Email: [info@cafamily.org.uk](mailto:info@cafamily.org.uk)

[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

### **Dyspraxia Foundation**

8 West Alley, Hitchin, Herts SG5 1EG

Helpline: 01462 454 986

Tel: 01462 455016

Email: [dyspraxia@dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](mailto:dyspraxia@dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

[www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

### **Equality at Playtime**

Free advice on adapting off-the-shelf toys for children with additional needs.

Contact: Barry Morgan, 10 Northover Close, Pendeford,  
Wolverhampton WV9 5LT

Tel: 07870 391132

### **Fledglings**

Fledglings operates a free search and supply service for toys and aids to help parents, carers and childcare professionals.

Contact: Ruth Lingard, Fledglings, Wenden Court, Station Approach,  
Wendens Ambo, Saffron Walden CB11 4LB

Tel: 0845 458 1124

Email: [enquiries@fledglings.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@fledglings.org.uk)

[www.fledglings.org.uk](http://www.fledglings.org.uk)

### **Hemi-help**

Hemi-help offers information and support to families where there is a child with hemiplegia.

Camelford House, 89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TP

Helpline: 0845 123 2372

Tel: 0845 120 3713

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

[www.hemihelp.org.uk](http://www.hemihelp.org.uk)

## **I CAN**

\*The national educational charity for special schools, nurseries and centres within local schools and provides training and information for parents, teachers and therapists.

I CAN, 8 Wakeley Street, London EC1V 7QE

Tel: 0845 225 4071

Email: [information@ican.org.uk](mailto:information@ican.org.uk)

[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

## **Mencap**

Charity for people with learning disabilities.

123 Golden Lane, London EC1Y 0RT

Tel: 020 7454 0454

Learning disability helpline: 0808 808 1111 (Freephone)

Email: [information@mencap.org.uk](mailto:information@mencap.org.uk)

[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

## **National Autistic Society**

Website includes information about autism and Asperger syndrome, and about the support and services available.

393 City Road, London EC1V 1NG

Tel: 020 7833 2299

Email: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk)

[www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

## **National Portage Association**

A home-visiting educational service for pre-school children with additional support needs and their families.

PO Box 3075, Yeovil, Somerset BA21 3FB

Tel: 01935 471641 (Office hours Monday and Thursday 9am–1pm)

Website: [www.portage.org.uk](http://www.portage.org.uk)

Email: [info@portage.org.uk](mailto:info@portage.org.uk)

## **One Switch**

Fun ideas with art, music and assistive technology, which can be done using just one switch.

Email Barrie Ellis on [info@OneSwitch.org.uk](mailto:info@OneSwitch.org.uk)

[www.oneswitch.org.uk](http://www.oneswitch.org.uk)

## **Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**

\*RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. Call their information line for details of speech and language therapists local to you, and for contact details of other allied organisations.

Information line: 020 7378 3012

General: 020 7378 1200

Email: [info@rcslt.org](mailto:info@rcslt.org)

[www.rcslt.org](http://www.rcslt.org)

## **RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People)**

RNIB offers information, support and advice to people with sight problems.

105 Judd Street, London WC1H 9NE

Helpline: 0845 766 9999

Tel: 020 7388 1266

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

[www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

## **RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People)**

RNID aims to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people.

19–23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL

Tel: 020 7296 8000

Information helpline: 0808 808 0123 (Freephone)

Textphone: 0808 808 9000

Email: [informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk)

[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

## **Sense**

An organisation for people who are deafblind or have associated impairments.

11–13 Clifton Terrace, Finsbury Park, London N4 3SR

Tel: 0845 127 0060

Textphone: 0845 127 0062

Email: [info@sense.org.uk](mailto:info@sense.org.uk)

[www.sense.org.uk](http://www.sense.org.uk)

## **Scope**

Scope is a disability organisation in England and Wales whose focus is people with cerebral palsy. Website has list of groups/organisations and lots of information.

Scope, 6 Market Road, London N7 9PW

Tel: 020 7619 7100

Scope Response: 0808 800 3333 (free helpline)

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

[www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

## **1Voice Communicating Together**

The charity, run by parents for AAC users (low tech and electronic Augmentative and Alternative Communication aids) and their families, provides information and support.

PO Box 559, Halifax HX1 2XT

Tel: 0845 330 7862

Email: [info@1voice.info](mailto:info@1voice.info)

[www.1voice.info](http://www.1voice.info)

\*AFASIC, I CAN and RCSLT have collaborated to create the Talking Point website: [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)

*Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy but information is subject to change.*

## **Communication Passport 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 their needs, how he/she indicates 'yes' or 'no' and so on. They are important because they value the person, give them a voice, provide positive problem-solving solutions and can help new people quickly understand their needs.

Scope Early Years Unit has developed three different-sized templates to get people started on making passports. They are available on the Play Talks CD-ROM and can be downloaded for free from [www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears](http://www.scope.org.uk/earlyyears)

For more details about passports contact:

Sally Millar, The Call Centre, University of Edinburgh, Paterson's Land, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

Tel: 0131 651 6236

Email: [info@callcentrescotland.org.uk](mailto:info@callcentrescotland.org.uk)

[www.callcentrescotland.org.uk](http://www.callcentrescotland.org.uk)



We hope you find this pack useful. It was compiled with the invaluable help of many contributors.

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Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

Julie Smith

If you would like to request Play Talks in audio, from Scope, please phone: 02920 662 405 or email [earlyyears@scope.org.uk](mailto:earlyyears@scope.org.uk)

## ■ **Anne McDonald**

Anne McDonald has cerebral palsy and lives in Australia. She spent 14 years in an institution until she found a way to communicate and won her fight to leave. Her story was made into a book and film, *Annie's Coming Out*. She now has a university degree and campaigns for rights of people with severe communication impairments.

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~dealcc/ANCOM1.htm>

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~dealcc/Anne2.htm>