

# Supporting Emerging Communicators

Every child and adult can and does communicate. We all communicate in many forms, including verbal (speech or voice-output devices) and non-verbal behaviours (gestures, facial expressions, sign language, pointing to objects or symbols, etc.). By using these behaviours, we are able to clearly tell those around us the message we want to say. For example, when a child uses the sign “*cookie*”, says the word, or points to a picture of a cookie, it is easy to determine that they are asking for or talking about a cookie. For some children, it is much more difficult to determine if they are purposefully communicating a message with the sounds and body movements they use, or if they are simply reacting to how they are feeling or the environment around them.

## Emerging Communicators

Emerging communicators are beginning communicators who may not yet have a clear way to share a message with those around them. You may recognize their feelings or interests through:

- **Physiological Responses** - increased rate of breathing, sweating
- **Vocalizations** – humming, sighing, crying, giggles, various vowel sounds
- **Affect** – displaying emotions
- **Body Movements** – general overall body motions, increased or decreased tension, turning away, rocking
- **Gestures** – limb or body part movements such as reaching towards an object, turning a head towards a person or item they like, turning head away to protest, hitting, pulling, pushing
- **Facial Expressions** – smiling, grimacing, biting, frowning, eye gaze

Emerging communicators may not yet understand that their physical responses can be interpreted as communication, so they may not display them consistently. Although these behaviours can occur involuntarily, they can be shaped into intentional communication messages.

## Build intentional communication

You can build intentional communication by treating the things your child does as meaningful.

- **Choice making** – interpret your child’s behavior as purposeful, even if you are unsure (e.g., reaching towards an item can be accepted as a choice)
- **Describing the behavior** – use a “talk out loud” strategy to teach your child about their behavior and its intentions (e.g., “*You’re smiling. Do you like this book?*”)
- **Being attentive** to the various behaviours that your child is able to do (e.g., cry, smile, laugh, turn away, reach, grimace, pull, rock, hit, push, hum, bite, etc.)
- **Learning what motivates** your child most by watching their behaviours in various activities, environments, or with different people
- **Use your child’s interests** - All children will build their language skills around the activities and interests they enjoy most. We need to use these opportunities to teach that their behavioural efforts are meaningful before focusing on our own interests

By assigning meaning to your child’s actions in every day routines, you are teaching new reasons for communicating, such as expressing their needs and wants, sharing information, engaging in social closeness and demonstrating etiquette such as saying “*thanks*” or “*hello*”.

## Write down your child’s behaviours

Keep track of your child’s behaviours and the messages they may mean and share this information with others. Sharing the knowledge you have can help others appropriately interpret their behaviour and build meaning. These tools can also be used to determine what specific words and/or symbols can be used to describe their communication message when introducing alternative or augmentative communication (AAC) systems in the future.

## Communication Matrix

This online tool for both parents and professionals helps to gather info about your child’s communication skills through a questionnaire. It creates a profile to show the different reasons why your child might be communicating (communicative functions) as well as listing the way in which they may express those reasons (e.g., body language, concrete symbols, verbal language, etc.).

<http://communicationmatrix.org>

## Communication Dictionary

This chart from a child's point of view is wonderful to share with family members or school teams to list the behavior that the child does, what message should be interpreted, and what the response of the communication partner should be.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Behaviour Observed</b>	<b>Intent / What it means</b>	<b>How to Respond</b>
"This is what I do"  Shake my head "no" when I'm offered a choice or asked a question.	"This is what I am trying to tell you"  I'm not interested/do not want what is offered.  I'm responding "no" to a yes/no question	"What you can say or do"  "Name" you are shaking your head "no" you're telling me you are not interested. Offer "Name" another choice.  "Name" you are telling me by shaking your head that you don't want XXX. Offer another activity.
My head is down	I'm not interested.	"Name" you have your head down, you must not be interested in XXX. Offer "Name" another activity.
Wave my hand	Greeting/I'm saying "hi"	"Name" I see you waving your hand. You're saying "hi" to XXX.
Turn my head away	I do not want what is offered	"Name" you're turning your head away. You're telling me that you don't want XXX. Offer another choice.

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 ACS | [acs.tvcc.on.ca](http://acs.tvcc.on.ca) | 1.866.590.8822 ext 53378  
[www.tvcc.on.ca](http://www.tvcc.on.ca) | 779 Base Line Road East, London ON N6C 5Y6  
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