

Students with Complex Needs: Communication and Keeping in Touch with others whilst being at home.



When we are considering communication for students with Complex Needs, we need to begin with the individual. Each student will be at their own stage of communication development.

Many will have, or will be beginning to learn communication / language with the use of an **alternative communication device** or system, such as **PECS, Lámh or an electronic device**, so it is obviously best **to incorporate this system into their daily communication** and language development.

To encourage communication and keeping in touch with others during this time it is good to begin with a person or friend that the **student really likes**, often that's a grandparent, family relative or close school friend. Setting up some sort of **visual & audio contact** works best – as the student can see the person they are communicating with, which can support motivation, engagement and **two way conversation**.

Many are already using a wide variety of platforms to suit this purpose, such as Skype, WhatsApp, Duo, Zoom etc.

Other '**keeping in touch**' activities ideas might include:

- Sending a piece of the student's art work in the post: involve the student with creating the art, some ideas can be found here - <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Supporting-Learning-at-home-for-children-with-Down-Syndrome.pdf> Support the student to put into an envelope and encourage the recipient to send something back in the post.
- Taking photographs of the student engaged in activities and as above send in the post.
- Together with the student, sending and receiving voice notes through applicable apps such as WhatsApp can encourage and develop communication development.

- Where applicable introducing or developing communication through ICT can be introduced: sending emails, texts etc.

Whilst keeping in touch and communicating with others is very important, it may **pose a challenge** for some students, due to the **varying stages** in ability and personality of the individual. Many may need to **practise and develop** their communication skills.

The **following activities will support communication development** which can then be **practised in real life** when communication with others is encouraged.

Teach turn-taking: Students need to understand that communication is two-way, and learn to wait, listen and respond. Most simple games encourage and support development of this skill. Games such as Connect 4, Snakes and Ladders and SNAP to name but a few.

The following link provides more ideas and resources to support teachers and parents when teaching turn-taking:

<https://www.andnextcomesl.com/2018/03/how-to-teach-taking-turns-sharing-to-kids.html>

Turn-taking cards or objects are a useful added support for those students that may need extra help or practise with this skill.



Twinkl, which is currently offering free a subscription has many useful resources: <https://www.twinkl.ie/resources/specialeducationalneeds-sen-communication-and-interaction/sen-autism-spectrum-disorders/sen-autism-spectrum-disorders-turn-taking-games-and-support>

This skill of turn taking can then be developed into everyday communication – supporting the student to listen and respond (using their own communication system) with their communication partner.

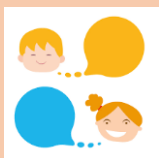




Teach Topicalisation This skill is important to ensure that students can **introduce and maintain and sustain conversation** around a specific topic. Staying on topic is often difficult for students with complex needs due to comprehension, vocabulary and interest levels, and therefore needs to be **explicitly taught**.

One simple strategy that can be introduced to help develop this skill is through the use of a **“Power Card”** (Gagnon, 2011). Power cards are **prompt cards** to remind and support students to engage in topicalisation. Below, is an example of a power card that to **support a student to communicate** – initiate a conversation, maintain a conversation whilst staying on topic and how to finish a conversation.

This skill will **need to be practised** with a variety of people that the student is comfortable and familiar with, and then practised with less familiar people. Lots of practise will help to support the student become comfortable when communicating with others. The use of the Power Card can be reduced as the student gains confidence.



My Power Card

1. Say – **‘Hello’**
2. Ask – **‘Would you like a chat?’**
3. Some interesting questions you could ask:
 - **What did you do yesterday?**
 - **Did you have a nice weekend?**
 - **Have you a pet?**
 - **What is your favourite food?**
4. When the chat is over say – **‘thanks for the chat, see you later.’**



Teaching students to ask and answer questions: This can be an area of difficulty for many students with Complex Needs. However, it is an **important skill for all children**, and often needs to be **explicitly taught**.

Whilst at home a nice activity can be to use **photograph albums** (digital or hard copy) to look through with the student **encouraging and supporting** questioning:

- Who is this?
- Where are they?
- What are they doing?
- Who is this girl / boy?
- What is their name?



Providing the student a **visual support** such as a photograph or object is very important to support **receptive and expressive** communication. Where the vocabulary may not be there to answer a question the student may point allowing you to model the **correct vocabulary** needed.

Creating **questioning cards as visual prompts** can support students with this.

An **example of a questioning card** is on the following page.





Twinkl also have some supports for this area:

<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resource/t-l-701-question-prompt-cards>

A further area of interest in this topic: Bloom's Taxonomy of Questions, a lot of information on this widely available. Here is one site:

<https://mrwilsonspcialeducation.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/blooms-taxonomy/>

Questioning card sample:

	
<p>Who?</p>	<p>When?</p>
	 <p>publicdomainvectors.org</p>
<p>What?</p>	<p>Where?</p>