



Total Communication Approach

1. Introduction

Total Communication is a flexible, inclusive approach that promotes the use of **all modalities** to support individuals with communication difficulties. Total Communication aims not be a fixed method, but an approach that adapts to an individual's needs, where they can use any combination of methods that work best for them, without valuing one form of communication above others. Individuals may use a different combination for expressive communication and receptive communication.

2. Purpose of Intervention

The purpose is to increase a child or young person's connection and communication by providing multimodal methods, it aims to create a communication-rich environment. Examples of different types of communication include:

Non-verbal (body movements, gestures, expressions eye pointing, breathing patterns, textures, smells, temperature, intensive interaction, routine).

Language-based (speech, written language, lip reading, large print, braille, sign systems (British Sign Language, Makaton), Tadoma, deafblind manual alphabet and block alphabet).

Symbol Systems (objects of reference, Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS), pictures and photographs, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools and commercially available options such as Widgit, Bliss and Mayer-Johnson).

3. Target Audience

Total communication was originally developed to support deaf children in education, however it is now used more broadly to support children and young people with communication difficulties, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

4. Who Can Deliver the Intervention

Anyone who interacts with children and young people can use the approach, including teachers, Learning Support Assistants, pastoral staff, parents and other professionals, it should be embedded into school life. Staff may need training and support to understand communication differences and effectively implement a total communication approach.

5. Session Structure

Total Communication does not have fixed sessions and should be used throughout interactions. However, distributed practice (interactive games, role-play, structured teaching) and utilising natural opportunities (modelling, snack time, choosing activities) can be helpful to introduce new methods. There should be a focus on creating a positive environment for communication (changing the lighting, reducing background noise, moving to a good position for seeing and hearing, reducing clutter and distractions).

6. Frequency and Duration



Total communication approaches require embedded consistency and repetition, daily practice, and continued monitoring and adaption, rather than time-limited sessions. The duration of practice sessions should be determined in line with developing attention skills, as assessed by setting staff.

7. Key Principles

Multimodal Methods: Using all methods consistently throughout the day. Having visual timetables, communication boards, symbol banks, core boards etc. available across the setting. The goal is functional communication, leave pauses to allow them the best chance to respond.

Individualisation and Person-centred: Assessing preferred communication methods and strengths, creating individual communication passports, collaborating with families and professionals.

Embedded in daily routine: Using the approach during every transition, lesson, playtime and mealtime. Modelling consistently, for example say, sign and show each time. Share approaches with all staff, including teachers, learning support assistants, lunchtime and families to reinforce at home.

Monitor and Adapt: Use monitoring frameworks to record development. Set clear goals and adjust strategies based on progress.

Autonomy and Inclusion: Encourage choice-making, celebrate all communication equally and find ways to ensure participation in all aspects of school life.

8. Training and Implementation

Anyone can apply the principles of Total Communication in their daily interactions with children and young people with communication needs. A more in-depth implementation could be provided by staff who have received training in speech and language interventions, and who are provided with time for ongoing CPD around Total Communication, for example taking part in reflective practice to consider the impact of the approach and areas for development.

9. Evidence and Outcomes

Total Communication is grounded in theory from psychology, linguistics and speech and language therapy, including those on language and cognitive development and processing. Research shows improvement in overall language development, mean length of utterances, number of propositions, vocal responses, auditory/speech perception, academic performance and social integration. The approach is widely used in mainstream and specialist settings and endorsed by the charity 'Sense'.

10. Pupil Feedback

Research has found collaboratively delivered Total Communication can increase pupil's confidence and enthusiasm. Where possible, you should include feedback from pupils and families in all monitoring and evaluation of the approach.



Further Information and Resources

Video: Total Communication Approach

Sense: Total communication - Sense

Communication in the classroom: A Total Communication Environment — The Springboard Curriculum

How to Create a Total Communication Environment: Speech Matters

Speech TherapyHow to Create a Total Communication Environment - Speech Matters Speech Therapy

Suffolk SES Service: Communication & Interaction (C&I) Service – Suffolk Learning

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