Communication at St Bernard's School

Intent

'Communication is fundamental to children's development; children need to be able to understand and be understood. Communication is the foundation of relationships and is essential for learning, play and social interaction' (The Communication Trust)

It is an absolute right of all our learners to be able to communicate with, and be understood by, all staff members at St Bernard's school, in whatever way they can. Staff have a responsibility to support all forms of communication used by our learners and to implement common strategies and enhanced strategies identified for specific individuals. The curriculum and experiences offered at school are accessible in many forms and learners are provided with a means of expressing their responses, needs, likes and dislikes and understanding in multi-modal ways. Being able to communicate in any way enables all our learners to engage fully and successfully in order to live their life both in school and at home to the fullest. 'Everyone can and does communicate and it is therefore up to those who are supporting people with complex support needs, to tune into them and try to see the world from their point of view.' (http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk)

At St Bernard's School, the development of communication aims to foster well-being and independence, allowing our learners to fully engage with the world around them and to reach their full potential. The ability to communicate runs through all strands of the curriculum. All the different strategies used to support communication have the aim of developing functional, receptive and expressive language skills. They are designed to lay the foundations for whatever communication pathway the learner may eventually follow.

Implementation

There are a number of different strands to communication at St Bernard's School

- Total communication environment
- Curriculum provision focusing on developing communication skills
- Individual communication support

Total Communication Environment

At St Bernard's School, we are passionate about supporting all our learners in having a voice. To ensure this we have adopted a Total Communication approach. Total Communication provides a holistic view of communication, which recognises and values different methods of communication. The aim is to make all the different communication methods consistent and visible throughout all pathways of school, normalising their use and exposing all learners to them. This will increase the opportunities for our learners to communicate not only with the adults that support them but also with their peers.

Communication can take many forms and might include one or a combination of the following:

- Natural gesture – e.g. pointing, facial expression, body movements
- Speech
- Vocalisations
- Using different tones, pitch or volume of the voice
- Makaton
- Symbols
- Real objects – Objects of reference.
- Pictures
- Photos
- Paper based and powered AAC supports.

Communication underpins everything we do during the school day, and is embedded across all areas of the curriculum, over all pathways of school. All staff are vital to maintaining a Total Communication environment to support all our learners. Staff at St Bernard's School use a range of modalities to communicate with all learners and, at the same time, they are modelling a range of strategies that learners can use to communicate with staff and with each other. There is no single approach as the communication needs of our learners vary.

Communication Strategies at St Bernard's School

Objects of reference

Objects of Reference are real objects that are used to represent activities, places, objects or people. They are used along with spoken language to help cue the learner in to what activity is taking place. PMLD classes have an adapted version of the Objects of reference, which reflect the complex needs of the learners in these classes.

Photographs

Photographs can support learner's initial development in making the link between a visual representation of an object or an activity and the real thing. Photographs are used alongside symbols throughout school as appropriate to the needs of the learners.

Symbols

Symbols are used in a variety of ways across school to support our learners understanding and communication. Communicate in Print 4 is used to produce any symbol supported resources. Staff use an agreed set of symbols to ensure consistency.

Visual timetables, consisting of symbols or photographs, are clearly displayed in classrooms and are referred to during the school day. Timetable symbols are consistent across all pathways of school, although the name of the subject or activity may differ. The timetables offer visual cues to enhance understanding, supporting learners to become more independent and giving them control over the school day by providing the important information in a way that does not rely on verbal / language understanding or processing.

Now and Next boards may be used to support understanding of the school day and transitions while moving round school. Some learners also benefit from the use of an individual timetable or a Now/next board to support them with their individual daily routines or activities.

Teaching spaces and rooms around school are all labelled to aid learners, staff and visitors as they move round the school. This supports in supporting our learners during transitions and in developing their independence.

Learning materials and resources are enhanced through the use of symbols and words together. They can help learners to visualise the meanings of the words and access different concepts and ideas. They also provide different ways of learners being able to record or indicate their own learning.

Symbols are also used to support individual learners who use AAC. Staff ensure that these learners have access to their personalised symbol communication methods at all times. Choosing boards are being used, alongside core vocabulary boards, to provide another way for learners to make spontaneous choices. The core vocabulary boards allow adults to chat and comment to learners while they are making choices, and, importantly, to model the use of paper based AAC. Communication boards are being used to support different activities. These include some of the agreed core vocabulary alongside fringe vocabulary relevant to the activity. Again, adults are using the boards to model the use of paper based AAC during an engaging activity for the learner. Being able to chat and comment about the activity with the learner will help to move communication on from functional communication, simple requesting, to receptive and expressive communication. Some learners will also use Communication Books and eye gaze. Learners will be assessed for suitability for these supports by the Speech and Language Therapists,

who also guide and support staff on their use. Learners who access these resources will have access to them at all times.

Makaton

Makaton is a unique language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate. It supports the development of essential communication skills such as attention and listening, comprehension, memory, recall and organisation of language and expression. With Makaton, signs are used, with speech, in spoken word order. This helps provide extra clues about what someone is saying. Using signs can help people who have no speech or whose speech is unclear. Using symbols can help people who have limited speech and those who cannot, or prefer not to sign. Makaton is extremely flexible as it can be personalised to an individual's needs and used at a level suitable for them. (The Makaton Charity)

At St Bernard's School, staff use Makaton signing to support their communication with learners throughout the day. Signing is used, alongside speech, to reinforce key concepts and transitions. This also serves to slow down adult's speech, focusing on the important parts of the message. Staff are supported to use Makaton through weekly signs of the week to be modelled in classes. Makaton signs may be displayed around school to support adults in using the signs. At St Bernard's school we have 4 Makaton Champions who support staff and students with any Makaton signs that they need.

Paper Based AAC

Paper based AAC are communication supports that do not need power to function. They may include word mats created using In print 4, simple core vocabulary boards, communication books etc. At St Bernard's School, we are developing the use of paper based AAC to support a Total Communication Environment across all pathways of school. The aim is that these paper based AAC supports will form an integral part of the Total Communication Environment in each class and across all pathway's becoming familiar to the learners as they move through school.

Powered AAC

Powered AAC are electronic devices that are used to support communication. At St Bernard's School, some learners use powered AAC devices such as eye gaze, communication apps, and individual devices provided through Speech and Language services. Learners will be assessed for suitability for powered AAC by the Speech and Language Therapists. The implementation of these devices is also guided and supported by the Speech and Language Therapists.

Spoken Word

All forms of communication used are supported by speech. Staff adapt their language to support the needs of the learners. They may do this by:

- Slowing down their speech and simplifying their language

- Using minimal language that emphasises the most important words
- Reinforcing the key information through the use of objects, photographs or visual symbols.
- Giving the learners time to process the information and respond

Attention Autism

Attention Autism is an intervention model designed by Gina Davies, Specialist Speech and Language Therapist. It aims to develop natural and spontaneous communication through the use of visually based and highly motivating activities. It is used to help encourage joint attention, engagement, spontaneous interaction in a natural group setting, focus on activities that may not be of the learner's choosing, and to increase non-verbal and verbal communication through spontaneous commenting. It can also be used to introduce new skills, develop independence and build vocabulary and experiences. Adults support the learners by modelling attention and engagement.

Aims of Attention Autism

1. To engage attention
2. To improve joint attention
3. To develop shared enjoyment in group activities
4. To increase attention in adult-led activities
5. To encourage spontaneous interaction in a natural group setting
6. To increase non-verbal and verbal communication through commenting
7. To build a wealth and depth of vocabulary
8. To have fun!

Stages of Attention Autism

The Attention Autism programme progresses through a series of stages, building on each skill level. Each new stage is introduced when the learners are ready to expand attention skills.

Stage 1: The Bucket to Focus Attention

A bucket is filled with visually engaging objects and toys, aiming to gain the shared attention of the group. The adult leader shows each item to the group and uses simple repetitive vocabulary to comment on the various objects.

Stage 2: The Attention Builder

Visually stimulating activities are shown to the group by the adult leader, aiming to sustain attention for a longer period. The activities are fun, visually engaging and can often involve delightful mess!

Stage 3: Turn taking & Re-engaging Attention

The adult leader demonstrates a simple activity, often modelled with another adult in the group. Learners are then invited to have a turn but only if they are comfortable to do so. We are working towards not giving every learner in the group a turn each session, which will develop important emotional regulation skills, as well as the essential skills of waiting, turn taking and learning through modelling.

Stage 4: Shifting & Re-engaging Attention

Stage 4 aims to develop the skill of engaging and shifting attention. The adult leader demonstrates a simple creative task, and then gives each learner and supporting adult an individual kit to copy the task. They take their kits to a table, complete the task independently, and then everyone returns to the group to show their completed tasks.

More complex skills can be introduced as confidence and social skills develop e.g. sharing materials, working with a partner, problem solving. Attention Autism principles can then be generalised to curriculum activities (e.g. literacy and numeracy) to facilitate learning and skill development.

TACPAC

TACPAC stands for Touch and Communication Pac. It is a sensory communication session, which uses touch and music to align the senses and develop communication skills. It aims to support learners who have any kind of sensory impairment or limited or pre-verbal levels of communication. It can also support with tactile defensiveness. The same adult each time carries out the session in the same way. This helps to build a deeper, trusting relationship with the adult. Over time, the sessions aim to support the learner in being able to engage and show anticipation during Tac Pac sessions, and to communicate their likes and dislikes in response to different stimuli.

Sensory Stories

A sensory story is one that serves to activate each of the senses to encourage engagement in a range of learning situations. These range from simple engagement, anticipation, communication, vocabulary development, social skills, literacy, movement and so on. Sensory stories allow our learners to access and be immersed in a rich world of storytelling at their own level. The stories are used to enrich the teaching of topics and to develop joint attention, social interaction and engagement and communication development. Repetition of the same story throughout the topic allows the learners to begin to build up anticipation, express their likes and dislikes of different sensory media and begin to ask for more of a favourite experience. The short-repeated phrases can also encourage spontaneous vocalisations or verbalisation of familiar phrases.

Intensive Interaction

Intensive interaction focuses on developing early interaction abilities, enjoyment from being with another person, relating and interacting with another person. It teaches the 'Fundamentals of Communication', such as use and understanding of eye contact, facial expression, vocalisations leading to speech, taking turns in exchanges of conversations and the structure of conversation.

Eye Gaze – Etran

For some learners with very little control over their bodies, eye gaze can be a very quick and efficient method of communicating. If they are looking at a toy on the table, it might mean they want that toy.

Switch Access

Another way to communicate a choice is by using a switch, these are pre-loaded with phrases appropriate to individual learners, Learners activate these simple switches by pressing down on the top with a part of their body, such as the hand, head or knee.

Other therapeutic interventions and programs which also support the development of communication include:

- Rebound
- Sound Sensations
- Sensory Diet
- Swimming
- Physiotherapy

Frameworks and Schemes of Work

Our EYFS curriculum is currently using

- Pre solar steps for EYFS supported by the EYFS Framework.

For learners following the Complex Needs and Informal pathways, communication development is supported by the following frameworks and schemes of work:

- Routes for learning
- Solar steps (national curriculum broken down into smaller steps
- Accreditation WJEC & aims awards (personal progress route)

For learners following the Lower Semi-Formal, Semi-Formal and Formal pathways, communication development is supported by the following frameworks and schemes of work:

- Solar steps (national curriculum broken down into smaller steps
- Accreditation WJEC & aims awards (Entry level 1 and above)

Speech and Language Therapy Services

At St Bernard's School, Speech and Language Therapists work alongside school staff and parents to provide assessments, therapy and interventions, guidance and support. There are a number of learners on their caseload. If a clinical need is identified, therapy will be offered. The Speech and Language Therapists also carry out assessments for suitability of both paper based and powered AAC supports. Learners may have individual targets to work towards in class following their Speech and Language assessment. Staff carry out focused work to meet these targets throughout the week, either on an individual basis or through the curriculum provision already in place as appropriate. Group programs may also be suggested to support classes, and these are carried out throughout the week if applicable. Speech and Language Therapists also provide support and training to staff as required.

Impact

The impact of immersing our learners in a total communication environment can be observed in daily interactions. Learners will become aware of the routines of their day, using supports appropriate to their developmental level. This will lessen anxiety about what is happening next and for some learners will support them in making calm transitions between activities or around school. Learners will be able to make intentional and independent choices (at their own level), using the supports available. If appropriate, they will be able to initiate interactions with adults to make a request, and have confidence that these requests will be met. Learners will also be able to express their own likes and dislikes. Staff will be able to chat and comment, modelling conversation, using the communication boards. After sustained exposure to the communication boards, learners may begin to show interest in using them themselves (if developmentally appropriate). The focus of interactions during activities will move from focusing on functional communication to expressive communication, leading to more exposure to a wider range of vocabulary, different communicative purposes, and a more natural commentary about the activity. Learners will be engaged in a social interaction as part of a shared activity. For our learners that may follow an AAC pathway as their communication develops are also practicing the motor planning required to navigate these systems. The systems in place will also support learners in being able to communicate with their peers socially, leading to greater levels of well-being.

The curriculum provision aims to impact on all strands of the learner's school experience. Learners will begin to develop joint attention, experience being part of a group, and build relationships with their peers and the staff who support them. They will develop social connections and interactions with staff and begin to initiate seeking these out. This will increase well-being, sense of self and of being part of a group. Some of the activities will help develop an understanding that the learners can have some control over their own environment and can make things happen. The skills will be transferable across curriculum areas and experiences. This will lead to greater motivation to engage in the whole school experience, which will have a positive impact on the variety of experiences learners are willing to tolerate.

Together with the impact of the total communication environment, these outcomes will lead to learners becoming more involved and having control of their day-to-day experiences. In turn this will support them making progress across all areas of their development.

Communication development is individual and learners will make progress at their own pace. The curriculum pathways are supported by a wide range of provision and interventions that can be tailored to the needs of specific groups and individual learners. A number of learners also have individual speech and language targets. Progress is measured against individual targets and learning intentions (EYFS, SOLAR) and speech and language targets. Assessment is carried out through a mix of verbal feedback and observations during sessions, video evidence, pupil assessment data at regular intervals throughout the year, learning journeys and reports and formal speech and language reviews. Specific outcomes and progress towards targets for individual learners under the Speech and Language Team are assessed and reported on following meetings between Speech and Language Therapists and staff supporting the learners, alongside assessments of the learners.

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