

How children start communication -2-

In the pre-verbal stage: skills the child need

Before children develop any language they need skills to communicate. Like having attention for others; showing what they want by pointing, waving, refusing like by shaking the head. It is essential for the language development that those skills develop well. And this only can happen by doing it. As much as she can. Frequent and a varied communication with the child makes a solid base for language development. Even in a later stage, when children are older, but their language and communication didn't develop as well as expected. Extra attention for the pre-verbal communication skills can help.

The skills that are needed are:

- Having attention for others and reacting to them
- Playing
- Taking turn
- Imitating
- Applying these skills in every-day-life events

Having attention for others and reacting to them

Skills in having attention are not an exclusive condition for developing communication. The child's attention development is a process that starts a soon as it makes eye-contact and goes on far into the school age. When babies have attention there is contact with people, events and objects and things like playing can develop. It helps to survey and to discover the surrounding and that way find things about they want to communicate.

In an inventory you can see to what extend certain area's of attention need extra care. The first four elements are important: if your answer there is "NO" try to find ways go encourage the attention. The other ones also need attention, but those skills develop also together with those on other areas like motoric skills and social skills.

Inventory on attention

	yes	no
Does your child look to your face when you talk?		
When you talk about 1 minute to the child does she look at least half of the time to your mouth or your eyes?		
Does the child look to an object when it is put about 30 cm in front of her face?		
When you are going to show the drinking bottle or approach her to lift her up will your child then change her body movement as a token that she knows what will happen?		
Does the child turn the head and the eyes to look for you when you call?		
When she sits comfortable and you show her an object can she sit quiet and attentive for about a minute?		
When you look together to an object or a picture does she look alternating to you and the picture as a token that she is aware of both the object and you?		
Does the child react on requests that are together with a sign like stretching your hand and saying "Give it to me"		
Without you indicating what she has to do, can the child wave when you leave or clap in her hand or any other gesture when you enter?		

Ways to support the child to have attention and to react on you

The tips here are quite general, and applicable in every situation. But especially when in the inventory above there are “NO”-s it might be useful to give explicitly attention on your own interaction with the child. And when the words “talking” and “communication” are used, it is not only about spoken language, also signing and supporting spoken language with signs is included. Remember that the main goal is to strengthen the attention span and the attention quality of the child.

- **Talk to your child, with your child.**

When you are doing things, tell about what you are doing. It doesn't have to be one continuous stream of language, sometimes simple, sentences with breaks are very effective, and a good routine is to start with calling the child by name and waiting till you see that it gives attention.

- **When you talk, smile.**

Make the child aware that talking is fun, that it feels nice to share information and above all that you like to talk with the child

- **Keep your face close to the child.**

Initially the distance that children see clear is about 30 cm. When they grow older the distance in which they can focus increases, but keep in mind that their vision needs time to develop.

- **Let the child feel your face.**

Developing attention needs like all developmental activities a lot of multi-sensorial perception. When the attention of the child is leaving take her hands and lead them to your face and let her feel the movements and the resonance of your voice.

- **Leave the child time to react.**

Don't be frustrated when the child doesn't react immediately. It needs time; perception is quite a complex thing. Maybe you remember how in the first years even the neural systems still have to develop. Think in and realizing what happens or what is expected costs time. The continuously repeating of a same order like “Look....Look....Look” doesn't make sense. It is better to change your voice, or to touch the child or to point together with her.

- **Provoke expectations.**

In relation with the previous it can help when you support the expectation of the child: showing the bottle before you present it for drinking, stretching your arms before you lift up the child. It makes the child curious and attentive to what happened around. Especially children with autistic problems often can't cope with sudden situation changes.

- **Reward a reaction of your child.**

A smile or a gentle touch already will do to make the child aware that it is worth while to give attention of you.

- **React on any sound the child produces.**

It doesn't matter whether it is explicit communicative or just by accident. Give sound back, preferably in the beginning repeating the sound the child makes. It helps in developing turn-taking

- **Give the same events the same name.**

Develop routines with the child. When you do identical things, like changing the diaper, or bathing, repeat not only the same routine but use the same words; spoken, or signed, or maybe in any other communicative form. Initially the child will not “understand” things yes but it will develop a global understanding and tokens become concepts and meaningful words.

- **Involve the whole family.**

Everyone can sing songs, tickle, make funny faces; can communicate with a child, make them aware.

- **Give the child things to look to.**

Even when it is alone it can use its attention. Things like mobiles, moving object, colorful things. A simple feather on a string already can announce that you enter a room or a mirror on the inside of the door that changes the light when the door is opened.

- **Take time yourself to observe your child.**

That way you will detect what she likes, how she reacts. It helps you to find ways to attract her attention in a better way. Especially a somewhat older child maybe is not able to pay attention before you approached it on her way. Do you really know when it wants to communicate with you? You only know when you observe her.

- **Don't expect too much at once.**

If you expect too much at once you will be disappointed and become frustrated. And the child too. Try to achieve each day another small step, and sometimes even that will not happen. In relation with the inventory above: maybe the child can't give attention for a whole minute, and it will take weeks before it can. But tomorrow maybe 21 seconds instead of 18? Allow yourself also to look for small changes. For the child it might be a huge step forward when she can indicate that she wants jam on her sandwich instead of cheese.

- **Limit the distractions**

Sometimes it is needed to shape a place where the child is not distracted by all kind of things or activities. Maybe temporarily short moments without much noise, many impulses like colors, shapes, things, light, can help your child to learn to concentrate.

Quote about attention:

Constant attention by a good nurse may be just as important as a major operation by a surgeon.

[Dag Hammarskjöld](#)