Communication Policy

Communication is fundamental to learning and is a crucial aspect of what we provide at TRACKS. We use a Total Communication approach within the setting which means that every child benefits from having access to all forms of communication to support their understanding of language and routines. As all children and people with Autism Spectrum Disorder are unique and learn in different ways, they find it difficult to understand social, verbal and non-verbal communication. They are also often self-directed with a reluctance to follow adult led learning activities, and also struggle to generalize skills to different situations and activities. Therefore, with this in mind, we aim for all communication strategies to be embedded into the setting and activities so that the children have every opportunity to learn and imitate a communication approach. Communication and language difficulties can be masked as children with ASD may have better expressive skills than receptive skills, which means that they may not be understanding the full meaning of the words they are using.

Communication approaches for the setting are guided by the Speech and Language Therapist who demonstrates strategies and approaches with individual children, and trains the staff in specific approaches used to develop the children's communication skills. The speech and language therapist works in close conjunction with the Principal Teacher, the Occupational Therapist and the Speech and Language Therapy Assistant, as well as children's key workers in order to ensure best outcomes for the children. Each aspect of the Total Communication approach is considered with each child, and the most relevant strategies are then incorporated into the child's IEP (individual education plan).

The total communication approach implemented within the setting is one which considers the communication and comprehension needs of all individuals within the classroom and supports a variety of learning styles and language levels. Often the focus is on developing visual systems for learning language and sentence building, as many children with speech and language needs are visual learners and this is particularly true of the majority of the ASD population. The total communication approach considers the following aspects of communication within the setting:

1. ***Signing*** *alongside the spoken word*

   - o Makaton signing should be used during all sessions. Signing updates are provided to staff so they are trained and can augment the language they use with the children. SLT models and uses signing with children during sessions as well. It is particularly useful for those who are showing the intention to communicate and who are understanding situational/routine language, and may be attempting their own natural gestures.
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2. ***Pictures and visuals*** *to support understanding as well as to provide a means of communication*
   - o Different levels of visual support are needed for individuals who have differing and unique language skills. Visuals (i.e. symbols and photos) are being implemented across the curriculum and setting in the following ways:
     - ▪ To support comprehension through the use of photos to represent the next activity which will occur
     - ▪ To provide children with a means of making a choice if they do not have the spoken vocabulary to make a request or answer a question, used across a range of activities, not just snack time.
     - ▪ To develop comprehension of action words within activities
     - ▪ To provide specific individuals with the ability to build sentences (subject, verb, object) to enhance and develop their language skills and generalize across different activities.

3. ***Written word*** *to support literacy and learning for more able students*
   - o Written word accompanies the photos or symbols used across the setting. Children may develop skills to learn 'sight word reading', but will also encourage comprehension of the written word they have read.

4. ***Body language*** *using gesture and facial expression to convey meaning*
   - o Intensive interaction is used as a specific approach for those who are not yet engaging with adults or other children for communicative purposes
   - o Children using gesture is recognized as a communicative intent if directed towards another person.
   - o Adults use gesture and facial expression to direct attention e.g. during 'look' activities and free play to engage and encourage joint attention to activities and a shared need to communicate.

5. ***Touch*** *to support learning e.g. hand over hand demonstrations*
   - o More hand over hand support is encouraged and demonstrated for those children who have fleeting attention skills, or are at an early developmental level for play (e.g. mouthing 3-6 months level)
   - o Hand over hand support may also be used to support imitation of Makaton signs
   - o Other touch is reviewed from a sensory perspective by the occupational therapist.

6. ***Environmental cues*** *such as rearranged furniture for snack time, or equipment for sensory circuits*
   - o The room has been rearranged so that there are no distractions during specific learning activities and the set-up of the furniture is a clear indication of the activity that is about to start.
   - o E.g. tables out and trolley for snack time; circle of chairs for 'look' etc.

7. ***Assistive technology*** *to facilitate learning and communication (e.g. computer, or big mack switches with recorded voice messages)*
   - o IPads and switches with a range of programs are trialed with different children as devices with a voice as a response to pushing a button can be motivating in developing communication intent for some children.

8. *Language level* *be aware of the level of understanding of the child and adapt your language accordingly, e.g. only one word comments for some, or full sentences and questions for others*
    o   The setting uses descriptors of language levels that relate to the SCERTS approach. More information can be available on request.
    o   Ongoing assessment occurs with children through observations to establish what vocabulary and instructions the children are understanding.

9. *Questions* *open questions vs closed questions deepening on the child's ability*
    o   Questions can be very difficult for children to understand and therefore the use of questions is limited, unless it is clear the child can understand.

10. **Awareness of sensory needs**
    o   Sensory needs are managed by the occupational therapist who provides advice to the setting in this area to understand each child's sensory profile.

11. **Processing time**
    o   Be aware of how long it takes a child to respond
    o   Allow time for a child to interpret, understand and respond to an adult/situation.

12. *Textures and objects* *for those who do not understand pictorial representation*
    o   Objects of reference are used throughout the setting to support children who do not understand pictures or photos.

13. **Environmental factors**
    o   consider back ground noise etc.

In addition to the Total Communication Approach, the setting is seeking to develop communication-based educational strategies using the principles of the SCERTS system of learning. This is an evidence based system which will enhance learning for all the children at their developmental level with regards to their social and linguistic abilities. This is to be embedded within the setting.

Further information can be available from the speech and language therapist on request.