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Social communication needs – Approach and Strategies for Parents/Carers and Professionals

Developed by C Aldred and Pennine ASD Workstream (2018)

Children and young people with **social communication needs** can experience difficultiesin a number of areas:

* Social interaction and communication
* Restricted repetitive behaviours and interests, which may include inflexible thinking style and sensory impairments
* Poor emotional regulation (anxiety and anger)

The impairments may vary widely in the way they present or may vary from one context to another e.g. home, school with peers or in new situations. Social communication needs can occur across a wide range of abilities from learning disability to age appropriate learning to gifted and talented and may occur alongside other developmental difficulties e.g. anxiety, motor co-ordination difficulty, language disorder, ADHD.

Some of the difficulties that young people with social communication needs can experience include:

* Difficulties in understanding social situations and responding to normal environmental cues;
* Difficulty in recognising other people’s feeling and intentions;
* Inappropriate or limited social initiative and problems with establishing and maintaining reciprocal social relationships;
* Inflexibility of thinking and a tendency to follow personal agendas which are not easily amenable to adult direction with an absence of awareness of the needs or emotions of others;
* Difficulty with open-ended or unstructured situations and with change;
* Limitations in expressive or creative activities;
* Obsessive interests or repetitive activities;
* Unusual features in their use of expressive language;
* Reduced or limited two-way communication for conversations;
* Difficulty adapting to same age peer interaction;
* Difficulty forming and maintaining friendship skills;
* Difficulty in transitioning from activities, rooms, year groups and schools;
* High susceptibility to hyper/hypo sensitivity.

These concerns may **change over time** with **increasing age**. It is necessary to observe a young person over time particularly as social demands increase e.g. increased social expectations in Secondary School, a new peer group, change in environments e.g. meeting new people and new situations.

Whilst many children/ young people demonstrate either temporary or mild difficulties in some of these areas; several areas of persistent concern (over two school terms or longer) should commence a process in accordance with National and Local Guidelines:

1. School arrange an informal meeting with parents to share and discuss their observations.
2. The school and parents complete a parent and professional form to identify areas of social communication concern
3. The school make observations/ surveillance of the young person over two school terms in class and in the unstructured times of the day e.g. break, transitions.
4. The school to consult with and ask for a ‘second opinion’ from another professional who has experience/ knowledge/ skills in social communication difficulties e.g. SALT, behaviour support, EP.
5. The SENCO/teacher/outside professional/ parent to plan and implement early support strategies
6. The school to monitor progress review and plan (see below suggestions).
7. If significant concerns persist over the review period (two school terms) to refer to Healthy Young Minds (CAMHS) or Paediatric Services in line with local pathway, including the parent-professional form, a summary of information gathered including interventions implemented.

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| **Meeting Needs of Children and Young People** | | |
| **SOCIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS** | | |
| **Social Communication Needs** | **Strategies and Interventions** | **Resources** |
| * Difficultly knowing how to talk and listen to others in a conversation * Echolalia, rather than meaningful language * Inability to read the facial expressions of others * Lack of ability to recognise and communicate emotions in self | * Visual prompt cards e.g. take turns, stay on topic * Say what you mean (explain double meanings, void sarcasm etc.) * Emotions cards and activities * Emotional literacy skills e.g. modelling/labelling and use of traffic lights or emotional thermometer | * See conversational skills strategies * Use emotional literacy strategies (advice from SALT/EP if needed) |

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| **Meeting Needs of Children and Young People** | | |
| **SOCIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS** | | |
| **Social Interaction Needs** | **Strategies and Interventions** | **Resources** |
| * Difficulty making and maintaining friendships * Inability to cope with unstructured social situations, including transitions * Inability to use knowledge and skills functionally to generalise to various situations * Difficulty understanding rules of social interaction * Problems with empathy and seeing other people’s points of views * Difficulty predicting others and understanding their motives * Inflexible thinking, including strong routines and rituals * Attention focused on own needs and interests | * Friendship skills -definition and roles * Scaffolding and supporting social interactions * Modelling good friendships skills * Role-play social scenarios * Buddy system * Social stories * Modelling empathy by using examples | * See friendship skills strategies |

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| **Meeting Needs of Children and Young People** | | |
| **SOCIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS** | | |
| **Restricted Interests Needs** | **Strategies and Interventions** | **Resources** |
| * Inability to cope with unstructured social situations, including transitions * Difficulty coping in new or unfamiliar situations or meeting new people * Anxiety in busy, unpredictable environments | * Preparation for change of activity or meeting new people   Orientation visits   * Use of visual cues/photos * Visual prompting of expected routine/ daily timetable by using visual timetable * Clear rewards – including individual motivators | * Social stories * Role-play social scenarios * Buddy system * Visual timetables, schedules and prompts * First/ next board |

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| **Meeting Needs of Children and Young People** | | |
| **SOCIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS** | | |
| **Sensory Sensitivity Needs** | **Strategies and Interventions** | **Resources** |
| * Over/under sensitivity to touch, light, taste, sound, smell or colour | * Preparation (for child and others including school) of impact of sensory sensitivity on emotions, behaviour and learning e.g. alarms/sirens * Reduce impact of stimulus where possible e.g. for noise – ear defenders * Access to a calm environment if distressed/stressed * Use of distraction strategies e.g. music through earphones/video games | * See sensory sensitivity strategies |

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| **Meeting Needs of Children and Young People** | | |
| **SOCIAL COMMUNICATION INCREASING NEEDS** | | |
| **Childs Needs** | **Strategies and Interventions** | **Resources** |
| * Extreme reactions, rather than a graded response | * Chaperone * Access to time out area or distraction free environment * Regular, short sensory breaks * Personalised Social stories * Comic Strip conversations * Lego therapy | * Social Stories * Comic Strip * Conversations * Social Communication Skills * Training for parents * Advice/ training from OT/ SLT |

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| **Meeting Needs of Children and Young People** | | |
| **SOCIAL COMMUNICATION SIGNIFICANT NEEDS** | | |
| **Childs Needs** | **Strategies and Interventions** | **Resources** |
| * Unable to cope with close proximity to other pupils * Physical outbursts if stressed e.g. another person gets too close * Lack of response inhibitions e.g. can’t wait, shouts out, runs off * Physically challenging behaviour * Unusual reactions to sensory stimuli * Difficulties with independence skills, such as dressing, toileting, eating | * Sensory breaks and snacks * Visual timetable and support to use it * Visual approaches personalised to specific interest/ clubs * Comic Strip conversations or social stories | * Specialist team involvement * ASD Partnership, SLT, OT Training for parents in social communication difficulties * SALT advice * OT advice on equipment/ sensory issues |

Conversational Skills

How to develop reciprocal interaction skills in conversation

This can be a 5 minute a day activity:

* Explain that conversation goes ‘to and fro’ like a game of tennis. You can use an object to pass back and forwards if you like.
* Tell your child that he/ she is going to listen carefully to what you say then see if they can ask a question about what you said or comment on the same topic.
* Give written wh-question prompt cards if necessary e.g. - ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘what happened’, ‘why’.
* Give them a ‘lead’ – a bit of information to find out more about e.g. ‘I had an awful weekend’ ‘I went out last night’ then PAUSE. Sometimes you may have to pause for a lot longer than feels comfortable. Encourage a ‘comeback’ from them. If their comment is not connected to what you said, point this out gently and try to get back to the topic.
* Obviously you can’t talk about the same topic for ever so switch topics when you feel you’ve exhausted that one.
* Although this may feel a bit un-natural at first it should soon become more natural and spontaneous.
* When your child is comfortable doing this with you try to incorporate other people to practice this in a group.

**Good Conversation Skills:**

* Introducing your topic
* Keep it relevant
* Showing interest in the other person’s topic
* Pause to let the other person comment or ask questions
* Take turns
* Wit for a pause before you take your turn
* Avoid switching the topic
* Avoid changing to your favourite topic
* Ask relevant questions
* Keep it short
* Keep to the key points
* Avoid too much detail
* Know when to end

**Conversation Topics:**

* Hobbies and interests
* Family
* Trips out
* Shopping
* To the park
* Cinema
* Swimming
* My weekend
* My holiday
* My favourite food
* My friends
* When I was poorly
* The games we play
* The best day ever
* The worst day ever
* Going on a long journey
* My favourite TV programme

Sensory Processing

Every minute of every day the brain receives pieces of sensory information from our senses. These give us the information we need in order to organise ourselves within our environment so that we can function in the world.

Sensory integration is the neurological process of locating, sorting and organising the sensory information we receive from our bodies and from the world around us, for use in daily life.

Modulation is a term that refers to the brain’s ability to organise, regulate and prioritise incoming sensory information. This involves the brain working out what sensory information is relevant and what needs to be prioritised or ignored so that we can make an appropriate response. An example of this would be prioritising the sensation of heat from a hot object and ignoring the sensation of air brushing past our skin so that we focus our attention on moving our hand away from the hot object. Making an appropriate response e.g. moving hand is called facilitation.

Some sensory messages become very familiar to us and our brain is able to automatically tune them out e.g. the teacher talking. This process is called habituation.

When habituation and facilitation are balanced we can make smooth transitions from one state to another (i.e. degree of attention, emotional state, level of activity).

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| **A well-modulated nervous system**   * Adapts to changes within the environment. * Has a level of arousal and attention appropriate for the task. * Blocks out irrelevant information. * Attends to relevant stimulation. * Responds appropriately and in proportion to the level of stimulation. |

Adapted from Murray-Slutsky and Paris, 2000

For some children sensory integration does not happen as it should and they respond in an inappropriate way to ordinary sensations and situations. The child may be under responsive (hypo sensitive) to sensory information or over responsive (hyper sensitive) to sensory information or can have a mixture of these extremes.

Children can have difficulties with sensory integration for many reasons. It is not uncommon for such children to have had health difficulties early in life leading to time spent in special care baby units, during which they may have experienced extremes of sensory stimulation from the sensory deprivation of maternal touch and suckling to the sensory overload of noisy equipment, invasive medical procedures and bright lights.

Children who have sensory integration difficulties can be helped by the adults around them understanding more about why they respond the way they do. These adults can help provide the child with a more suitables sensory environment to help them feel more calm, organised and able to concentrate. Such children often beneifti from seeing an Occupational Therapist who can fully assess the child’s sensory experiences needed for them to feel calm, organised and alert.

Children can be referred to an Occupational Therapist through their GP or Paediatrician. Occupational Therapists may be based within the Paediatric Services or within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

The following pages give some practical ideas to try to adapt your child’s environments at school and at home. These ideas are general and therefore may not be applicable to your individual child. Look through and select the strategies you feel are relevant to trial.

**Suggested strategies to try for commonly experienced problems:**

* If the child is seeking out sensory input e.g. wanting to touch things excessively, seeking out messy/tactile play, licking/mouthing or smelling objects. Consider that the child needs this sensory input so do not punish or forbid these experiences but provide more acceptable opportunities for the child to gain the sensory input. This could mean allowing the child to have a gag of acceptable objects to smell and mouth or providing the child with a fiddle toy hold.
* If the child seeks out movement opportunities and struggles to sit still provide the child with regular opportunities to move around the room or change position e.g. be book monitor, help load the washing machine, work whilst kneeling at the desk. Some children find the use of an air filled cushion useful as they are able to remain seated but keep moving in a non-disruptive way.
* Be mindful about the structure to the child’s day. If the child is going to be expected to sit for a long period, e.g. a car journey, a family meal or a circle time, encourage the child to first get a lot of movement through playtime/trampolining/rough and tumble play. Try to balance quiet sedentary activities with opportunities for gross movement and activity.
* Allowing the child to suck on their water bottle or chew a safe chewy toy whilst working may help them to concentrate for longer.
* Providing the child with a fiddle toy e.g. koosh ball/slinky may help them to listen during carpet time.
* If the child appears sensitive to touch they may struggle to line up with the class, they may touch others in order to control their tactile experience rather than wait and risk others touching them unpredictably. Such children can be helped by placing them at the front of the end of the line allowing them to have greater distance between themselves and their classmates than expected.
* Children who are sensitive to touch may dislike wearing certain clothing or textures. They may insist on labels being cut out of clothing or may want to wear short sleeves on cold days/long sleeves on hot days. Go with the child’s preferences and be mindful to them when buying clothes. Sometimes children can tolerate clothing more if you encourage them to massage their skin before dressing. Use deep pressure as light touch heightens sensitivity. This can prepare the skin for the sensation of clothing and be less of a shock to the sensory system. This often helps particularly when children do not want to wear socks. Another tip is to wear socks inside out so the seam does not irritate. Children’s hypersensitivity to clothing usually becomes less problematic as they get older and have more control over what they chose to wear themselves. Be mindful that the change of season often brings heightened sensitivity as does tiredness and stress.
* If a child is sensitive to noise you may notice them becoming distressed by unexpected noise or loud noise. Warn the child about impending loud noises e.g. school bell/hoover. If they cover their ears encourage them to periodically remove their hands from their ears then replace their hands, this encourages the brain to begin to habituate the noise. Provide reassurance and information about what the noise is, where it comes from and how long it will last.
* Position the child in an area of the classroom that is not too noisy e.g. not near the door/window or near the heating system. At home be thoughtful about the child’s bedroom e.g. is it near to a busy road, over the TV room. Experiment with different positions with the home and classroom.
* If the child is easily distracted by what they see give thought to the amount of clutter in the classroom or home. If the child is expected to sit and concentrate cover up shelves of toys with a sheet or provide them with a quiet unfussy area of the classroom to work. Some children find working within a work booth very helpful.
* When providing the child with worksheets try to keep the amount of writing/pictures to a minimum. White spaces around each written problem helps the child to focus on one problem at a time.
* Children with sensory integration difficulties often benefit from routine and structure. Provide the child with a visual plan for the day and the lesson. This can help them feel more calm, organised and more able to concentrate. At home use a visual planner to map out what the daily or weekly routine is. Be aware that during times of change e.g. school holidays the child may feel less secure and their behaviour may demonstrate this. Providing extra boundaries during the holidays can help e.g. create a visual planner of what is going to happen each day, incorporate clear and definite points of routine to the day e.g. meal time, snack time, TV time, bath time.
* If the child struggles to wait for an unexpected activity provide them with a visual time cue, if unable to read the time give them a chart with 10 blocks on. Set an egg timer for 5 minutes, when the egg timer goes off ask the child to colour in block then re-set the timer for another 5 minute block. Continue until the time arrives. Being able to monitor the passage of time themselves in a visual form can help them feel calmer and more able to tolerate the wait.
* Children with sensory processing difficulties can have restricted diets as they can be hypersensitive to taste, texture or temperature. Difficulties of this type are best dealt with through the advice of an Occupational Therapist or Psychologist. Be mindful that the child may have genuine sensory sensitivity and it may not be helpful to address this as a behavioural problem. Try not to attach emotion to food e.g. be careful not to share your own anxiety about what they do/don’t eat, monitor your own response to their eating and try to remain as calm and neutral as possible. It may take many many introductions of a food before the child feels able to try it, this is ok don’t give up and remain calm and neutral when introducing food. Allow the child to smell, touch and explore the food offered, if you notice your child avoids lumpy textures try offering the food in a smooth or pureed form initial e.g. sauces/yoghurts.
* Some children find it helpful to have a safe space which they can retreat to if they feel overwhelmed by their environments. This can be created by having a small pop up tent filled with cushions/blankets or a quiet area in the school library with bean bags, soft lighting and classical calming music. Children may need an adult to reflect to them that they seem stressed/giddy/upset and encourage them to go to this place initially, after some time it is hoped that the child would begin to monitor their own level of arousal and chose to go to their safe space to calm down. It is important that this place is not associated with any form of punishment rather a tool for the child to use to modulate their sensory experiences.

**Useful Reading:**

Kranowitz CS (1998) The Out of Sync Child: Recognising and coping with sensory integration disorder. Pedigree: New York.

Kranowitz CS (2003) The Out of Sync Child has fun: Activities for kids in tight spaces. Pedigree: New York.

**Friendship Skills:**

* Show interest in the other person
* They may like you because you are friendly
* Ask relevant questions
* Listen well
* What do they like playing with?
* What are their interests?
* Share the same game together
* Talk about their interests
* Don’t take control
* Ask instead of telling
* Don’t talk about your own favourite topic all of the time
* Remember to chat
* Ask about friends

**Keeping Friends**

**1. Saying Nice Things to People**

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| **Importance** | **Components** | **Wrong Way** | **Right Way** | **Problems** | **Homework** |
| * Helps to keep friends. * People may like you because you are friendly. * Puts others in a good mood. * You may find that people start to say nice things to you too. | 1. Friendly face and voice. 2. Think of something nice to say about the person (About the way they look or something they have done). 3. Look at the person. 4. Say something nice. | Harry and Pete see each other waiting for a bus.  *H:* Hi, Pete  *P:* Hi  *H:* You’ve got a dirty stain on your shirt. Didn’t you wash it?  *P:* Oh dear, It’s my best shirt.  *H:* Apart from that you look ok. Don’t worry. | Harry and Pete see each other waiting for a bus.  *H:* Hi, Pete  *P:* Hi  *H:* I like your shirt, Pete. It looks great. Are you going anywhere special?  *P:* Thanks. Yes I’m going to a concert tonight | * You pay your friend a compliment and he rejects it, saying ‘oh no, these shoes are awful’. * You pay a compliment and the other person starts to brag. * Someone pays you a compliment and you feel embarrassed. * You tell your friend how good she is at being on time and she says, ‘Oh, don’t be silly. I wish you were good at that. | 1. Say something nice to three different people. 2. Write down four reasons for saying something nice to someone. 3. Watch a video and see how people say nice things to each other. What things do they compliment. 4. Think about three people and write down five things that you like about each of them. |

**2. Showing an Interest in Others**

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| **Importance** | **Components** | **Wrong Way** | **Right Way** | **Problems** | **Housework** |
| * You will find out about people, which can be interesting and enjoyable. * You will be able to hear about other people’s interests. * People may like you because you are friendly. * If you don’t show an interest in others, they may ignore you. | 1. Friendly face and voice. 2. Make eye-contact. 3. Ask how the person is. 4. Ask what the person has been doing. 5. Listen to what the other person says. 6. Make comments and contributions when appropriate. | Ursula and Wendy bump into each other while shopping at the supermarket. They haven’t seen each other for several months.  *U:* Hi, Wendy.  *W:* Hi.  *U:* I’d better go.  *W:* Yes. Bye. | Ursula and Wendy bump into each other while shopping at the supermarket. They haven’t seen each other for several months.  *U:* Hi, Wendy  *W:* Hi.  *U:* How are you?  *W:* Fine.  *U:* I haven’t seen you for ages. What have you been doing?  *W:* Oh, I’ve been working very hard at my new job.  *U:* What new job? | * The other person ignores you. * You ask how the other person is and she spends the next 10 minutes telling you about her illnesses. * You ask what other people have been doing and they reply ‘nothing’. * Someone new asks how you are and you feel terrible. * Someone asks what you have been doing and you can’t remember. | 1. Start a conversation with three different people and show an interest in them. 2. Write down four reasons for showing an interest in others. 3. Write down six things to do when showing an interest in others. 4. Listen to the radio and see how interviewers show an interest in the people they interview. 5. Think of things that you have done over the last week that may be of interest to others. |

**3. Asking, not telling**

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| **Importance** | **Components** | **Wrong way** | **Right way** | **Problems** | **Homework** |
| * It is more polite to ask people to do things than tell them. * People may like you more if you ask not tell. * People are more likely to do what you want if you ask rather than tell. * Telling is bossy and people do not like bossiness. | 1. Keep a friendly face and voice. 2. Keep calm. 3. Use politeness words such as ‘please’ and ‘would you mind…?’ 4. If someone is doing something that you do not like, ask them to change what they are doing. 5. Give a reason for your request. 6. Thank the person for following your request. | Kim is playing at Roy’s house. Roy has made a building out of bricks.  *R:* Don’t touch my model.  *K:* But I want to play with the bricks too.  *R:* Get lost. It’s mine. Don’t come anywhere near it or I’ll tell my mum. | Kim is playing at Roy’s house. Roy has made a building out of bricks.  *R:* Please could you play with these bricks over here, Kim, because I’m building a hospital with those.  *K:* OK, I don’t mind.  *R:* Thank you. You can play with the hospital when it’s finished if you want to.  *K:* Yes. Maybe I will. | * You ask a boy to move so you can get past. He says, ‘no’. * You ask a friend not to smoke when he sits near you but he laughs at you. * You ask your tutors to call you Chris not Chrissie but they always forget. * You ask some young children to be quiet but they just get louder. * Someone asks you to move your car. You don’t want to because you are busy. | 1. Ask five people to tell you the time and to direct you to the train station. Write down what happened. 2. Write down four reasons for asking, not telling. 3. Write down how to ask, not tell. 4. Watch TV programmes to see how people ask others to do things. 5. Think how you feel when told to do something rather than asked. Write down how you feel. |

**4. Keeping a Secret**

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| **Importance** | **Components** | **Wrong way** | **Right way** | **Problems** | **Homework** |
| * Friends like to feel sure that they can trust you. * It can be exciting to be trusted with a secret. * Telling the secret may hurt someone who is not supposed to hear it or spoil a nice surprise. * You can feel safe about telling friends your secrets if you trust each other. | If someone tells you a secret:   1. Remember that it is a secret and don’t tell anyone. 2. If someone asks you to reveal a secret then tell them politely that you cannot and change the subject right away. 3. If you accidently tell a secret, make sure you tell your friend and apologise. 4. If you know you cannot remember to keep a secret then tell your friends not to tell you. | Charlie has just told Frances what he has bought for Justin’s birthday present. Justin approaches Frances later.  *J:* I’d love to know what Charlie has got me for my birthday.  *F:* I know what he’s got for you. It’s a secret.  *J:* Go on, tell me, please.  *F:* It’s very nice.  *J:* I’m dying to find out. Please tell me.  *F:* OK. But don’t tell Charlie that I told you. It’s a big fishing rod.  *J:* I’ll go and thank him. | Charlie has just told Frances what he has bought for Justin’s birthday present. Justin approaches Frances later.  *J:* I’d love to know what Charlie has got me for my birthday.  *F:* I’m sure it’s something nice. Do you want to play cards?  *J:* OK. | * A friend tries again and again to get you to tell a secret. You think that she will not give up until you tell her. * An adult frightens you and tells you not to tell anyone else or they will hurt you. * You tell a friend about a surprise party for your mother and realise she has overheard you. * You overhear a friend telling another friend a secret that she promised she would tell no-one. | 1. Practise keeping secrets by remembering unimportant things that your friends tell you and making sure that you don’t tell anyone about them. 2. Write down four reasons for keeping secrets. 3. Write down how to keep a secret. 4. Think of three things that you would not like anyone to know about at the moment. 5. Think of ways of telling friends that it is important they keep a secret for you. |