

## Supporting Receptive Language Development

### What is Receptive Language and why is it important?

Receptive language is the ability to understand information. It involves understanding the words, sentences and meaning of what others say or of what you read. Conversely expressive language means being able to put thoughts into words and sentences in a way that makes sense to others. Receptive language is very important for successful communication; you first need to understand the meaning of words in order to then use these words to express yourself meaningfully.

Language and communication is complex and often challenging for emergent communicators. Emergent communicators are people of all ages who do not have a reliable method of expressive communication through symbolic language. Just as it takes time to understand, learn and use spoken language, so too does it take time to understand, learn and use a symbolic language system successfully. Individuals who are finding it challenging to understand language may display attention and listening difficulties and/or behavioural issues. This is because it can be very difficult to follow instructions, respond appropriately to questions and follow routines when you don't understand the language being used. If you think about a typical day, language is used in almost every activity that occurs. This is a very complex and challenging environment for our emergent communicators! However we can use strategies and supports frequently throughout the day to make it easier for our emergent communicators to understand what's happening and participate in daily activities.

### How can we help build receptive language?

#### 1. Use an AAC System

Having a robust and systematic symbolic language system is important for all emergent communicators. Through repeated modelling of their AAC system in predictable routines (more on this below), emergent communicators are provided with multiple meaningful models of language over time. This will help build understanding of the words and symbols used. Core vocabulary boards and PODD books are low tech AAC systems that are frequently used with emergent communicators to help build their understanding of what is happening around them. Talk to your Speech Language Therapist if you don't have a robust AAC system as they will be able to advise you on what is most appropriate.



#### 2. Have Consistent Predictable Routines

Often emergent communicators are aware of routines but it can be challenging to follow instructions and understand questions when routines are performed a different way every time. Routines by definition are predictable; they use predictable vocabulary and sequences, and occur frequently. They create a structure onto

which emergent communicators can build language. Keeping routines consistent by doing things the same way each and every time will make them easily predictable and allow understanding of the language used in these routines to be developed. To make a routine consistent and predictable you need to:

- Choose a frequently played favourite game or every day activity
- Choose the vocabulary you will model during the routine
- Start, do and finish the routine in the same way every time

Once consistent predictable routines have been built and the communicator is showing greater understanding of the language used in this routine you can alter your routine slightly in order to provide opportunities to model new vocabulary and further develop receptive language. Lots of engagement and communication can happen when a predictable routine happens a little differently!

### 3. Use a Visual Schedule

Visual schedules or visual timetables use a series of pictures to communicate a series of activities or the steps of a specific activity. They are often used to help emergent communicators understand and manage the daily events in their lives. Visual schedules support emergent communicators to understand what is happening now, what will happen next and what will happen for the rest of the day or activity. Visual schedules can help to reduce behaviours of concern by reducing anxiety about the unknown of what is coming next and make transitions much smoother. They can be created using pictures, symbols, photographs or even hand drawn images. It is important to have your visual schedule somewhere where it can always be seen and to support individuals to check it when transitioning from one activity to another as this will help them to understand that one activity is finished and see what is coming next. [Click here to check out our tip of the month on visual timetables](#) and learn more about how to use them.



### 4. Decrease Questioning

Questions can be really difficult to understand and respond to appropriately as they are such abstract concepts. Questions require that the listener understands the concepts and functions of the question being asked and that the listener has the vocabulary and expressive language skills to answer it successfully. You can't answer a question if you don't understand it and don't know the right words to use! Before asking a question, you should first focus on ensuring an individual understands the vocabulary that would be used to answer this question. The table below gives some examples of vocabulary that needs to be understood first in order to answer particular types of questions – you can see there is a lot involved!

Question Word	Examples Of Receptive Vocabulary Required
Who	People words – him, her, us, we, mum, dad, brother, sister, boy, baby People Names - Johnny, Lucy, doctor, firefighter, bus driver Animal Names – tiger, cat, horse, monkey
What	Object Names – Cheese, car, grass, cloud, toy

	Animal Names – tiger, cat, horse, monkey Event Names – Birthday, Christmas, Easter, party, wedding Action Words – jump, kick, run, swim, swing, hop, play
Where	Place Names – lake, playground, beach, park Location words – under, on, behind, up, down
When	Time Words – 12 O'clock, today, tomorrow, April, at Christmas
How & Why	These are complex concepts and require vocabulary for reasoning and explanation

Because of the directive nature of questions, they can also put a communicator on the defensive and increase their anxiety. Questions that only require a yes or no answer can also lead to the communicator saying or doing less, rather than more. You can support an emergent communicator's receptive language development by reducing the amount of questions you ask them. Instead try re-framing your question into a comment that helps teach them new vocabulary. Here are some examples:

"Is that Mum's car?"            "Oh, you see Mum's car!"  
 "Do you like your juice?"            "That juice looks delicious!"  
 "What's that? Is it a train?"            "Wow that train is going fast!"

Using more comments provides lots of great opportunities to model new vocabulary, build understanding and create space for a communicator to take a turn to express themselves. You can ask questions to keep a conversation going but as a general rule, try to use more comments than questions.

When you do ask a question, try to always give a sign/gesture or point to the picture/word in the communicators AAC system. This helps the individual to begin to understand what question you're asking, which in turn will help them answer it. The key is being consistent so that your emergent communicator has many opportunities to learn and understand the signs and symbols.



References:

<http://www.hanen.org/SiteAssets/Helpful-Info/Articles/oh-those-questions---printer-friendly.aspx>

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