BELS
Barnet Education & Learning Service

Specialist Teaching Team, Vision

Early Communication with your young child with a Vision Impairment

There are some Important points to remember when communicating and speaking with very young children.

- Remember a baby with a Vision Impairment (VI) may not be able to see your facial expressions, so may not imitate your behaviours such as smiling back, copying your facial expressions or body movements. Often, this is how an adult gains feedback during communication and keeps them interacting with the baby. Please keep interacting, copying noises and movements your child is making, even if there does not seem to be any specific feedback from them. This can lead to tactile exploration of the person they are communicating with.
- You may find that some babies with VI still when you start to communicate with them so that they can focus on what you are saying. They are attending, but it is not obvious, so it is important for you to continue to talk and interact with them regardless.
- With very young children verbally respond to any attempt at communication – vocalising, body movements, facial expressions. Repeat back their vocalising, words or short phrases to show that you value what they are saying.
- Give specific praise saying what you are pleased with/ about. ‘I can see you are happy, you are smiling.’, ‘Yes, it’s a teddy.’
- Turn taking is an important part of communication, so when your child vocalises, babbles or says a word repeat this, then wait to give them time to ‘reply’ to you.
- Ensure there are motivating things to explore with joint attention for you to talk about.
- Real objects are best to use where possible because, for example, objects made from plastic such as a plastic fruit would feel similar to the touch. Real fruit could be explored using many senses and would be obviously different.
- Build on what they say- if they say ‘Bubbles’, say ‘Yes, I am blowing bubbles.’

For young children with a VI it is important to realise the importance of using touch to learn about the world around them and therefore linking to the development of communication and language.

Shared attention where you and your child are sharing experiences of touching and exploring real objects together is an important way of developing communication. You can move an object so your child can touch it if they are not yet making purposeful hand and arm movements or move it near to them to encourage them to reach out for it by asking if they can find it, you could shake/tap it on a hard surface to make a noise, so they know it is near to them.

Providing consistent support and enabling lots of opportunities whilst exploring together enables children to actively learn the meaning of objects and the importance of communication. Objects can support conversations, an enjoyable ‘conversation’ can be developed by exploring together and setting up engaging opportunities that support the child to access information and gain tactile feedback.

Tapping an object can make the child aware that there is something that could be exciting and is out of their reach or outside of their direct experience. For a child with a VI using sound to locate an object is an important skill to develop. To develop this skill, you could tap an object while they are touching your hand so they become aware of a link between the sound and placement of the object. The distance and placement of the object can then be varied so that the child learns to reach in different directions and distances.

You can use the hand under hand technique to help with exploration of objects, this is a way of making it more of an active experience for the child and enables them to be more in control than when you are holding and moving their hand to the object.

This is a link is to a short informative SenseCharity video showing the use of hand under hand technique.

Making play inclusive - Hand under hand communication - YouTube

Some other useful information regarding communication has been written by Oxford University Hospitals – NHS Foundation Trust - Communicating with a child with a visual impairment – Information for parents and carers

43381Pvisualimpairment.pdf (ouh.nhs.uk)