

Using Naturalistic Communication Strategies in Early Childhood Settings

A QUICK START GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



What are Naturalistic Strategies for Communication?

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) strategies support communication by embedding opportunities for communication into **play, routines, and everyday interactions**.

They help children:

- ✓ communicate more often and more meaningfully
- ✓ stay engaged with adults and peers
- ✓ learn that communication works
- ✓ build language through natural interactions



These strategies are especially effective for young children because they occur **throughout the day**, not just during structured instruction.

Enhancing Motivation for Communication

Children are more likely to communicate when they are engaged and interested.



Educators can increase motivation by:

-  following the child's lead during play
-  embedding learning into play and routines
-  using natural reinforcement for communication (examples: child asks to build blocks → the play activity continues; child requests a hug → the child gets a hug)



-  using turn-taking and simple social games
-  offering the child choices
-  modeling and imitating the child's actions or sounds
-  adjusting pacing and difficulty so activities are just challenging enough
-  incorporating the child's sensory interests
-  using positive affect (warmth, smiles, enthusiasm)



Creating Communication Opportunities During Routines

Educators can intentionally set up the environment and activities to encourage children to communicate. When the child communicates, teachers should respond to their communication attempts so the child learns that communication works!

Examples include:



In sight, out of reach: placing preferred items where children can see them but need to request help to access

Shared control: holding materials until the child communicates for the item



Reducing anticipation: waiting for the child to communicate instead of automatically helping

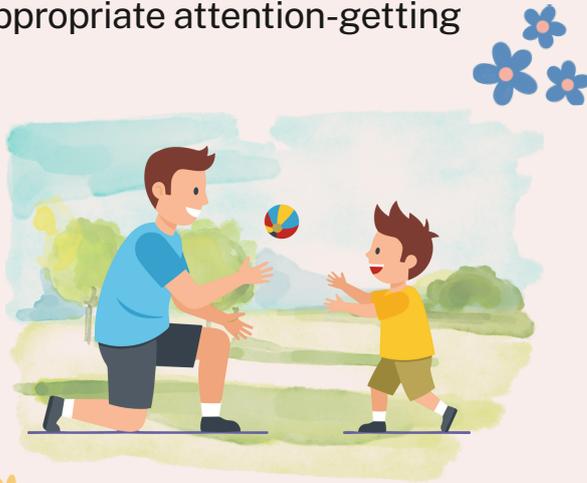
Breaking it up: giving small amounts of materials or snacks at a time so the child requests more of the item



Activity setup: preparing materials but keeping them just out of reach to encourage communication

Gentle withholding: leaving out an obvious part of an activity so the child has an opportunity to request it

Waiting: briefly waiting when the child needs assistance to encourage appropriate attention-getting



These strategies create **many natural opportunities** for children to use words, sounds, gestures, or eye gaze to communicate.

How Educators Support Communication in the Moment

During interactions, educators can:



get face-to-face at the child's level



model simple, developmentally appropriate language



respond to all communication attempts (looking, pointing, vocal language)



build on what the child communicates by adding one more word or idea



pause and wait to give the child time to respond

Teaching moments can be brief, responsive, and embedded within play

Monitor and Adjust

If a child is not communicating often:

- simplify adult language
- increase wait time
- adjust the activity or materials
- increase opportunities for choice
- respond more consistently to attempts

Small changes in adult behavior can lead to meaningful increases in communication.

Use Communication Strategies Everywhere

These strategies can be used:

- indoors and outdoors
- during play, routines, and caregiving activities
- in preschools, childcare centers, and homes



When used consistently across the day, children have more chances to practice and grow their communication skills



REMINDER!

Communication includes **words, sounds, gestures, and eye gaze.**

The goal is **connection and participation**, not perfect speech.

Adapted from: Bruinsma, Y., Minjarez, M. B., Schreibman, L., & Stahmer, A. C. (2020). Naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions for autism spectrum disorder. Brookes.