NATURALISTIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Teacher Implementation Checklist

Naturalistic communication strategies support children's communication during everyday play and routines. Use this checklist to help you join the child's activity, support engagement, and create natural opportunities for communication.

1. Prepare & Join

□ I offer activities or materials the child enjoys or join something they are already interested in.

□ I reduce unnecessary distractions when possible.

□ I make sure the child's usual communication supports are available (for example, picture symbols or AAC).

□ I get at the child's level and position myself so we can easily interact.

2. Engage & Follow the Child's Lead

□ I keep the interaction playful and enjoyable.

□ I join in or imitate the child's play actions.

□ I limit asking lots of questions or giving lots of directions and demands.

□ I take turns with the child and pause to give them time to take a turn.

□ I add a new action or idea to expand the child's play while following their interests.

- **Example:** The child is pushing a toy car back and forth. The teacher adds a block to make a ramp and says, "Car goes down!"

3. Create Opportunities to Communicate

□ During the activity, I create natural reasons for the child to communicate.

Examples include:

- **Hold and wait:** Hold an item the child wants and pause to give the child a chance to communicate (e.g., using words, sounds, gestures, looking, picture symbols, or AAC).
- **Offer a choice:** Show two options and give the child a chance to communicate which one they want.
- **Give a little at a time:** Provide a small amount or a few pieces at a time, creating another opportunity to ask for more.
- **Pause:** Stop briefly during an enjoyable activity or routine and wait for the child to communicate that they want it to continue.
- **In sight, out of reach:** Place something the child wants where they can see it but need your help to get it.

□ If the child needs help communicating, I give a simple prompt or model, then respond to their communication attempt.

4. Respond & Model Communication

□ I notice and respond naturally to the child's communication (including language, pointing, looking, gestures, picture symbols, AAC) whenever possible. For example, I give the requested item, help when they ask for help, or continue an activity they want to continue.

□ I talk about what the child is doing, seeing, or interested in.

□ I use short, clear language that the child can understand.

□ I build on what the child communicates by adding a word or idea.

- **Example:** Child says, "Baby." → Teacher says, "Baby is sleeping!"

□ I pair my words with gestures, actions, or objects when helpful.

□ If the child uses AAC, I model words using their AAC system during the interaction.

Reflection & Adjusting

- Was the child interested and engaged?
- Did the child have several opportunities to communicate?
- Did I give the child enough time to take turns and respond?
- What seemed to help the child communicate?
- What is one thing I can try next time?

Adapted from: Biggs, E., Turner, E., & Lee, S. (2026). Play-Based Naturalistic Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Intervention: Educator Fidelity and Effects on Communication and Peer Interactions. Behavioral Sciences, 16(8), 1275 and Bruinsma, Y., Minjarez, M. B., Schreibman, L., & Stahmer, A. C. (2020). Naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions for autism spectrum disorder. Brookes.