

Safe Hands Support

# Speech & Language Development Guide

*A practical resource for communication growth, early support, and family confidence*

Prepared for Safe Hands Support

This guide is designed to help families, carers, educators, and support workers understand how communication develops from birth through the early school years. It explains what speech and language are, what typical development may look like, what practical support can be used at home, and when extra help may be needed.

*It is educational only and does not replace assessment from a qualified speech pathologist, GP, child health nurse, paediatrician, audiologist, or other relevant health professional.*

## How to use this guide

This document is written to be practical. It is not just a list of milestones. It also explains how everyday routines build communication, how to notice early warning signs, and how to create a language-rich environment across home, school, and community settings.

You can read it from start to finish, or you can jump to the section that fits your needs. Families often start with the milestone tables and home strategies. Educators and support workers often use the activity plans, observation sheets, and communication environment checklists.

Part	What is inside	Who it helps most
1	Foundations of communication, key terms, and how children learn language through relationships and play.	Everyone
2	Age-based milestone tables from birth to 8 years, plus red flags and what they may mean.	Families and carers
3	Detailed home strategies, routines, book sharing, songs, play, and conversation ideas.	Families and educators
4	Bilingual development, hearing, fluency, social communication, screen use, and common myths.	Families and professionals
5	When and how to seek help, what speech pathology looks like, and how support plans are built.	Families and support workers
6	Practical activity plans sorted by age and communication goal.	Educators and support workers
7	Worksheets, observation forms, progress trackers, and planning tools.	Families and teams
8	Glossary, service pathways, and trusted resources for further support.	Everyone

### Good to know

Children develop at different rates. A milestone table is a guide, not a label. One missed milestone does not automatically mean a disorder. Still, persistent concerns should be acted on early because early support usually leads to better outcomes.

## Part 1. Foundations of speech, language, and communication

Communication starts from birth. Babies begin learning before they can talk. They listen to voices, notice facial expressions, watch how people take turns, and slowly connect sounds, actions, and meaning. Over time, communication grows through thousands of small everyday interactions.

Adults often use the words speech and language as if they are the same thing, but they are different. A child may have clear speech sounds but difficulty understanding language. Another child may know exactly what they want to say but have trouble producing speech clearly. Understanding the difference helps families choose the right support.

### What the main terms mean

Term	What it means	Simple example
Speech	The physical production of sounds, words, and sentences.	A child says ball clearly.
Language	The system of understanding and using words, grammar, and meaning.	A child follows 'Put the cup on the table'.
Receptive language	What a child understands.	They understand 'Get your shoes'.
Expressive language	What a child says or communicates to others.	They ask for 'more juice'.
Pragmatics / social communication	How language is used socially, including turn-taking, eye contact, and topic sharing.	They wait, respond, and stay on topic in play.
Fluency	The smooth flow of speech.	Speech may sound bumpy or repeated during stuttering.
Voice	How the voice sounds, including pitch, loudness, and quality.	A voice may sound hoarse or strained.
Articulation / speech sounds	How speech sounds are formed.	A child may say 'wabbit' instead of 'rabbit'.
Literacy foundations	Early skills that support reading and writing later on.	Rhyming, book awareness, listening, and sound play.

### How children learn communication

- Through relationships: warm back-and-forth interaction helps children link sounds, actions, and meaning.
- Through repetition: hearing the same words in many everyday situations builds understanding.
- Through play: pretend play, object play, songs, and turn-taking games all build language.
- Through routines: meals, bath time, getting dressed, shopping, and bedtime are full of useful language moments.
- Through being listened to: when adults pause, notice, and respond, children learn that communication works.
- Through hearing their home languages: strong exposure to family languages supports connection, identity, and learning.

### The communication pyramid

Communication is built like a pyramid. Skills at the bottom support skills at the top. If the foundation is weak, higher-level skills can be harder.

Foundation layer	Examples of skills in that layer
Attention and regulation	Being calm enough to notice, listen, watch, and stay in an interaction.
Connection and engagement	Eye contact, shared smiles, anticipation, turn-taking, and joint attention.
Understanding	Recognising words, following directions, and knowing what others mean.
Expression	Using gestures, signs, sounds, words, pictures, or devices to send messages.
Conversation and storytelling	Taking turns, explaining, asking questions, staying on topic, and telling events in order.
Literacy and learning	Listening to stories, playing with sounds, understanding print, reading, and writing.

### Factors that can affect communication development

There is no single path that explains every child. Communication development can be influenced by hearing, health, temperament, environment, developmental profile, opportunities for interaction, and how much adults respond to the child's communication attempts.

- Frequent ear infections or hearing loss
- Prematurity or medical complexity
- Developmental delay or neurodevelopmental differences
- Limited opportunities for back-and-forth interaction
- High levels of stress or inconsistent routines
- Motor or oral-motor challenges
- Differences in social communication
- A mismatch between the language used around the child and the language expected from the child

### When support helps

Support does not always mean therapy first. Sometimes the first steps are a hearing check, changes in the home environment, parent coaching, a review by an educator, or monitoring over time. The key idea is not to ignore persistent concerns.

## Part 2. Communication milestones by age

The age ranges in this section are general guides. Some skills appear a little earlier or later. The most helpful approach is to look for steady progress, not perfect performance. The tables below mix understanding, expression, play, and early literacy because communication does not develop in isolated boxes.

### Birth to 3 months

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Quiets to familiar voices	Hold face-to-face conversations with your baby
Cries differently for different needs	Pause after you speak as if taking turns
Looks at faces	Copy small sounds and facial expressions
Startles or alerts to sound	Use calm, repetitive language during care routines
Makes comfort sounds such as cooing	

### 3 to 6 months

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Smiles and vocalises during interaction	Get down at eye level
Turns toward sounds	Use songs with actions
Uses squeals, growls, and vowel-like sounds	Wait for your baby to respond
Shows excitement when a familiar person appears	Describe what your baby is looking at

### 6 to 9 months

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Babbling becomes more varied	Play simple turn-taking games
Looks for familiar people or objects when named	Name objects in daily routines
Begins using gestures like reaching or lifting arms	Use gestures with words such as bye-bye or come here
Enjoys peek-a-boo and anticipation games	Read sturdy picture books

### 9 to 12 months

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Responds to own name	Follow your child's point and label what they notice
Understands a few familiar words	Offer choices using real objects
Uses more intentional babble	Use short repeated phrases
May say first words	Celebrate any communication attempt, not just spoken words
Points, shows, gives, or looks between an object and a person	

### 12 to 18 months

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
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Understands more everyday words	Name what your child is doing
Uses gestures and some single words	Use one key word more than once in a sentence
Follows simple routine directions	Keep language simple and complete
Tries to copy sounds and words	Give your child chances to ask for help
Uses communication to protest, request, greet, and share interest	

## 18 to 24 months

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Vocabulary grows steadily	Expand what your child says
Follows one-step directions	Model action words such as go, eat, wash, jump
Points to some body parts or pictures	Offer pretend play with dolls, cars, kitchen, or animals
Starts combining two words	Read the same books often
Enjoys simple pretend play	

## 2 to 3 years

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Uses many more words	Use short conversations during play
Combines words into short sentences	Ask simple choice and what questions
Answers simple questions	Model early grammar without forcing repetition
Uses early pronouns and action words	Use books to talk about who, what, and where
Understands simple location and concept words	

## 3 to 4 years

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Speaks in longer sentences	Use story talk after outings and routines
Tells simple events	Play pretend games with roles and problems
Asks lots of questions	Teach feeling words
Joins in pretend play with others	Encourage turn-taking in conversations
Follows more complex instructions	

## 4 to 5 years

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Understands most everyday instructions	Talk about beginning, middle, and end
Uses longer and more organised sentences	Play rhyming and sound games
Retells simple stories	Ask for explanations such as 'Why do you think that happened?'
Speech is understood by most listeners	Support clear routines for listening and speaking
Begins stronger awareness of sounds in words	

## 5 to 8 years

What you may notice	Ways to support at home
Uses language for learning, friendships, and problem-solving	Talk through homework and school routines
Follows classroom instructions	Use rich vocabulary in real contexts
Explains ideas in more detail	Model how to retell events clearly
Understands jokes, rules, and simple inferences	Encourage discussion, not only short answers
Builds stronger reading and writing language	

### Important note about bilingual and multilingual children

Learning more than one language does not cause a language disorder. Some bilingual children split words across languages or show stronger skills in one language at different times. That can be normal. If a true language difficulty is present, it usually appears across languages, not only in English.

## Part 2B. Red flags and reasons to seek further review

The list below is not for self-diagnosis. It is a practical guide to help families decide when to talk to a health professional. If you are concerned, it is reasonable to ask for advice even if the child is not matching every point in the table.

Age / stage	Possible red flag	What to do next
By 12 months	Not trying to communicate using sounds, eye contact, gestures, or facial expression. Limited response to name or familiar voices.	Discuss concerns with a GP, child health nurse, or speech pathologist. Consider a hearing review if there is any doubt.
By 18 months	Very few words, limited imitation, limited response to simple spoken directions.	Arrange a hearing check and ask about a speech pathology assessment.
By 2 years	Fewer than about 50 words, not combining words, difficulty understanding simple instructions, limited pretend play.	Seek advice sooner rather than waiting several more months. Early support can reduce later difficulty.
At any age	Loss of words or social communication skills that were previously present.	This needs prompt review by a health professional.
Preschool years	Speech is very hard for unfamiliar people to understand, trouble joining conversations or play, very limited sentence growth.	Ask for a speech pathology assessment and share examples from home or preschool.
School entry	Trouble understanding classroom language, retelling events, answering questions, following multi-step directions, or learning sound-based early literacy skills.	Talk with the school and your GP. A speech pathology review may help clarify the language profile and next steps.

### Signs that should never be ignored

- Regression, meaning a loss of words, social engagement, or previously learned communication skills
- Clear signs of hearing difficulty or repeated ear infections affecting listening
- Very limited eye contact or joint attention together with other communication concerns
- Ongoing choking, coughing, or feeding concerns
- A persistently hoarse, breathy, or strained voice
- Stuttering that causes visible tension, distress, or avoidance

### Questions that can help you decide whether to seek help

- Is the child making steady progress over time?
- Can the child communicate wants, needs, feelings, and interests in a way that works in daily life?
- Do concerns happen across different settings, not only in one place?
- Does the child seem to understand less than expected for age?
- Are there any worries about hearing, attention, social connection, or play?
- Do educators, carers, or family members notice the same concerns?

## Part 3. Home strategies that build communication

Most communication growth happens during ordinary life. This means the most powerful activities are often simple and repeatable. A short daily strategy used consistently is usually more effective than a long activity used once in a while.

### 1. Follow the child's lead

Notice what the child is looking at, touching, doing, or trying to tell you.

Join their focus before changing the topic.

When a child is interested, attention is stronger and language learning is easier.

You do not always need to ask questions. Sometimes good talking starts with noticing and commenting.

### 2. Get face to face

Position yourself so the child can see your face, mouth, eyes, and gestures.

This supports attention, sound learning, and connection.

For very young children, floor play and nappy change time can be perfect moments for face-to-face interaction.

### 3. Use simple, complete language

Short sentences are easier to process than long explanations.

Keep your language just above the child's current level.

Instead of using baby talk, use real words in clear, simple sentences.

### 4. Repeat key words

Children learn by hearing the same words many times in meaningful situations.

Choose one or two useful words and repeat them naturally during the activity.

Example: During snack you might repeat eat, more, banana, open, and drink.

### 5. Pause and wait

After you speak, count silently to five or longer before speaking again.

Many children need extra processing time to respond.

A pause can create space for a look, sound, sign, gesture, word, or full sentence.

### 6. Expand and recast

Expansion means taking the child's message and adding a little more language.

If the child says dog, you might say big dog running.

Recasting means giving a correct model without criticism. If the child says him goed, you can reply yes, he went fast.

### 7. Reduce pressure

Too many questions, corrections, or requests to say it again can make communication harder.

Aim for more comments than questions.

Celebrate the message first, then model the next step.

### 8. Build communication into routines

Use the same words in the same routines so the child can predict meaning.

Routines support memory, understanding, and confidence.

Examples include bath time, dressing, meals, shopping, school drop-off, and bedtime.

## Commenting versus quizzing

Less helpful pattern	More helpful pattern	Why the second option works better
What colour is that? What shape? What's this? What's that?	You found the red car. It is going fast. Now it crashed.	It lowers pressure and gives the child a strong language model.
Say truck. Say truck. Say it again.	Truck. Big truck. The truck is coming.	Children can learn from hearing a clear model without being forced to imitate.
No, that's wrong. Say it properly.	I hear you. You want more water.	It protects confidence and keeps the interaction moving.
Too many directions in a row.	One clear direction at a time, with gesture if needed.	Clear input helps understanding and success.

## Everyday routines that are rich for language

Routine	Useful words	Interaction ideas	Possible targets
Meals and snacks	eat, drink, more, open, hot, cold, spoon	Offer small portions so the child has a reason to request more. Give choices between two foods.	Requesting, choices, action words, turn-taking
Bath time	wash, splash, in, out, wet, dry, bubbles	Play ready-set-go, pour and stop games, and body part songs.	Following directions, concepts, body words
Getting dressed	shirt, socks, on, off, pull, push, fast, slow	Pause before helping so the child can request or attempt the next step.	Sequencing, verbs, requesting help
Play with toys	go, stop, fall, build, fix, big, little	Imitate the child's play and then add a small new idea.	Joint attention, commenting, pretend play
Shopping	apple, milk, find, look, in, under, heavy	Give simple missions such as find the bananas. Talk about categories and actions.	Vocabulary, listening, concept words
Bedtime	book, turn, sleep, teddy, quiet, night	Read, sing, review the day, and talk about tomorrow.	Story language, feelings, sequencing

## Part 3B. Reading, singing, and play as communication tools

### Reading together

Shared book reading is one of the best ways to build language because it combines attention, pictures, repetition, vocabulary, listening, memory, and connection. You do not need to read every word on the page. Talking about the pictures can be just as useful.

- Choose books that match the child's interests.
- Read the same books many times. Repetition helps words stick.
- Point to pictures and name what you see.
- Pause so the child can finish a repeated phrase, point, or comment.
- Ask open questions for older children, but keep pressure low.
- Link the book to real life, such as We saw a bus like that today.

### Singing and rhymes

Songs, nursery rhymes, and rhythm games support listening, sound play, memory, and anticipation. The repeated pattern makes language easier to join in with.

- Use songs with actions such as clapping, waving, jumping, or body parts.
- Pause before a favourite word to encourage the child to fill it in.
- Repeat the same songs across the week so participation grows.
- Sing in your home language as well as English if that suits the family.

### Play-based language learning

Play creates reasons to communicate. Children request, protest, share, negotiate, imagine, plan, and retell during play. This is why play is not separate from learning. It is one of the main ways children learn communication.

Type of play	Examples	Language opportunities	Adult role
Cause-and-effect play	bubbles, pop-up toys, ball ramps	ready-set-go, more, stop, pop, turn	Create anticipation and wait
Construction play	blocks, magnetic tiles, Lego	build, on, under, fall, fix, tall, count	Model actions and problem-solving talk
Pretend play	kitchen, dolls, doctors, cars	eat, sleep, drive, help, sick, because	Join the pretend story and add ideas
Outdoor play	swings, sandpit, running games	fast, slow, up, down, dig, chase, again	Use movement words and turn-taking
Board and card games	matching games, simple rules games	my turn, your turn, win, lose, same, different	Support rule language and conversation

### Open-ended questions that invite more language

- What happened next?
- How did you make that?
- What do you think we need first?
- Why do you think that fell down?
- How can we fix it?
- Tell me about your picture.
- What was your favourite part?
- How are these two things the same or different?

## Part 4. Special considerations and common concerns

### Bilingual and multilingual development

Many families worry that two languages might confuse a child. Current guidance from major speech and language organisations does not support the idea that bilingual exposure causes a communication disorder. Children can successfully learn more than one language.

The best language for adults to use is usually the language they speak most naturally and richly. Strong models matter more than forcing a family to use a language that feels uncomfortable or limited.

A bilingual child might know some words in one language and different words in another. Total vocabulary across languages may be a better reflection of learning than counting English words only.

- Keep home languages active through play, stories, songs, and family conversations.
- Share concerns across all languages used by the child, not just English.
- Tell professionals which languages are used, by whom, and in what settings.
- Ask whether an interpreter is needed for appointments or assessments.

### Hearing and listening

Children learn language by hearing it clearly and often. If a child is not responding as expected, seems to misunderstand often, or has a history of ear infections, hearing should be considered. A hearing check is a sensible part of the pathway when communication concerns are present.

- Not turning to sound may be a sign to investigate further.
- A child who hears inconsistently may miss parts of language and appear inattentive.
- Background noise can make listening harder, especially for children with language difficulties.
- Reduce noise where possible and face the child when speaking.

### Speech sounds

Speech sound development takes time. Many young children make predictable sound errors while they are still learning. Some errors disappear naturally. Others continue past the expected age or make speech very hard to understand, in which case a speech pathologist can help.

What families may notice	What is often okay in younger children	When to get advice
The child substitutes some sounds	Some simplification is common while speech is developing	If speech remains hard to understand or progress is limited
Family members understand more than strangers do	This can happen in younger children	If unfamiliar listeners understand very little or frustration is high
The child avoids certain words	Can happen when sounds are difficult	If it affects confidence or participation

### Stuttering and fluency

It is common for some children to go through periods of bumpy speech, especially when language is growing quickly. However, ongoing stuttering, visible struggle, avoidance, or family concern should be taken seriously. Early advice can be very helpful.

- Model calm listening and do not rush the child.
- Reduce time pressure in conversations.
- Avoid telling the child to slow down or start again repeatedly.
- Seek advice if stuttering persists, worsens, or causes distress.

### Social communication

Some children know many words but still struggle with the social side of communication. This can include difficulty taking turns, reading cues, staying on topic, joining play, or understanding what another person knows or feels. These skills can also be supported and assessed.

- Model greetings, turn-taking, and repair language such as 'Can you say that another way?'
- Use role-play for friendship and problem-solving situations.
- Talk about thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in stories and real events.

## Screen use and communication

Face-to-face interaction is especially important in the early years because children learn a lot from shared attention, gestures, facial expression, and responsive conversation. Passive screen use should not replace human interaction. For very young children, everyday play and social interaction are stronger communication builders than passive viewing.

- Choose active, shared media use rather than leaving a child alone with a screen.
- Talk about what you are watching together.
- Switch some screen time for books, pretend play, music, and outdoor conversation-rich activities.

## Common myths

Myth	Better understanding
Boys just talk late, so there is no need to worry.	Some variation is normal, but persistent concerns should still be reviewed.
Two languages cause delay.	Bilingual exposure does not cause a disorder. Children can learn multiple languages.
If a child can say words, their language must be fine.	Speech production and language understanding are different skills.
Children always grow out of it.	Some do, but some need support. Waiting too long can delay help.
Therapy means something is seriously wrong.	Therapy can simply be early support, parent coaching, and practical strategies.

## Part 5. What to do if you are worried

Families often feel unsure about whether to wait, watch, or act. A good rule is this: if concerns are persistent, or if several adults share the same concern, seek advice. Asking for help is not overreacting. It is a practical step.

### First steps

- Write down what you are noticing, with examples from daily life.
- Check hearing if there is any doubt, especially with a history of ear infections or poor response to sound.
- Talk with your GP, child health nurse, preschool educator, or school teacher.
- Contact a speech pathologist for advice or an assessment.
- Take videos or notes of both strengths and concerns to show the professional.

### What happens in a speech pathology assessment

Stage	What it may include
Case history	Pregnancy and birth history if relevant, health background, hearing, development, family concerns, languages used, education setting, and goals.
Observation	Watching the child communicate during play, conversation, or structured tasks.
Understanding review	Looking at how the child follows directions, understands vocabulary, concepts, and questions.
Expression review	Looking at words, sentences, grammar, narrative, or alternative communication methods.
Speech sound review	Checking clarity, sound patterns, and how understandable the child is.
Social communication review	Looking at turn-taking, play, eye contact, topic maintenance, and interaction style.
Summary and plan	Explaining strengths, needs, goals, recommended supports, and what happens next.

### What therapy may look like

Therapy is not one single thing. Depending on the child, support may include direct therapy sessions, parent coaching, teacher support, home practice, visual supports, group work, or monitoring over time. A good plan focuses on meaningful goals that improve real-life communication.

- Building vocabulary and early sentences
- Improving understanding of directions and concepts
- Supporting speech sound clarity
- Building play skills and social communication
- Helping fluency and confidence
- Using visuals, gestures, signs, or communication devices if needed
- Coaching adults so support continues between sessions

### Questions families can ask a speech pathologist

- What are the child's current strengths?
- What are the main communication goals right now?
- What should we practise at home and how often?

- How will we know progress is happening?
- Should hearing, feeding, or other professionals also be involved?
- How can school, preschool, or support workers help in the same way?

## The role of support workers and educators

Support workers and educators can make a big difference when strategies are used consistently across the day. Their role is not to replace the speech pathologist. Their role is to create more opportunities for successful communication in real life.

- Model simple, clear language
- Use visuals and gestures where helpful
- Pause and wait for communication attempts
- Support turn-taking and play
- Record observations and progress examples
- Communicate with the family and therapy team about what is working

## Part 6. Practical activity plans

This section gives ready-to-use ideas for families, support workers, and educators. The goal is not to do every activity. Pick a few that match the child's interests, age, and current communication level.

### Birth to 12 months

Activity	How to do it	Main communication targets
Copy-cat sounds	Copy your baby's coos and babbles, then pause.	Turn-taking, sound play, attention
Peek-a-boo	Use anticipation and a repeated routine.	Joint attention, anticipation, social connection
Song with actions	Sing the same action song daily.	Listening, rhythm, word-action links
Book pointing	Point to pictures and label them.	Attention, early vocabulary
Name-and-wait	Name a person or object, then pause for a look or smile.	Listening, shared attention

Activity planning note: keep sessions short, playful, and repeatable. Ten minutes used well is often enough.

### 12 to 24 months

Activity	How to do it	Main communication targets
Choice making	Hold up two items and wait for a point, look, sign, or word.	Requesting, vocabulary
Ready-set-go	Use a short countdown before a fun action.	Anticipation, joining in
Help me open	Put favourite items in a container that needs help.	Requesting help
Farm animal play	Use toy animals and simple action words.	Nouns, verbs, pretend play
Picture books	Name, point, and repeat key words.	Word learning

Activity planning note: keep sessions short, playful, and repeatable. Ten minutes used well is often enough.

### 2 to 3 years

Activity	How to do it	Main communication targets
Toy rescue mission	Hide toys and give simple clues.	Listening, concepts, verbs
Pretend snack shop	Sell and buy pretend food.	Requesting, turn-taking, categories
Action obstacle course	Jump, crawl, push, stop, go.	Following directions, action words
Photo talk	Use family photos to talk about people and events.	Vocabulary, memory, early narrative
Laundry helper	Sort clothes by type or colour while naming actions.	Concept words, categories

Activity planning note: keep sessions short, playful, and repeatable. Ten minutes used well is often enough.

## 3 to 5 years

Activity	How to do it	Main communication targets
Story basket	Use objects from a story and retell what happened.	Sequencing, narrative
Guessing bag	Feel an item in a bag and describe it.	Describing, question language
Build and explain	Build something and explain how you made it.	Planning language, sequencing
Feelings detective	Use books and photos to identify emotions and reasons.	Emotion words, inferencing
Barrier game	Describe a picture so another person can match it.	Clear language, listening

Activity planning note: keep sessions short, playful, and repeatable. Ten minutes used well is often enough.

## 5 to 8 years

Activity	How to do it	Main communication targets
Retell challenge	Tell an event with beginning, middle, and end.	Narrative organisation
Word detective	Find new words in reading and talk about meaning.	Vocabulary depth
Problem-solving talk	Discuss what to do in everyday dilemmas.	Reasoning language
Compare and contrast	How are two items the same and different?	Concept language
Explain the rules	Teach someone how to play a game.	Sequencing, clarity, audience awareness

Activity planning note: keep sessions short, playful, and repeatable. Ten minutes used well is often enough.

## Thirty quick communication boosters

No.	Booster idea
1	Put a favourite toy in sight but out of reach so the child has a reason to communicate.
2	Offer two choices and wait before helping.
3	Use one book every night for a week and notice how participation grows.
4	Repeat one action word during outdoor play, such as jump or throw.
5	Use family photos to talk about who, what, where, and when.
6	Take turns rolling a ball and say my turn, your turn.
7	Pause before opening a snack or drink.
8	Model one new describing word each day.

9	Use songs for transitions so routines are predictable.
10	Narrate cleaning up with simple action words.
11	Make silly mistakes in play and wait for the child to notice or repair.
12	Use toy animals to act out simple problems and solutions.
13	Play hide and seek with objects and use location words.
14	Give small jobs that need listening, such as put the spoon in the sink.
15	Teach one feeling word during real moments, not only in books.
16	Ask one open question after a shared experience.
17	Use bubbles to create repeated turn-taking opportunities.
18	Play stop-go games for attention and regulation.
19	Use a visual schedule for children who benefit from extra support.
20	Model clear greetings and farewells every day.
21	After school, ask tell me one thing you did first and one thing you did last.
22	Use recipe talk to practise sequencing and measurement words.
23	Sort toys into groups and name categories.
24	Use a toy phone for pretend conversations.
25	Encourage the child to explain how a game works.
26	Build a tower and talk about planning, problems, and fixes.
27	Turn television off during some routines and replace it with talking or music.
28	Read signs and labels in the community.
29	Use waiting time in the car for naming, noticing, or retelling games.
30	Celebrate every communication attempt, including looks, gestures, signs, pictures, and devices.






### Book-sharing planner

Choose a book and plan what you will model and repeat.

Book title	Target words	Questions or comments to use	Related play idea

### School / educator communication page

Use this page to share useful strategies across settings.

Current goal	What works well	What is hard	Visual supports / prompts	Feedback from team

### Speech clarity record

This page can help identify which words or sounds are especially hard for the child.

Date	Word attempted	How it sounded	Context	Comments





## Language-rich environment checklist

Checklist item	Yes / partly / not yet	Notes or action
Adults get down to the child's level and use face-to-face interaction.		
There are regular moments of shared book reading.		
Songs and rhymes are used during routines.		
The child is given time to respond without being rushed.		
Adults comment more than they quiz.		
Visual supports are used when helpful.		
There are chances to request, choose, protest, and ask for help.		
Screens do not replace most face-to-face communication opportunities.		
Home languages are respected and encouraged.		
Communication successes are noticed and celebrated.		

## Weekly communication plan

Day	Routine	Target words / skill	Strategy	How it went
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

## Question bank for adults

Purpose	Question starter	When to use it
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Retell	What happened first?	After an outing or activity
Reasoning	Why do you think that happened?	Stories, problem-solving, social situations
Prediction	What do you think will happen next?	Books, shows, experiments
Description	Tell me about it.	Art, toys, objects, photos
Comparison	How are these the same? How are they different?	Sorting, books, real life
Feelings	How do you think they felt?	Books, friendship moments
Repair	I didn't catch that. Can you show me another way?	When a message is unclear

## Part 8. Glossary and trusted resources

### Glossary

Term	Meaning
Audiologist	A professional who assesses hearing and manages hearing-related concerns.
Joint attention	When two people focus on the same thing and know they are sharing that focus.
Narrative	Story language used to tell what happened in an organised way.
Prompt	A cue or support that helps a child respond.
Receptive language	Language that a child understands.
Expressive language	Language that a child communicates to others.
Pragmatics	The social use of communication.
Visual support	A picture, object, schedule, gesture, or written cue that supports understanding.

### Trusted resources and referral pathways

The information in this guide was shaped using established public and professional resources on communication development, child milestones, hearing and speech concerns, home language support, and early intervention. Families should always use current local service information for appointments, costs, and referral pathways.

- Speech Pathology Australia: communication milestones and finding a speech pathologist
- Healthdirect Australia: child speech development, speech pathology, and developmental milestones
- Raising Children Network: language development, communication, play, and healthy screen use
- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne: parent fact sheets on encouraging language and communication
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: developmental milestones and home activities
- CDC Learn the Signs. Act Early.: developmental milestones
- NHS: communication, play, and early speech and language support

### Final notes for Safe Hands Support

Safe Hands Support can use this guide as an education resource for families, a training reference for support workers, and a starting point for practical communication planning. It works best when it is paired with child-specific goals, consistent team communication, and referral to qualified health professionals whenever concerns are ongoing or complex.

Communication growth is rarely built by one perfect session. It is built by many repeated moments of connection. Small changes in how adults talk, wait, play, and respond can make a real difference over time.

### Reference list

Speech Pathology Australia. Communication milestones and age-based communication information.

ASHA. Developmental milestones and activities to encourage speech and language development.

CDC. Learn the Signs. Act Early. Developmental milestones.

Raising Children Network. Language development from birth through school age and healthy screen use guidance.

Healthdirect Australia. Speech development in children, speech pathology, and developmental milestones.

Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Tips to encourage language development and encouraging communication.

NHS. Help your baby learn to talk and early speech and language development guidance.

## Part 6C. Detailed communication session plans

These session plans are written so Safe Hands Support staff, families, or educators can run a simple structured activity with a clear goal. Use them flexibly. The adult's responsiveness matters more than doing every step exactly.

### Plan 1. Bubble waiting game

<b>Goal</b>	Create repeated turns and communication attempts in a highly motivating game.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Joint attention, requesting, turn-taking, early words
<b>Materials</b>	Bubbles
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Keep language short. Do not talk over the child's turn. Build excitement, then pause.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Show the closed bubble bottle and wait.</li> <li>2. Model open, more, pop, and go.</li> <li>3. Blow a few bubbles, then stop and look expectantly.</li> <li>4. Respond to any look, gesture, sign, sound, or word as a turn.</li> <li>5. Repeat many short turns rather than one long turn.</li> </ol>

### Plan 2. Object surprise bag

<b>Goal</b>	Build listening, anticipation, and single-word vocabulary.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Vocabulary, attention, object labels
<b>Materials</b>	Bag with 5 to 8 familiar objects
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Repetition is helpful. Reuse the same small object set across several days.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hide simple objects in the bag.</li> <li>2. Pull one out slowly and name it.</li> <li>3. Pause so the child can touch, point, or attempt the word.</li> <li>4. Use one short phrase for each item such as big ball or red car.</li> <li>5. Put items back and repeat.</li> </ol>

### Plan 3. Snack request routine

<b>Goal</b>	Create functional communication during a real routine.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Requesting, choices, routine words
<b>Materials</b>	Preferred snack and drink
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	The best practice happens in real life, not only at a

	table activity.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare very small portions.</li> <li>2. Hold the next portion near your face and wait.</li> <li>3. Model more, open, drink, help, and finished.</li> <li>4. Offer two choices when appropriate.</li> <li>5. Celebrate any clear communication attempt.</li> </ol>

#### Plan 4. Action toy countdown

<b>Goal</b>	Encourage joining in with predictable phrases.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Anticipation, turn-taking, early phrase completion
<b>Materials</b>	Car ramp, swing, slide, or wind-up toy
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Predictable language helps children join even before they use many words.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Set up the toy but pause before the fun part.</li> <li>2. Use ready, set, go every time.</li> <li>3. Leave the last word open for the child to join.</li> <li>4. Repeat many turns.</li> <li>5. Add stop and again when the routine is strong.</li> </ol>

#### Plan 5. Farm play language set

<b>Goal</b>	Grow nouns, action words, and simple combinations.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Vocabulary, pretend play, two-word combinations
<b>Materials</b>	Toy farm or animal figures
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Keep the set small so language repeats often.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Choose only 4 to 6 animals at first.</li> <li>2. Model animal names and actions like cow eating or pig sleeping.</li> <li>3. Use sound effects if motivating.</li> <li>4. Create simple problems such as horse stuck or sheep lost.</li> <li>5. Expand the child's message with one extra word.</li> </ol>

#### Plan 6. Body part bath routine

<b>Goal</b>	Build understanding and vocabulary during care routines.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Body words, verbs, following directions
<b>Materials</b>	Bath time items
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Routines help children learn because the language is predictable and meaningful.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use the same song or phrase each bath.</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Wash one body part at a time and name it.</li> <li>3. Pause before washing the next one.</li> <li>4. Add action words like wash, splash, pour, dry.</li> <li>5. Finish with a simple review.</li> </ol>
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## Plan 7. Dressing step-by-step

<b>Goal</b>	Support listening and action words during self-care.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Action words, sequencing, understanding
<b>Materials</b>	Daily clothes and shoes
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Keep the demand realistic. Success matters more than speed.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lay out two clothing items.</li> <li>2. Use clear one-step directions such as socks on.</li> <li>3. Model pull, push, on, off, in, out.</li> <li>4. Pause before helping.</li> <li>5. Praise effort and communication.</li> </ol>

## Plan 8. Family photo talk

<b>Goal</b>	Build names, verbs, and simple retell skills.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Names, verbs, memory, narrative
<b>Materials</b>	Printed or phone photos
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Photos are powerful because they connect language to personal meaning.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Choose photos of recent familiar events.</li> <li>2. Name people and actions in the photo.</li> <li>3. Ask tell me about this for older children.</li> <li>4. Model time words like today, yesterday, then.</li> <li>5. Link the photo to a real memory.</li> </ol>

## Plan 9. Toy rescue clues

<b>Goal</b>	Practise listening and location words.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Concepts, listening, following directions
<b>Materials</b>	Favourite toys and hiding spots
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Use gesture first if needed, then fade support.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hide toys in easy places.</li> <li>2. Give one clue at a time using in, on, under, behind.</li> <li>3. Let the child search and celebrate the find.</li> <li>4. Swap turns so the child hides a toy too.</li> <li>5. Increase the clue length slowly.</li> </ol>

## Plan 10. Picture book commenting routine

<b>Goal</b>	Build vocabulary and listening with low pressure.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Vocabulary, shared attention, early literacy
<b>Materials</b>	Favourite picture book
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	You do not need to read every word. Interaction matters.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read slowly and point to key pictures.</li> <li>2. Use comments more than questions.</li> <li>3. Repeat target words across pages.</li> <li>4. Pause at repeated lines.</li> <li>5. Link one idea from the book to real life.</li> </ol>

## Plan 11. Build-and-break tower

<b>Goal</b>	Create fun turns for action words and requesting.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Turn-taking, verbs, requesting
<b>Materials</b>	Blocks
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Keep the pace lively and playful. Predictability helps learning.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Build a tower together.</li> <li>2. Use up, on, more, fall, crash, again.</li> <li>3. Take turns adding one block each.</li> <li>4. Pause before the crash moment.</li> <li>5. Repeat the full routine several times.</li> </ol>

## Plan 12. Pretend shop

<b>Goal</b>	Build requesting, describing, and social language.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Functional phrases, categories, social exchange
<b>Materials</b>	Toy or real food items, basket, pretend money
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Role play lets adults model useful real-world language repeatedly.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Set up a simple shop.</li> <li>2. Model I want, I need, more, please, thank you.</li> <li>3. Ask what do you need for older children.</li> <li>4. Swap cashier and customer roles.</li> <li>5. Sort foods by category or colour afterward.</li> </ol>

## Plan 13. Obstacle course directions

<b>Goal</b>	Build listening, sequencing, and action language.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Following directions, verbs, sequencing
<b>Materials</b>	Cushions, tunnel, tape, chairs

<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Movement often improves engagement for active children.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create 3 to 5 simple actions.</li> <li>2. Model jump, crawl, go under, stop, turn.</li> <li>3. Give one step at first, then two or three.</li> <li>4. Let the child lead and direct you as well.</li> <li>5. Add time words first, next, last.</li> </ol>

#### Plan 14. Feelings with story characters

<b>Goal</b>	Teach emotion words and perspective-taking.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Emotion words, inferencing, social communication
<b>Materials</b>	Books or picture cards
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Emotion teaching works best when linked to real contexts too.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Choose a clear social story or familiar character.</li> <li>2. Name facial expressions and body clues.</li> <li>3. Ask how do you think they feel and why for older children.</li> <li>4. Link the emotion to a real life example.</li> <li>5. Practise calming or problem-solving language.</li> </ol>

#### Plan 15. Barrier drawing game

<b>Goal</b>	Improve clear spoken language and listening accuracy.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Descriptive language, repair strategies, listening
<b>Materials</b>	Two simple matching pictures or drawing materials
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Start very simple. Increase detail only when success is high.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sit so partners cannot see each other's picture.</li> <li>2. One person describes what to draw or place.</li> <li>3. The other follows the directions.</li> <li>4. Compare at the end and talk about what helped.</li> <li>5. Swap roles.</li> </ol>

#### Plan 16. Guessing bag descriptions

<b>Goal</b>	Grow describing words and question language.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Adjectives, categories, inferencing
<b>Materials</b>	Bag with common objects
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Give word banks if needed instead of expecting perfect independent descriptions.

<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Put one object in the bag at a time.</li> <li>2. The child feels it without looking.</li> <li>3. Model describing words like soft, hard, long, round.</li> <li>4. Guess the object together.</li> <li>5. Turn it into a category game for older children.</li> </ol>
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## Plan 17. Retell the day

<b>Goal</b>	Strengthen narrative organisation for older children.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Narrative, sequencing, detail
<b>Materials</b>	No materials needed or use photos
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Do not turn it into an interrogation. Keep it conversational.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Choose one event from the day.</li> <li>2. Use prompts: first, then, after that, last.</li> <li>3. Help the child include who, where, what happened, and how it ended.</li> <li>4. Model a clear retell if needed.</li> <li>5. Write or draw the event afterwards.</li> </ol>

## Plan 18. Explain the game

<b>Goal</b>	Build language for teaching and organising ideas.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Sequencing, clarity, audience awareness
<b>Materials</b>	Any simple game
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Explaining to others is a strong language task for school-age children.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ask the child to teach a game to another person.</li> <li>2. Prompt with what do we need first and what happens next.</li> <li>3. Support order words and rule language.</li> <li>4. Practise again after the game.</li> <li>5. Reflect on which explanation was easiest to follow.</li> </ol>

## Plan 19. Category clean-up

<b>Goal</b>	Use tidy-up time to build concept language.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Categories, comparison, reasoning
<b>Materials</b>	Toys or household items
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	This turns a routine task into a language-rich concept game.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pick two categories such as animals and cars</li> </ol>

	<p>or red and blue.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Sort while naming the group.</li> <li>3. Ask older children to explain the rule.</li> <li>4. Use same, different, belongs with, and because.</li> <li>5. Change the sorting rule and repeat.</li> </ol>
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## Plan 20. Problem-and-fix talk

<b>Goal</b>	Support flexible thinking and explanatory language.
<b>Communication targets</b>	Problem-solving, reasoning, explanatory language
<b>Materials</b>	Broken or tricky toy setup, pretend scenario cards
<b>Adult coaching tips</b>	Children often need models for how to explain reasoning, not just the answer.
<b>Steps</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create a small problem like a toy trapped or missing piece.</li> <li>2. Ask what is the problem.</li> <li>3. Brainstorm two or three solutions.</li> <li>4. Try one and talk about the result.</li> <li>5. Review what worked best and why.</li> </ol>

## Part 6D. Goal banks for planning support

These goal banks are not formal therapy goals, but they can help families and support workers write simple practical targets for everyday support.

### Early interaction goals

- Looks to adult during a shared activity
- Takes at least three back-and-forth turns in a game
- Uses a gesture, sign, sound, or word to continue a routine
- Shows joint attention by looking between an object and another person
- Waits briefly for a turn in a familiar game

### Understanding goals

- Follows one familiar direction without gesture
- Follows two-step directions in a routine
- Understands common action words
- Understands basic location words like in, on, under
- Responds to simple who, what, where questions

### Expressive language goals

- Uses single words more often across routines
- Combines two words for requests or comments
- Uses action words in play
- Uses short sentences to tell needs
- Retells a simple event with adult support

### Social communication goals

- Greets familiar people with support
- Takes turns in play and conversation
- Stays on one topic for several turns
- Asks for clarification when confused
- Uses feeling words in real situations

### School-age language goals

- Answers questions with enough detail
- Explains steps in order
- Understands and uses because
- Compares and contrasts items or events
- Uses story structure with beginning, middle, and end








### Emotion word planner

Use this page to introduce new feeling words.

Emotion word	Picture / cue	Real life example	How we will model it




### Question prompt card sheet

Use these to prepare prompts before a shared activity.

Activity	Open question	Comment to model	Follow-up prompt

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Progress review page

Use this each month to reflect on change.

Date	What improved	What is still hard	What helped most	Next priority

## Part 8B. Frequently asked questions

### My child understands a lot but does not talk much. Does that matter?

Yes, it can matter, but it depends on the full picture. Some children have stronger understanding than expression and still make steady progress. Others need support because speaking is not keeping up enough for daily communication.

### Should I make my child repeat words correctly?

It is usually better to model the correct form naturally rather than insist on repetition. Too much pressure can reduce confidence. Clear models plus many chances to hear and use language work well.

### What if my child gets frustrated before speaking?

Respond to the message first. Accept gestures, signs, pictures, or devices as real communication. Then model the next spoken or language step if appropriate.

### Do tablets and videos help language?

Some digital tools can be useful when used together with an adult, but passive viewing should not replace responsive face-to-face interaction, especially in the early years.

### Can support happen only in therapy sessions?

No. Most progress comes from regular practice across the week in everyday routines. Therapy often works best when adults around the child use the same helpful strategies.

### What if the child uses gestures instead of words?

Gestures are a strength, not a problem. They show communication intent. Adults can respond to the gesture and model a word or phrase alongside it.

### Should we stop using our home language if the child is delayed?

Usually no. Families should generally keep using the language they speak most comfortably and naturally, while sharing concerns with professionals across all languages.

### How much home practice is enough?

Short, frequent, realistic practice is usually best. A few minutes across everyday routines often works better than long formal drills.

### What if the child refuses an activity?

Follow interest. A useful activity is one that creates engagement, not conflict. Change the materials, shorten the task, or shift to a routine-based opportunity instead.

### Can school-age children still benefit from speech and language support?

Yes. Older children can benefit with vocabulary, comprehension, narrative, social communication, speech clarity, literacy-related language, and classroom participation.

## Appendix. Communication examples by setting

### At home

- Kitchen time can build requesting, describing, and sequencing.
- Laundry time can build sorting, categories, and action words.
- Bedtime can build story retell, emotion talk, and review of the day.

### In the car

- Play naming games, category games, and simple retell games.
- Talk about what you see first, next, and last on the journey.
- Use travel time for low-pressure conversation instead of only passive entertainment.

### At the park

- Model movement words like climb, swing, push, stop, and fast.
- Create turn-taking games and social opportunities.
- Talk about risk, rules, and problem-solving in simple language.

### At the shops

- Give find-and-get missions.
- Use category, colour, size, and number words naturally.
- Practise greeting, asking, and thanking in real-life contexts.

### During support sessions

- Start with regulation and interest, not demands.
- Use the child's favourite materials to build interaction.
- Leave time for waiting, repair, and spontaneous communication rather than constant instruction.

#### Example 1. Late talking toddler

A toddler uses a few words, points often, and understands many daily routines. Adults focus on choices, waiting, repeated book reading, and routine words across meals and bath time. Progress is tracked monthly.

#### Example 2. Preschooler with unclear speech

A preschool child talks often but unfamiliar listeners understand only part of the message. Adults reduce pressure, model clear target words, and coordinate with speech pathology for sound-specific support.

#### Example 3. Child with strong words but weak social communication

A child knows many labels but struggles with turn-taking and staying on topic. Support focuses on role play, friendship scripts, visual supports, and conversation repair.

#### Example 4. School-age child with narrative difficulty

A student knows facts but struggles to explain events in order. Adults use first-next-then-last frameworks, visual organisers, and repeated retell practice with real school tasks.

## Appendix B. Extended planning and handover pages

These extra pages are included so the guide can also work as a practical workbook for Safe Hands Support teams and families.

### Communication passport

Use this summary page to explain how the child communicates best.

Name	How I communicate	What helps me understand	What makes communication harder	My interests and motivators	My current goals

### Sensory and regulation supports

Record the supports that help the child stay ready to communicate.

Support or strategy	When used	Signs it helps	Things to avoid	Notes






### Preschool or school communication summary

Share practical information with the education team.

Strengths	Main concerns	Helpful strategies	Visual supports	Current goals	Feedback

### Vocabulary target planner

Plan words to repeat across different routines in the week.

Target word	Routine 1	Routine 2	Routine 3	How the child used it




### Safe Hands Support follow-up notes

Use this space for next actions, referral details, favourite strategies, or reminders for family and team members.

Consistency matters. Small repeated moments of talking, waiting, reading, playing, and responding are often what create the biggest communication gains over time.

Priority action	Who will do it	Review date