Teaching Assistant

Communication & Professional Relationships with Children, Young Individuals & Adults.
Explain how different social, professional and cultural contexts may affect relationships and the way people communicate

Most of us are fluent in our own primary language, and also in the use of body language within our primary culture. The way we communicate within these parameters tends to change, depending on the situation. This is how we adapt, whether it is to different people, different scenarios, or different roles that we play.

Different types of communication.
Did you know?

The way we communicate, and how effectively we do it, is quite dependent on our ability to produce words that describe what we need. Take feelings for example. A child who does not know the word ‘indignant’, when passed over or blamed for something unfairly, will be unable to accurately identify his or her feelings on the matter without that word. They might use the word 'mad' or 'cross' instead, but it wouldn't be so accurate. Vocabulary is really important for effective communication, but it is also one of the areas that children who have communication difficulties especially struggle with. Helping them increase their vocabulary is extremely valuable.

Social situations

In many social contexts, our communication is unplanned and spontaneous. It is often governed by how we feel about the person or people we are talking to, how we feel about the situation or job in hand, and how others react to us. By using good communication techniques, showing respect, listening to others, and so on, we can influence relationships to remain positive, even in situations when we are not entirely happy with how things are played out.

Professional situations

Not all communication is unplanned, however. Schools often have a lot of planned communication in formal settings, as well as the unplanned type. For example, your involvement with meetings with parents and carers, or other professionals may require some specific messages that you need to deliver. By planning what you want to say, you can make it easier to be clear and efficient in your communication in these types of context.

In addition, not all communication is verbal and direct; we also communicate in writing, whether that is in emails to other professionals, feedback comments on a pupil's work, and so on. Because writing is not backed up with body language in the same way that verbal communication is, it can be very easy to miscommunicate and be unclear in emails and letters.

With pupil feedback, some primary schools now have a feedback system using rubber stamps that indicate different types of commentary in a consistent way across all classes. This marking policy at Kings Hill Primary School is a good example of this type of thing. The stamps mean that there is less opportunity for misunderstandings to happen through written feedback.

The way we communicate in emails should be different, depending on whether it is a social situation or a professional one. For example, in the latter, professional language should be used, bias and judgement should be avoided, and points should be made clearly. In social situations, such as emailing peers or friends, all these things can help, but they are not so necessary.
Although body language is not present for written communications, there are other factors that can come into play around this. For example the speed at which you respond to someone's email can either convey interest or a lack of interest. A quick response - even if it is to inform them that you will find out more information and let them know - can tell them you think their email is important. It is a simple action that conveys respect and attentiveness.

**Different cultural contexts**

Communication can be harder sometimes when talking or writing to someone from a different cultural context from your own. This is because cultures have their own homogeneity; over thousands of years they build up certain ways of behaviour, ways to communicate, and their own taboos around both behaviour and communication.

For example, in some cultures, it is considered disrespectful for children to directly address their elders. In others, certain words are considered to be terribly rude. For example, some South East Asian cultures consider the word 'no' to be highly disrespectful, and people may use euphemisms to avoid using it. An example is the Japanese businessman who, whenever asked to do something he didn't intend to do, would say 'I'll see what I can do'. Thus, he used a positive response for a negative connotation.

Most schools in the UK will have children who live in different cultural contexts to the majority, and it is important to have some working knowledge of the main cultural influences and ways of behaving. For example, in some Asian families, the main decision-maker for aspects of education may be the male head of the family, so writing to the mother and asking for her permission may not be the right way to communicate.

Additionally, you should be aware that the use of body language in English is not always the same in every language; those whose primary language is not English may have difficulty reading English body language, or may even be offended by it. For example, in some cultures, it is disrespectful to look someone directly in the eyes when talking to them; in English, this type of action conveys trustworthiness and genuineness.

Although it may seem like a bit of a mire in which you can get yourself stuck, you shouldn't approach communication with people from different cultures with trepidation. The best way to arm yourself for future interactions is to learn as much as you can about the different cultures with which you will come into contact. The more you know, the better you will communicate.