Teaching Assistant

Communication & Professional Relationships with Children, Young Individuals & Adults.
Explain the skills needed to communicate with children and young people

Effective communication with anyone, whether children and young people, or adults, requires a certain skill set. You are likely to already have most of the skills that are needed for this, but often the use of these skills is dependent on whether or not you are comfortable and familiar with the situation.

Reflecting on how well you do at these different techniques can help you understand better what happens when it all goes wrong, and can also shed light on why your communication isn’t effective sometimes.

Part of effective communication is in the conveyance of courtesy and respect, especially in a school situation, because these attitudes help children feel valued and can add to their self-worth and confidence, which in turn helps them respond and engage fully in the communication.
Improving your own active listening skills to help pupils develop theirs

Body language has to match up with verbal language, or the communicator runs the risk of coming across as ungenuine and uninterested. If, when you are listening, you are watching something out of the window, or if you simply don't stop the activity you are doing in order to listen, you send the message that you are not interested.

Delivering attentive body language, where you are facing the pupil when they speak, and giving them appropriate direct eye contact, backs up the message that you are listening. In addition, active listening techniques include things like asking little questions that move the child's story along, and repeating aspects back or paraphrasing them to ensure understanding, for example, 'So let me get this straight: when you went to the park, there was a gang of big dogs playing by themselves?'. This type of supportive active listening can really help the other person move the conversation along, whether they are a child or an adult.

Developing the confidence to speak

Some children are not used to being asked by adults what they think, and the lack of opportunities to express their opinions, emotions and thoughts can sometimes lead to a severe lack of confidence. Expressing themselves at school may not therefore be second nature, and sometimes giving them time to get used to the idea of speaking out is all that is needed to help them feel comfortable enough to do so.

Ensuring that pupils are given enough time to form their thoughts and respond to stimuli is an important part of your role in supporting their learning. It all ties in with delivering courtesy and respect, not rushing them, and not expecting an answer within a time-frame that is just relevant to you and your needs, but that is comfortable and doable for theirs.

Using non-verbal communication generally to improve communication

Smiling at someone, even if they are angry, can reduce tension and help you present yourself as helpful, interested, and non-aggressive. Reacting in a positive way, which can sometimes mean turning a negative situation around and suggesting a positive outcome or way forward, is just as important.

Body language when speaking to a child should be specific to the individual child and the situation; for example, a small child may feel more comfortable if an adult bends or crouches down to them; or if the child sits on a seat that raises them up.

Feeding back and reacting to children's communication
As mentioned above, part of the active listening skill set is to repeat or paraphrase the things that pupils say to you. One reason this is particularly helpful in school situations is that many very young children may still make grammatically incorrect verbal statements. “I eated my dinner,” is a good example of this, where the past tense of the verb in English can be ‘eaten’ or ‘ate’. It is possible to correct a child’s grammar without making them feel embarrassed, just by paraphrasing what they have said to you. So, in reaction to ‘I eated my dinner’, you might say, ‘You've eaten your dinner? Well done!’

By reacting directly to the child, commenting or adding something to the discussion, you feedback more information than you realise that can help them become more effective communicators for the future.

**Keeping the interest going by being interested yourself**

Conversations are maintained by the roles of encoder and decoder. The person speaking encodes the information; the person listening decodes what is being said. One way to decode more accurately is by questioning the communicator, asking what they mean by something or requesting more information. Responding in this way makes for more interesting conversations (from both points of view) and can also help build the pupil's confidence.

These are the norms of conversation, and children really only learn these through experience of doing them. Acting as an enabler of communication, allowing pupils to feel confident and relaxed so that even if they get something wrong, that experience doesn't stop them from participating in something else, is a great part of your role and the lessons learned here will go with pupils throughout their lives.

Encouraging children to convey their ideas, and responding to them in a way that draws out further information around those ideas, helps to cement the idea of two-way communication, otherwise school runs the risk of becoming an environment where there is mainly a flow of one-way instructions.