Communication Through Nature Play
Introduction

Play in nature is a powerful vehicle for developing communication in young children. It offers rich opportunities to interact with others and make meaning from the world around them.



Something to Talk About

So why does play, specifically play in nature, support the development of speech and language so effectively? Studies have shown that high quality environments lead to high quality speech (Richardson, 2019) and that outdoor natural environments, such as a nursery garden, are the most conducive to developing communication. This is related to the stimulating, seasonally changing, sensory nature of a natural space.

It is also due to the interactions with available adults and peers. Essentially, there needs to be something interesting to fascinate a child – from the way the light plays through dappled leaves to the wonderful squelch of a muddy puddle. High quality environments have things to explore, to talk about, and to be curious about. Crucially, they also have people to engage with; people who will start with that fascination, and take the time to explore alongside the child.

Putting Speech into Context

- Meaning comes from context. When we learn a new piece of vocabulary in its context, it allows us to attach the word to an experience; strengthening our memory and recall.
- You can be told the word ‘dog’ and may be able to mimic the sound of the word, but actually meeting a dog brings the word to life and allows you to map this vocabulary onto your understanding of the world around you.

Variety

Spaces which offer a variety of natural textures, surfaces and materials support the development of speech and language as children make discoveries and begin to ask questions. This won't initially be through words, so we need to be aware of children's actions and emotions, which give clues to children's fascinations and curiosities. By always starting with what engages and interests the child, we can begin to offer the variety they require. If your children seem disinterested or unsure, try adding a new surface to your space and see how they respond.

Sensory

Offering sensory experiences provides the opportunity to use lots of rich, descriptive language. Water, sand, and mud-play will be at the core of most nursery provision and are an excellent way to extend natural play. Considering your spaces through a sensory lens can help you create more opportunities. Are there soft grasses, nobbly stumps, smooth boulders or crunchy leaves? Are there things to engage the whole body and interact with?





Novelty

Playing in natural spaces also provides the opportunity for new and unusual experiences. Consider the joy of play on a snow day or lying in the long grass cloud-gazing on a mild day. These seasonally changing experiences inspire new fascinations, which need a new set of words to describe them.

Communication Through Nature Play
Setting the Foundations

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The ShREC Approach

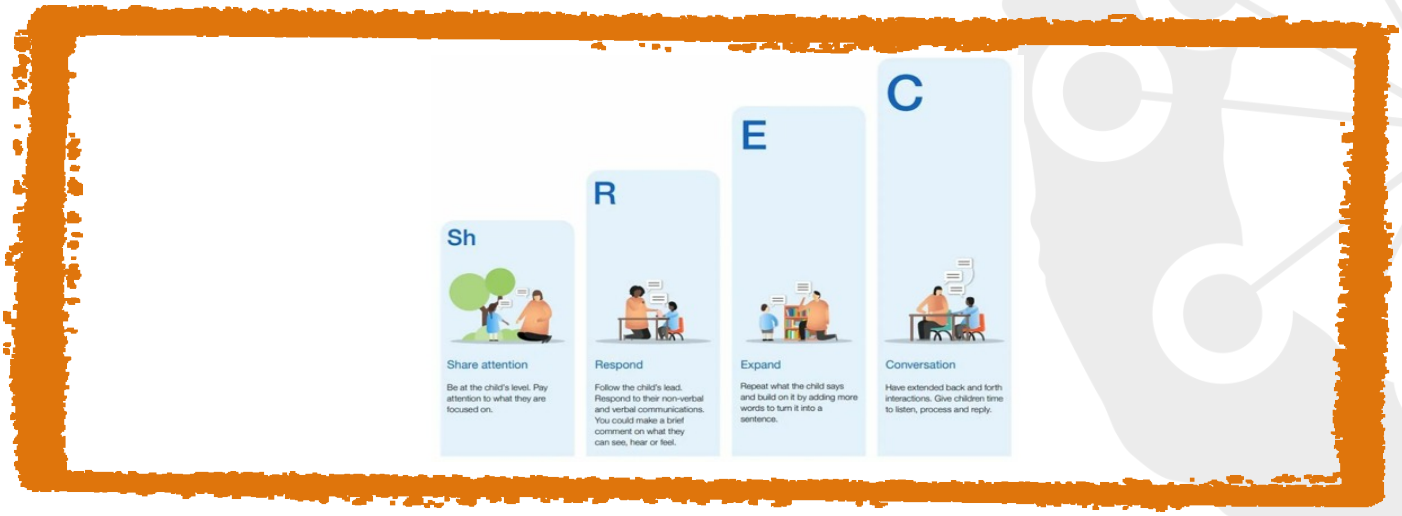
Share attention

Tuning in and showing genuine interest in what a young child is focused on lets them know that you value and want to spend time with them.

Getting down to the child's level and engaging in their choice of activity provides a crucial opportunity to pay attention to what they look at, what they do, and what they say. Sensitively joining in with a child's play motivates them to communicate with you.

Respond

A child is a unique individual. Adaptive, attuned responses should be sensitive, supportive and stimulating. Educators should warmly acknowledge children's verbal and non-verbal communication. Non-verbal responses may include eye contact, looking expectantly, nodding or smiling. Verbal responses may include narrating what the child is doing or commenting on what they can see, hear, or feel.



Expand

The ‘back and forth’ rally of engagement is getting underway; the educator and child are sharing attention, with the educator responsively following the child’s lead. This is where modelling and scaffolding begins, with the educator pitching their language just above the level of the child. If a child gives a one-word response such as ‘dog’, we should expand on what they say. Educators can do this by repeating and building on this utterance by adding a few more words (‘Yes, it’s a dog. A small, brown dog’). This helps children to use more complex utterances.

Conversation

The goal is to develop sustained back-and-forth conversations that involve many turns. The beauty and power of conversation is that it offers children an opportunity to practise talking and to receive feedback from an adult.To encourage rich back-and-forth conversations comment more; question less. When used sparingly, questions can be useful to cue turn-taking during conversation, especially ‘Wh’ (who, what, where, when) and open questions.





Are We Listening?

According to the National Deaf Children’s Society, 1 in 5 Pre-School children in the UK have glue ear at any one time. It is vitally important, then, to make sure children can see our faces during interactions so they can tune in to us and so that we can check for understanding.

Communication Through Nature Play
Reflecting on Experiences

Staff often find that immersing a child in nature unlocks their language. Children who say little inside the setting begin to make new connections and feel freer to express themselves outdoors.



ShREC Outdoors

Getting down to the child's level to share attention outdoors may require some forward planning. Do staff have suitable clothing so they can kneel or sit next to where the children are playing? Are there places to perch, such as stumps or stones, so staff are not towering over the children?
Responding to children's interests outdoors may also require us to temper our personal reactions so that we 'warmly acknowledge' children's interests in slugs and snails, rainy days or windy weather. We can still be ourselves with our own preferences and phobias, but we must recognise our influence on the children we work with and the power of our words in shaping their experiences. Try calling it a 'lovely, rainy day' the next time and see how the children respond. Have bug pots available so that staff can allow children to explore minibeasts without having to face their own fear of spiders.

Personalisation and Choice

There are thousands of ways to communicate and connect –be it through speech, sign language, touch, movement, gesture, sound, pictures, objects or electronic aids. Take time to consider which methods will be most appropriate for your children's needs and whether these may need to be adapted for use outdoors. You may need new symbols for outdoor areas or activities, waterproof cases for electronics or laminated resources.

Transitions to Outdoors

You may have an easily accessed outdoor space with free-flow play throughout the day or you may have to journey through several doors and corridors, requiring carefully timetabled outdoor sessions. Whatever your situation you will need to consider t

how do children communicate that they would like to go outdoors?
Carefully assess this process and how easy it is for children to indicate their preferences. In spaces with high windows, or where your garden is far away, children may just assume that outdoor play is not available to them.

One way to counter this and offer more genuinely child-led options is to support children to communicate their play needs. Do you need to use objects of reference to associate with outdoors, such as a welly boot, so that children can bring you a welly when they want to go outside? Could you add photographs to the back of the door leading outside so that children can point to go out? Perhaps there are symbols on staff lanyards or at the garden door, which children can show staff to communicate their choices.





Nature Play Enhances Communication Skills

Outdoor play in all weathers and in natural environments, with natural materials introduces children to a wonderful array of new language, places it in memorable contexts, and offers an enhanced level of freedom to explore and investigate, to make meaning, and understand the world around us.

Communication Through Nature Play
Further thinking & Reading

You can enhance your outdoor space and practice further by considering the speech and language development opportunities each area affords and making simple adaptations.



Malaguzzi – The Hundred Languages of Children

'The Hundred Languages' is a term used by the educators of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The children use one hundred languages (and more) to construct concepts and consolidate their understanding of the world around them, both indoors and outdoors.
The children in Reggio Emilia schools are often asked to explain their symbolic representations. The educators see the process of explanation as extremely valuable and an important part of the learning process.
They believe the explanation of the children's symbolic representations is an opportunity for the children to clarify their ideas. The Hundred Languages of children are described as being:

Expressive, Communicative, Symbolic, Cognitive, Ethical, Metaphorical, Logical, Imaginative, and Relational.

National Guidance to Explore

- England - Help for early years providers : Interactions
- Scotland - how-can-we-create-a-language-and-communication-supportive-environment-in-elc-settings.pdf
- Wales - Supporting the Development of Speech, Language and Communication in the Early Years

Froebel – Additional Languages

If you enter an early years setting in the UK it is very likely that you will come across a large number of young children who are growing up speaking languages other than English at home. Interdisciplinary research combining cognitive science, psycholinguistics and psychology, has shown that learning more than one language from a young age helps the development of many cognitive, linguistic, metacognitive and metalinguistic skills that are transferred to children's learning (Sorace, 2019).

Froebelian principles promote educational approaches in which children's intrinsic motivation and their active role in their own learning help them to flourish in rich learning environments (Bruce, 2012). Children who are learning English as an additional language bring with them their linguistic background, identity, and cultural assets as well as the funds of knowledge they have accumulated during their early experiences (Kelly, 2010). Consider which strategies might support additional language speakers out-doors.





A Health Approach

Developing the muscles for speech is an important step to becoming more articulate. Sometimes a simple move, such as taking an occassional snack outdoors can encourage a reluctant eater to engage with eating. Chewing more solid foods builds the muscles for speech.

Communication Through Nature Play
Next Steps

You can enhance your outdoor space and practice further by considering the speech and language development opportunities each area affords and making simple adaptations.



Using Spaces

Mud Areas

Consider the placement of workbenches within your mud kitchen. Often these are designed with a high back which the child faces.

Having a mud kitchen 'island' instead which can be approached from both sides offers far more opportunity for interaction between children and allows more children to access the space at the same time. Add small loose parts to expand role play possibilities.

Sand and Water Areas

Similarly, in sand areas, a walk in/sit-in sandpit offers far more play opportunities and reasons to talk than a waist level sand tray. Using the whole body to engage with this natural material often leads to deeper, more sustained play and interaction as children's thinking becomes visible. Adding water changes the properties of the sand and introduces new language and vocabulary around STEM concepts.

Seating Areas

Consider having seating which can be moved and grouped according to children's needs. Fixed linear benches are less sociable than circles or horseshoes so may be best for areas designed for quiet reflection rather than conversation. Stumps, logs, portable sit mats or picnic rugs can all provide sociable gathering and resting spaces, where eye contact and face-to-face interaction can be facilitated more readily.

Loose Parts

Loose parts play outdoors offers a multitude of ways to develop speech and language. Natural materials offer seasonal variety, complexity, and open-endedness that stimulate curiosity, imagination, and problem-solving skills far more effectively than their manmade equivalents. Audit your loose parts to check that you have a wide variety of scales (small, medium and large items) to encourage more complex combinations and story-telling. Use loose-parts obstacle courses to explore positional language, instructional language, directional language, turn-taking and conflict resolution.

Growing and Planting Areas

Enhance speech and language opportunities by planting vegetables like beans and turnips, which have easy links to stories (Jack & the Beanstalk, The Enormous Turnip). Children who struggle with self-regulation often appreciate the deep work involved in gardening; digging, lifting, and shifting. This calming activity can create the right conditions for unhurried speech and expression.





Expressive Arts

Sound dissipates outdoors far more easily than indoors so get expressive! Singing, chant-ing, and dancing in the rain should all be encouraged as children learn how to use their voices in different ways for specific purposes.