

## Working Together

Supporting positive communication between education professionals and parents and carers of children with additional support needs

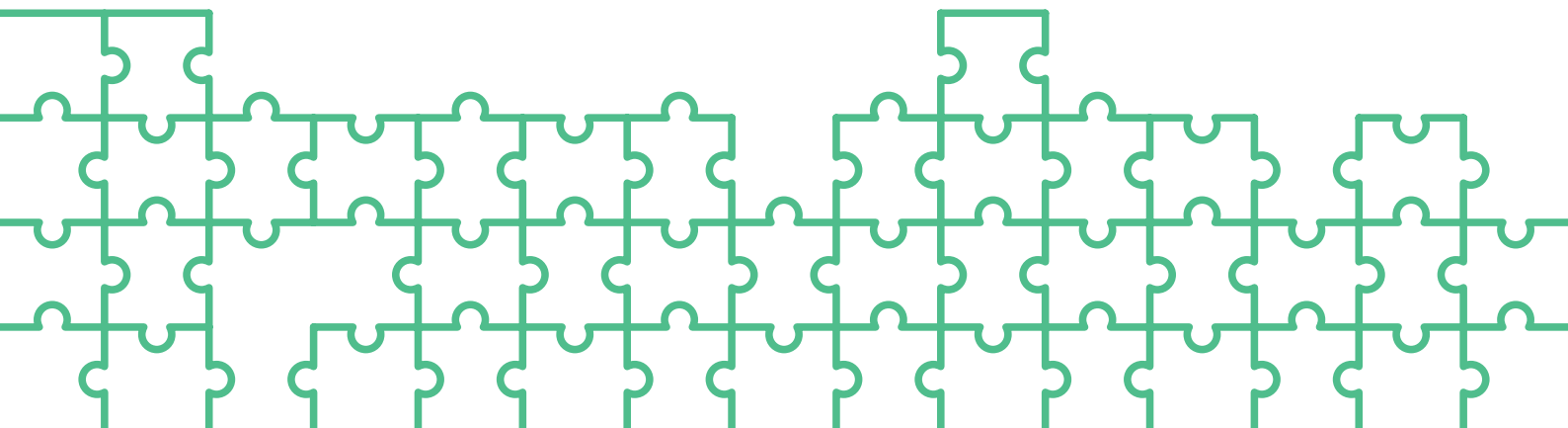


### Module 4

## The key elements of effective communication with parents

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*In this section you will explore your own communication style and consider the key elements of successful communication with parents of children with additional support needs*





## Background

*“Although there are sometimes bumps along the way, we’ve got into a good rhythm of staying in touch and sharing information with staff at the nursery. It feels like we are working together as a team”*

Parent

### Why is effective communication important?

It is impossible to achieve the best outcomes for children if you are working in isolation. The relationship between educators and parents of children with additional support needs should be viewed as a partnership – everyone is working towards a common goal, with the child’s learning and individual needs at the centre.

As with all partnership working, effective communication is essential.

Effective communication isn’t just about information exchange, it is a skill that prevents misunderstandings, breaks down barriers and can help build positive and resilient relationships.

Families tell us that good communication fosters an atmosphere of transparency and openness and can build trust between parents and professionals. It also helps to ensure that families feel included and respected, and that they understand how and why decisions are made.

Good communication can also help a practitioner to understand a child’s needs. Remember, parents know their child best – good communication can unlock valuable information that can help you to recognise and support a child’s strengths.

## Exercise



**Film:** Listen to this parent (who is also a Support for Learning Teacher) explain why supportive relationships between parents and school staff are so important



Duration:  
2 mins 15 secs



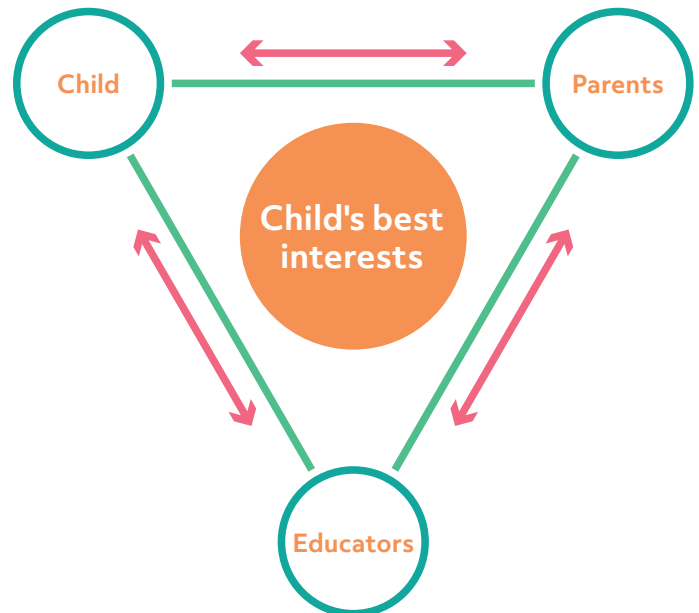
## Evidence & information

### The Communication Triangle

The best learning environment for children is when they feel safe, respected, and listened to, and their individual learning needs are placed at the centre of everything.

We know that working in partnership with families is crucial to supporting children with additional support needs, and there is a clear commitment to progressing this in the **Additional Support for Learning Action Plan**.

It is often helpful to think of communication between educators, parents and children as a communication triangle, with regular communication between everyone involved. This communication includes active listening, sharing views and experiences, explaining processes, examining support options, and providing clear information.



All partners in this triangle have valuable input, and the key to supporting good partnership working is to recognise everyone as equal partners and to facilitate a good flow of communication.

### Exercise



Consider the [communication triangle diagram](#) and sketch out your own version.

Write some notes about what type of information and communication flows between each of the partners in this triangle. It may help you to think about a specific family you are currently working with.

Things to consider:



How is information communicated?

What information is shared and received?

How often does this communication happen?

Are these communications essential, important, or simply nice to have?

Once you have completed the activity, continue reading the information on the following page.

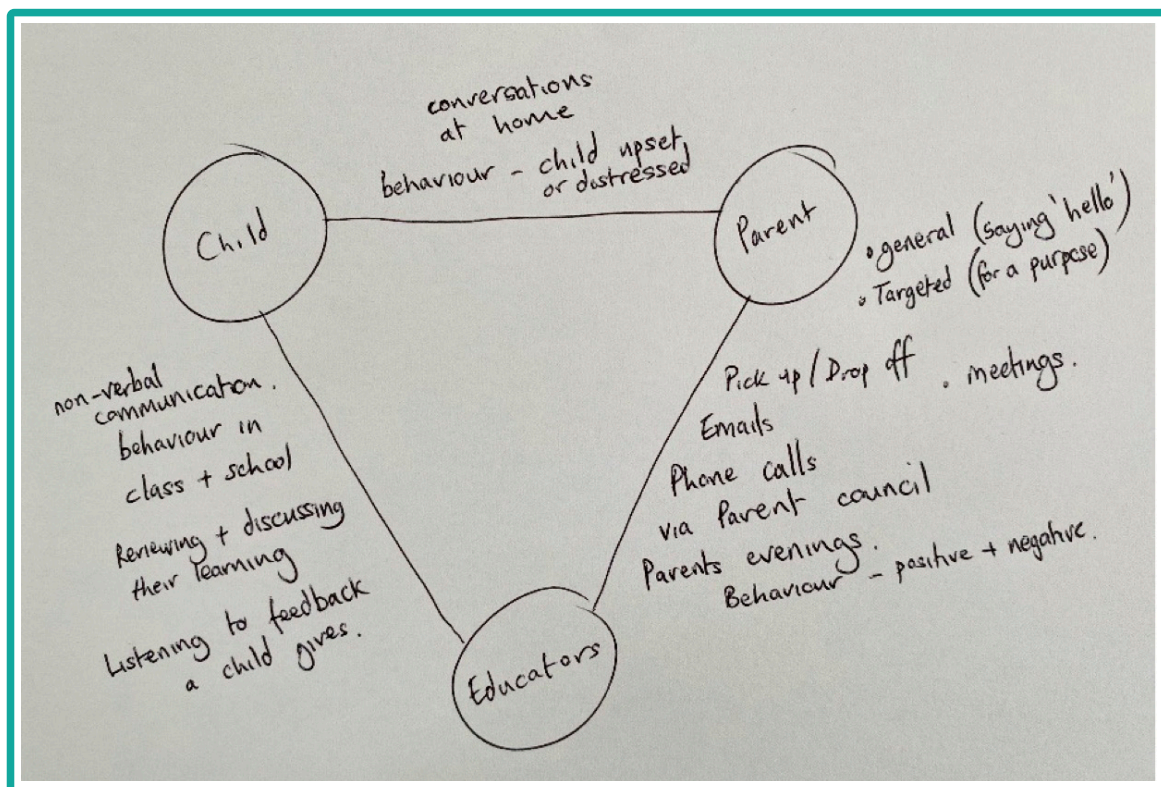
## Why the communication triangle is important

This exercise reveals the complexity of relationships between these three partners, with information shared in different ways, at different times and between different people.

For everyone to feel like equal partners, good communication must be a priority, and staff must regularly think about how and when they are communicating with both parents and children. A school or education setting can only provide the best learning environment when it understands a child's needs and requirements, information which parents and children are best placed to share.

We often think about communication as written or verbal communication however, behaviour is also an important form of communication that can help you to understand what a child or parent needs or is feeling.

See the example below. You may want to repeat this exercise with a particular family in mind, to help you understand what you know and to work out what information is missing.



## Everyone can learn to be better a communicator

Parents of children with additional support needs have repeatedly highlighted the need for improved communication from education staff through various questionnaires and different types of consultation activity. It is important that education professionals listen to what parents are saying and reflect on how this links with their own practice. Everyone can be better a communicator!

In this module and the next module (Module 5) we look at different communication styles which parents have said they prefer. We will also explore the different ways in which parents want to communicate with educators.



## What style of communication do parents value?

Communication with parents can take many different forms. Parents have stated that these key elements are important for sharing information effectively, supporting understanding, and strengthening relationships between parents and education professionals.

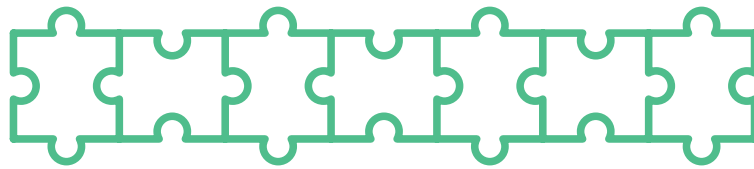
Parents want:

- Simple clear language that is easy for everyone to understand
- Communication that is honest and based on facts and evidence rather than opinions
- To be properly listened to by education professionals
- Education professionals who listen to understand, rather than to reply
- Communication that demonstrates the school have listened and acted upon information from parents
- Regular and consistent communication and contact with staff
- A mix of different types of communication (this is covered more in Module 5).

All education professionals have their own style of communicating with parents, but remember, communication isn't a static thing, it is a skill that needs to be practised and honed.

We have highlighted below seven key elements to successful communication, and developed some reflective questions to help you consider your own communication style and identify your strengths and areas for improvement.





## Seven elements to successful communication

### 1. Active listening

Active listening requires the listener to actively engage in the listening process – the listener must pay attention, show that they are listening, ask questions, request clarification and summarise what they have heard. They should also be attuned to and reflect the feelings of the person they are listening to.

When communicating with parents, it is important not to have preconceived ideas. Active listening will help you to understand a child's needs and the family's wider situation. It's human nature to think ahead and make assumptions, but this can mean you may miss out on vital information. When speaking to parents be prepared to listen, and to learn.

Here are some tips to support active listening:

- Give the parent your undivided attention
- Ask open-end and probing questions
- Think about your body language and how you show you are listening (for example, maintaining good eye contact, nodding)
- Keep an open mind
- Don't interrupt
- Summarise as you go along to check your understanding
- Recognise non-verbal clues that may show how a parent is feeling.

### 2. Be positive

Remaining positive and focusing on strengths is essential for working in partnership with parents. All parents will have unique strengths and skills – it is important to think about what scaffolding you can provide to support and build upon these strengths. Recognising parents' strengths and building them into support interventions, where appropriate, will help to reassure parents that everyone is working towards a common goal.



Make sure you highlight progress that has been made. Think about the language you use in meetings and emails, and how you can emphasise supportive measures or things that are working well.

It can be challenging to always remain positive, especially when there are disagreements between parents and professionals. However, a positive approach can often help to resolve some of these issues.

Be aware of the language you are using. Be careful not to use unprofessional language about a child being "difficult", "tricky" or "frustrating". Hearing their child described in these terms is upsetting for parents. Try talking about activities or lessons the child finds challenging or frustrating.

### 3. Remain calm and polite

As an educator, you set the tone for communications with parents. By remaining calm and polite, you can create an atmosphere of respect and trust that will help you to work closely with parents. Remaining polite and professional helps to overcome emotive situations and ensure that everyone stays focused on the child's needs.

If emotions are heightened during a discussion, try to acknowledge how they are feeling.

*"I understand you feel really strongly about this..."*  
*"I appreciate this is upsetting for you..."*  
*"I can see that you are angry..."*

If a person's distress, upset or anger is preventing the discussion from moving forwards, try taking a break from the conversation. Offer the parent a cup of tea or suggest a breath of fresh air and wait for them to regain their composure before resuming discussions.

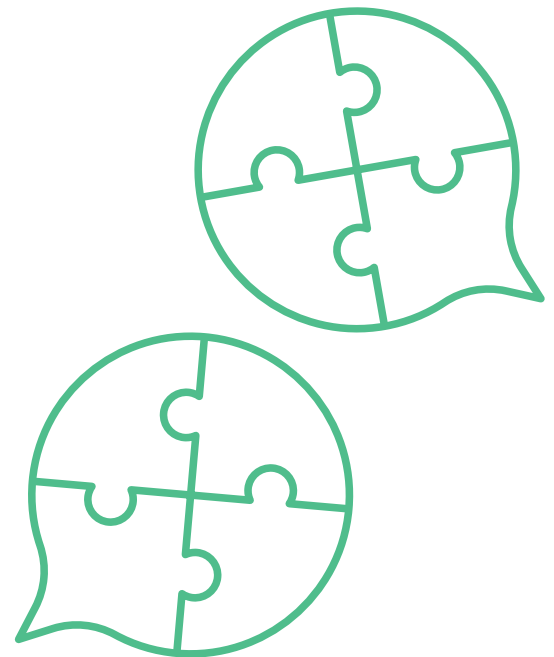
### 4. Body language

So much of communication is expressed through body language – smiling faces, open gestures and good eye contact let others know you are listening and respecting what they say. Be aware of your body language and try to remain relaxed during discussions with parents. Good, engaged body language helps to reinforce a positive approach to partnership working.

### 5. Use clear and concise language

Jargon and acronyms can be a barrier to relationships between parents and education professionals. Remember that parents won't always understand the language that you use with colleagues on a day-to-day basis. Parents may often feel apprehensive or embarrassed to ask if they don't fully understand terminology used in discussions or in written communication, so try not to put them in this position.

Take time to ask about a parent's understanding of the Additional Support for Learning framework and explain any language they are unfamiliar with. Even if you've had meetings with parents in the past, don't assume knowledge.



### 6. Provide factual information

It is important for parents to understand why certain decisions are being considered or made about their child's education. Planning at your setting will be evidence based so be transparent and share this information with parents, giving clear examples and facts as a basis for discussions. Be honest about where things have not gone according to plan and explain why. Try to avoid speculation as this can make things unclear and be unsettling for parents.

## 7. Keep the young person's needs at the centre of discussions

Often discussions and communication can become focused on logistics or procedural issues and move away from the individual child's needs. If you feel this is happening, try resetting the conversation by directly acknowledging it. Often saying something like 'I think we've moved away from focusing on Michael's needs' or 'Perhaps we can get back to discussing immediate supports we can put in place to help Jade' can help to get things back on track. This approach also re-affirms that the child is at the centre of all discussions.



## Practice reflection

### Reflective questions

Consider the list of seven elements to successful communication, then answer the following questions.

1. Can you remember a time recently when you used some of these elements successfully with parents? When was this, and how did it impact your conversation?
2. Do you find some of these elements more challenging than others? If so, identify which ones and why.
3. What could you do to build your confidence and skills in this area?  
*You may want to consider talking to colleagues, role play activities, self-evaluation after meetings or discussions with parents.*
4. How do the elements of effective face-to-face communication differ for written communication (emails, letters, etc.)? Can you incorporate these elements in your written communications with parents?



## Next steps

- Review our **Communication Champion Checklist** and share this printable resource with colleagues.
- Talk to colleagues and practise some of the areas where you feel less confident.