

## Working Together

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

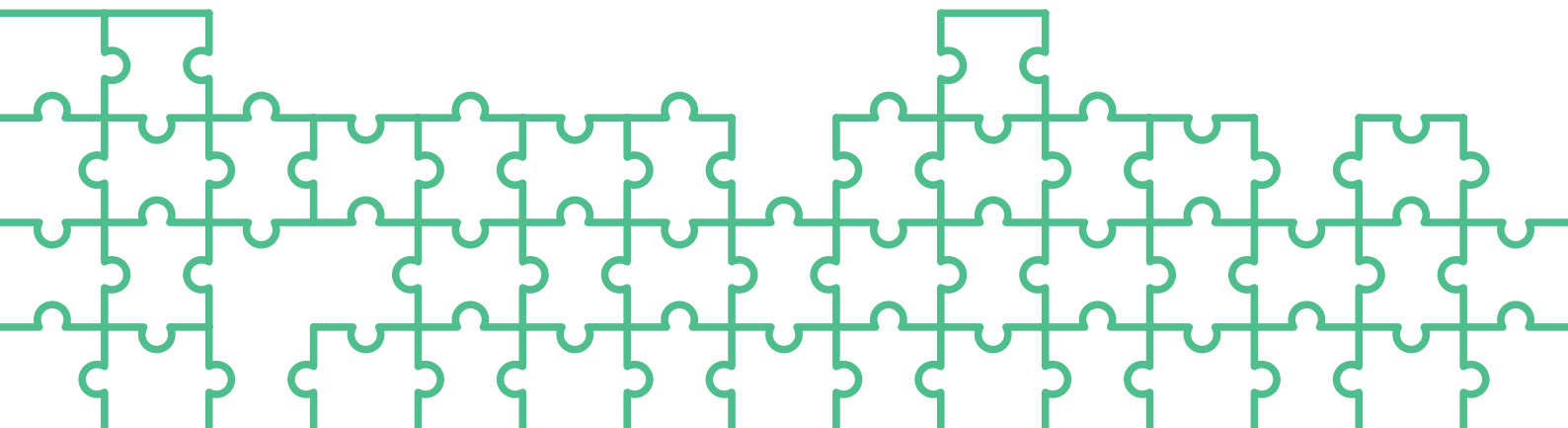


### Module 6

## Positive communication strategies at key stages and transitions

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*This module will help you consider what support parents of children with additional support needs want at key stages of their child's education journey*





## Background

*“Getting the right support at the right time makes all the difference”*

Parent

*“We had great support from the school and it helped us get through a difficult time. Things are much better now”*

Parent

### Providing the right support at the right time

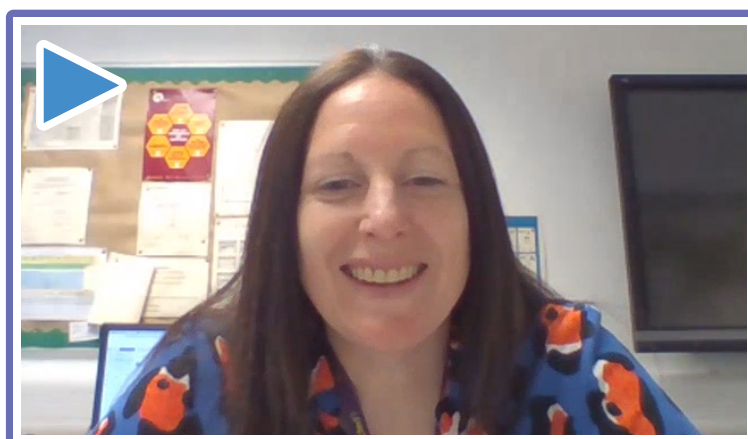
We have identified a number of approaches and techniques in these modules which staff working in education settings can use to support communication with parents of children with additional support needs.

Parents have told us that certain stages of their child’s education journey present significant challenges and can be instrumental in how relationships with education staff develop.

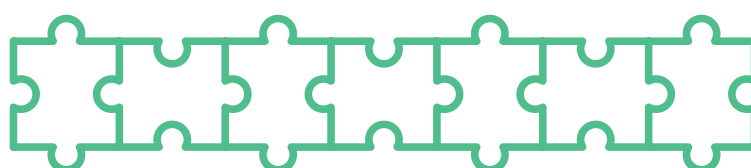
## Exercise



**Film:** Listen to this Head Teacher talk about the importance of getting communication with parents right at key stages



Duration:  
3 mins 27 secs





## Evidence & information

This is what parents have told us about communication that helps at key stages and points of transition.



### Stage: Identification of need (at any point or age)



It's important to recognise that when a child's additional support needs are first identified, it can be a very challenging time for parents. Parents may have had concerns about a child's needs before education staff, or they may have been unaware of the issue. In some cases, parents may have been struggling to cope for some time.

A diagnosis isn't always necessary for a child to be identified as requiring additional support for their learning - a child may need support without a formal diagnosis.



### Case Study:



Nadia is 15. In recent months she has withdrawn from her group of friends and has lost a lot of weight. She continues to work hard at school but teachers have noticed that she has lost some of her focus during lessons. Nadia recently approached one of her teachers to tell them she's been feeling low and anxious for some time.

With Nadia's permission, the school contacted her parents to discuss the situation. Nadia's parents revealed that they have been concerned about their daughter for a while.

Nadia, her parents and staff from the school met to work out how they could best support her. This included discussing coping strategies, identifying ways for Nadia to express and manage her anxiety, and regular check-ins between Nadia and support teachers. The school were also able to share some useful resources about supporting children with anxiety with Nadia's parents.

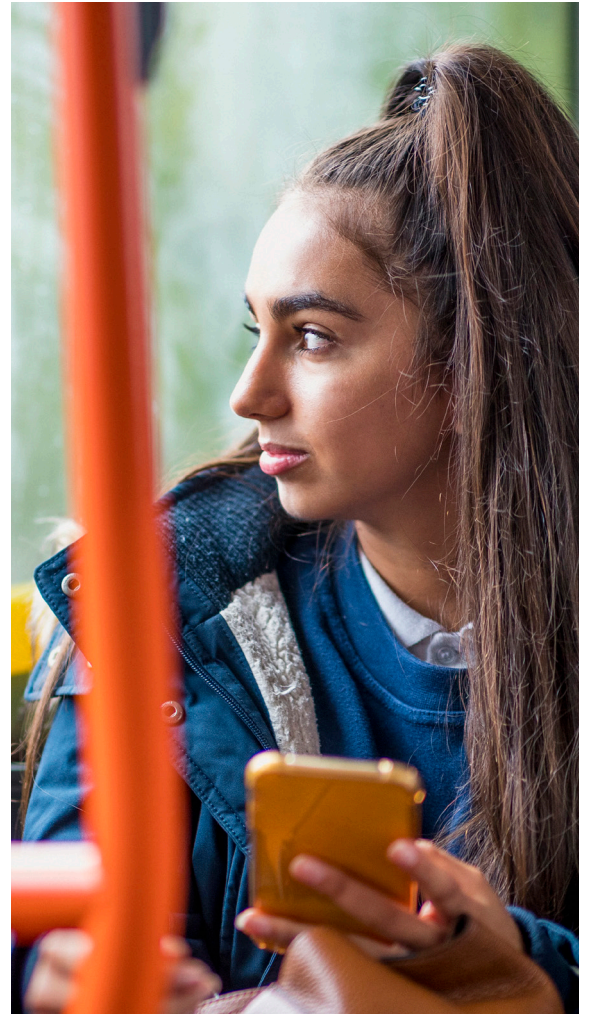
Everyone has agreed to meet in several weeks to review how Nadia is getting on.

- How did the school involve Nadia's parents?
- What positive benefits do you think this may bring?



## Identification of need: positive communication approaches with parents

- > Should a setting or school be concerned that a child has an additional support need, parents would want to be informed about this as quickly as possible. However, depending on the child's age and capacity, it may be up to them what information is shared with a parent or parents.
- > When communicating with parents, remember that they may be unaware of their child's additional support needs. In many cases, parents may need time to digest what you have told them.
- > Parents want to provide practical support for their child – include them in discussions around planning strategies and options.
- > If a parent approaches you about their child's support needs, make time to discuss their concerns and be clear about how you plan to take this forward.
- > Where appropriate, share details of information and **support resources** with parents. Remember, try not to overwhelm parents with too much information straight away.



### Stage: Assessment(s)



The purpose of assessments is to identify what support a child needs to help them to make the most of their education.

The term “assessment” can be difficult for parents to understand. Assessments might mean a one-off appointment, a series of appointments or a longer period of close observation and monitoring of a child's progress.

Assessments may be done by school staff or professionals from the local authority (e.g. Educational Psychologist or visual impairment teacher), NHS (e.g. Speech and Language Therapist or Occupational Therapist) or social workers.

It is important to be clear with parents about what will happen and how they will be involved in the assessment process.



## Case Study:



Micah is 10. His teacher has noticed that Micah's behaviour in class demonstrates signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Micah often fidgets in lessons, he frequently interrupts and he is prone to frustrated outbursts. Micah's teacher has highlighted his concerns to senior staff at the school who discussed this with some of Micah's previous teachers.

Micah's mum Alana is a single parent who has a good relationship with staff at the school. She has three children under 11 and works part time.

The school contacted Micah's mother to discuss their observations and arrange a suitable time for Anaya to come to the school and meet with staff. They were able to arrange a time that fitted around Anaya's existing childcare arrangements. Micah's teacher said Anaya could bring someone with her so Anaya's mother came along too, which made Anaya feel more confident.

The school discussed their observations and explained the next steps for an assessment of Micah's needs. Staff explained who would be involved, how long the process would take and how Anaya and Micah would be involved. Micah's teacher followed up with an email to Anaya outlining the key points discussed and asking Anaya to get in touch if she had any questions. Anaya found it helpful having a summary to read through this after the meeting.

- What positive steps did the school take to ensure Anaya was able to engage in discussions?
- How did the school ensure Anaya understood the next steps?



## Assessment: positive communication approaches with parents

- > Discuss key concerns with parents before making any referrals. In some cases, parents will need to provide permission for assessments to be undertaken.
- > Help parents to understand the process (e.g. observations, reviewing a child's work, etc.) and what will happen after the assessment (e.g. discussion meeting, creating a plan, etc.).
- > Explain who will be involved and what their roles are. For example, parents may have heard of an Occupational Therapist but be unclear about what they do in an educational setting or school.
- > Explain that the views of parents and children will be captured as part of the process and be clear about how this will be done.
- > Explain the support that will be provided during the process.
- > If possible, provide a timescale for the assessment process so the parent knows what to expect.

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## Stage: Changes in support



Changes in the support a child receives can happen for a number of reasons.

These include:

- New approaches or additional supports are identified that could benefit the child
- The child becomes more independent and needs less support
- Changes in personnel at the school or nursery
- Changes to other resources at the setting (either new or reduced resources).

Regardless of the reason, keeping parents updated about changes in support is important to maintain trust between parents and professionals. It also helps to avoid misunderstandings.



## Case Study:



Joseph is 11 and has dyslexia. Joseph has received additional support in school for several years and has been progressing well. Joseph's teacher identified that paired reading with a younger child may help Joseph to build his self-esteem and improve his confidence with his reading.

At home, Joseph told his parents that he was reading with a child in P3. They contacted the school because they were concerned and angry to hear that Joseph was reading with children at a much younger age. They thought Joseph had been singled-out because of his dyslexia.

Joseph's teacher had identified a positive new strategy to support Joseph to build his confidence however this hadn't been communicated to Joseph's family. The positive intention ended up having a negative impact on the relationship between the school and Joseph's parents.

- How could this situation have been avoided?



## Changes in support: positive communication approaches with parents

- > Discuss proposed changes with the parents and the child and find out their views. Where possible, explore what alternative options might be available.
- > Provide reasons and evidence for why the change is needed or how it will help. Be clear about how you expect any proposed changes to impact their child and how it will be monitored.
- > Change can be particularly challenging for children with additional support needs. Be clear with parents about how you will be working with the child in the setting or school to help them adapt to this change.
- > Let parents know about changes as early as possible. This will help them to support this process and introduce the change gradually to their child.
- > Changes can sometimes happen at short notice. It's helpful to have an agreed approach to communicating with parents if this should happen. When communicating with parents, be clear if changes will be short-term or long-term.
- > Communicating about limited resources can be a difficult conversation to have. Parents may not always be aware of the finite resources available and appreciate honesty from professionals.
- > Update education plans regularly to ensure that everyone is clear about any decisions made and progress so far.



### Stage: Starting a new school or education setting



Starting a new school or setting can include starting an early learning and childcare setting, moving to primary or secondary school or relocating school.

Transitions can be challenging for all children, but especially for children with additional support needs. Transitions can involve a lot of uncertainty for a child, which may impact on their mood and behaviour. This in turn can have a big impact on their parents and a family's day-to-day life.

Transitions can also be an anxious time for parents as they navigate new ways of working and new relationships with education professionals and the school community.



## Case Study:



Mia is four years old and has Down's Syndrome. Her early learning and childcare setting is preparing for her to start primary school next year.

Mia's mum Jen has struggled with anxiety and depression, and she has concerns about how Mia will cope with the transition to primary school. Mia is well supported at her early learning and childcare setting and several of the staff have learned Makaton to help them to communicate with Mia more effectively. Staff have also developed a good relationship with Jen, however she is worried that she will lose an important part of her support network when Mia moves school.

Staff at Mia's early learning and childcare setting have been working closely with Jen so she understands what will happen and when, and how she can support Mia with the change. Jen and Mia are creating a book together at home about the new school to help Mia prepare. Staff at Mia's early learning and childcare setting have arranged for the Primary 1 teacher and Pupil Support Assistant from Mia's new school to visit the nursery and meet Jen and Mia. The primary school have also made arrangements for Jen and Mia to visit and familiarise themselves with the layout of the building and the staff

Staff at the early learning and childcare setting have encouraged Jen to write down any questions she has and to share these with nursery staff. Jen wants to know if the primary school staff have experience of working with children with Down's Syndrome and who she should speak to if Mia has trouble settling in at the start of school.

- What positive steps did the school and early learning and childcare setting take to ensure Jen was able to engage in discussions?



## Starting a new school: positive communication approaches with parents

- > Planning early is the key to success for transitions. There is a legal duty on education settings to start planning at least 12 months in advance for children with additional support needs but parents have also highlighted that discussing things early on can help to allay their fears.
- > Make sure the parent(s) are aware of the key stages of the transition process, be clear about how they will be involved and what the school's responsibilities are.
- > Discuss what information is being shared with the new school.
- > Support the child and parents to become familiar with the new school and staff.
- > Be clear about how communication will work with the new school – who will be their main contact and how will they stay in touch.
- > Support parents to help their child prepare.
- > If a placing request is refused and a child (and their family) was expecting to move but is staying on, talk through with the family what will happen now to support the child.





## Stage: Leaving school (16 years or above)



There are a range of options open to all children as they think about leaving school and they progress towards adult life.

These include:

- Going on to further education (for example, college or university)
- Attending training courses
- Becoming an apprentice.

Leaving school is another transition that can present uncertainty and anxiety. However, it also offers exciting opportunities for children to follow their interests and achieve their potential.

Parents may need additional help and guidance at this stage as they support their child to consider their options.



### Case Study:



Jake is a 16-year-old Deaf pupil who is planning to leave school in the summer. Jake's first language is British Sign Language (BSL); English is his second language. He has always been passionate about photography and is planning to study this at a local college.

Jake's school met with him and his hearing parents through a BSL/English interpreter early on to discuss his plans for leaving school. Jake has struggled with his school education due to having limited access to BSL support which affected his confidence. Both Jake and his parents were anxious about how this may affect his future opportunities and his transition to college.

The school contacted Skills Development Scotland (SDS) who were able to help Jake consider his next steps. Jake and his parents were able to meet with the Student Disability Service at his local college which is responsible for providing BSL support to discuss his options and talk to its staff about what communication support the college could provide.

After Jake was offered a place, his school worked with him and his parents to collate information to share with the college to ensure a smooth transition from the school to the college. Having his parents closely involved in the process helped to empower Jake to open up about what areas were of key concern for him and what support he felt he needed.



When Jake started his new course, he participated in an enhanced induction programme and communication support was in place which included providing BSL/English interpreters and notetaker. Jake's tutors received BSL Awareness training, and this training was also made available to Jake's fellow students. The college has arranged termly review meetings with Jake and his parents with BSL/English interpreters booked in advance. The meetings focus on Jake's general wellbeing and his communication support within the college.

- How did parentship working between school staff, Jake and his parents benefit Jake?



## Leaving school (16 years or above): positive communication approaches with parents

- > Provide information to parents about transition planning duties of the school. They should know that planning will begin at least 12 months before their child is due to leave school.
- > Parents should be informed that local authorities have to offer an appropriate place in post-16 learning for every young person who wants it.
- > Support parents (and the child) to have their views heard during the planning processes for leaving school.
- > Let parents know about agencies that can provide additional support (for example, Skills Development Scotland).
- > Parents (and children) may need someone to support and/or advocate for them during meetings when discussing key stages and transitions. Local organisations may be available and can be found on the **Enquire** or **ALISS** websites. Specific local community support organisations may exist for families from different ethnic groups.
- > The **Scottish Transitions Forum** also has resources to support good communication with families during key stages and transitions.



## Complaints and disputes

### Positive communication approaches with parents

Complaints and disputes are covered in detail in Module 8. Information for education professionals and families about the Complaints Handling Procedure and mediation is also available from **Enquire**.