TURNING PAGES,
BUILDING FUTURES

LEARNING WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

When Your Child Can't Tell You What They Need

Making everyday communication easier, one response at a time.

Short on time? Jump to page 3 for the one-page "What Is My Child Trying to Tell Me?" chart.

Start Here

Some children don't say much - or don't say anything at all - and it's easy to read that as a child who isn't communicating yet. But communication isn't limited to spoken words. Your child may already be communicating constantly, through reaching, pointing, gestures, sounds, a few words, pictures, facial expressions, movement, or bringing things to you. The first step isn't teaching something new. It's noticing what they're already telling you - and making sure what they tell you works.

If you've read Learning Where Life Happens - about creating more opportunities for your child to communicate: that resource is about building more reasons to communicate into your routines. This one is about the other half of the conversation - recognizing the communication your child is already showing you, reading what it might mean, and responding in ways that make it worth doing again.

The big idea: Communication grows when children experience that their messages matter.

A child doesn't keep using communication because we think it's important. They keep using it because it gets results - the milk moves, the door opens, the toy comes back. Every response you give is a lesson in whether communicating is worth the effort.

Try This: Notice, pause, respond

Notice what your child is already doing

Try: Reaching is communication. So is pulling you across the room, pushing something off the tray, or a look that lingers on the snack cabinet. For one day, treat every one of those as a message - because it probably is one.

Pause and give them a turn

Try: When you can see what your child needs, pause briefly before helping. Give them a chance to reach, gesture, make a sound, use a word, or communicate in another way. If they don't respond, go ahead and help. You're creating an opportunity to communicate, not making them work for what they need.

Model words for what they feel

Try: When your child gets hurt, encounters something frustrating, or experiences something exciting, offer simple words they might use to describe the experience. "That hurt me!" "I'm frustrated." "I'm excited!" Keep it natural and connected to what's happening. Your child doesn't need to repeat the words. You're making language available for experiences they may not yet know how to express.

Model a simple communication response

Try: As you respond, say the word: "Want ___," "Help," "All done." Model the response your child could use next time, in whatever system they understand, without requiring a repeat first. Models teach; requirements shut down.

Give them a chance to respond

Try: After you model, wait. Count slowly to five in your head. Many children need more processing time than a busy household offers.

Make room for different ways to respond

Try: Your child might respond with a gesture, a movement, a sound, a word, a picture, or a communication device. Notice and respond to their message, even when it doesn't look or sound the way you expected.

Practice during real routines

Try: Snack, bath, the car, the playground - the best practice happens where life already happens. One good exchange in a real routine beats ten in a drill.

Pick one routine - not all of them. One exchange at a time is how this grows.

What to look for

You don't need to collect formal data to notice whether something is helping. Over a week or two, watch for:

- ☐ More communication attempts
- ☐ Communication becoming more intentional - aimed at you, not just at things
- ☐ More independent requests
- ☐ More variety - new gestures, sounds, or words doing the same job
- ☐ Less guessing on your part

One small change is information - and a place to build from.

If it doesn't work...

If the exchanges aren't clicking yet, that is not a verdict on your child - it is information. Try:

- Make the response easier - a reach toward the item counts more than an accurate word.
- Use the system your child already understands - their sounds, their signs, their device.
- Require fewer words - one word opens the door just as well as a sentence.
- Give more wait time - count slower than feels natural.
- Make sure communication has an effect – your child should experience that their message matters.

Remember: *If communication works, your child has a reason to use it again.*

Want more practical ideas?

Get practical, doable strategies for teaching your own child at home - what to try next, how to break it down, and how to make it fit your family's routines. **Join the PAGE list and browse the full library at pageaba.com.**

Need help figuring out what to try?

Every child is different. If you're trying strategies at home and aren't sure what to change, PAGE can help you identify practical, individualized ways to support learning, communication, participation, and independence in everyday life. **Learn more or schedule a consultation at pageaba.com.**

LEARNING WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

What Is My Child Trying to Tell Me?

A starting point for reading the signals your child may already be sending.

These are possibilities, not assumptions. Watch what happens after you respond - what happens next tells you what the signal meant.

I notice...	It might mean...	I can try...
Reaching	Wants something	Modeling “Want ___” - then hand it over
Pulling me	Wants help or access	Modeling “Help” - then help
Moving toward the door	Wants to go	Modeling “Outside” - then go
Pushing something away	Doesn't want it	Modeling “No” or “All done” - then remove it
Looking toward an item	Interested	Modeling “Want that?” - then offer it
Bumps head	Feels pain	Modeling “My head hurts” – then provide comfort
Something exciting happens and face lights up or jumps up and down	Experiences excitement	Modeling “I’m excited!” – then share the moment

If your child keeps reaching after you hand it over, your first guess may need adjusting. If they stop, that may be a clue that you understood. Keep watching what happens next.

One signal I noticed today: _____

What happened when I responded: _____