

COMMUNICATION & AAC POLICY

INTRODUCTION:

Communication development is a key focus at Radlett Lodge School. It is central to our curriculum and is equally championed during social activities, such as break times and lunch. Successful communication, in all its forms, is promoted through our environment, the way in which we structure activities, and the adjustments we make to our own interaction styles.

AAC stands for Alternative or Augmentative Communication. This refers to any method of communication that is used to support or replace spoken language. Many pupils at Radlett Lodge use AAC to communicate, and as a school we value communication in every form. We design every lesson and recreational activity carefully, so that pupils using AAC are fully included and supported to develop their communication skills.

This policy underpins AAC and communication practice throughout the school. It will be used to inform monitoring procedures. The practise described will be implemented by all staff at Radlett Lodge School and monitored under the guidance of the Senior Leadership Team and the Speech and Language Therapy Team.

RATIONALE:

Communication is more than being able to speak, or being able to combine words in a grammatical order.

Communication can be achieved through the use of gestures, signs, symbols, spoken words, written words or, more commonly, through a combination of all of these. For communication to take place, there must be one person sending a message, and another person receiving the message.

Crucially, effective communication is a *two-way process*. Communication partners need to be able to take on the roles of both message sender (“speaker”) and message receiver (“listener”), to have an awareness of each other’s existing knowledge, interests, emotions, and to interpret each other’s intentions.

A wide range of communication profiles are found amongst children and young people with ASD, and this is true of the pupils at Radlett Lodge School. It is, however, all autistic individuals experience some difficulties or differences in relation to their social communication development. For example, individuals may have difficulties initiating communication or interaction, understanding what to say or do in a particular context, and predicting the actions and behaviour of other people.

In addition to social interaction differences, children with autism may be delayed in their understanding and use of language or have a language disorder. Some autistic individuals will have speech that is difficult to understand. Some will not use speech at all.

When communication and interaction difficulties are left unaddressed, a young person may experience frustration or isolation, and their educational progress will likely be impacted. Difficulty in expressing wants, needs, feelings and opinions can contribute significantly to the emergence or maintenance of behaviours that challenge; behaviours become a means of communication in their own right - used when a more conventional or effective means of communication is not (yet) available to the child.

For these reasons, our aim as a school is:

To provide the appropriate supports to enable all pupils to comprehend and communicate effectively, using their preferred modalities, across different settings and situations, so that each pupil can reach their full educational potential and achieve the highest degree of independence and autonomy of which they are able.

COMMUNICATION PROFILES AT RADLETT LODGE SCHOOL

Many pupils at Radlett Lodge School are at an early level of communication and require high levels of support to understand and engage with the world around them. Providing the young person with reasons, means and opportunities to communicate is the first step in teaching about successful interaction with another person. Developing joint attention skills is also a focus at this stage, in order to support the pupil to engage in learning and social interaction.

Approximately one third of the pupils at Radlett Lodge School do not yet use spoken words regularly to communicate. These pupils require access to alternative means of communication (AAC) such as paper based symbol systems, voice output devices, objects of reference, or Makaton. Many pupils are able to use some spoken language but also benefit from access to AAC to optimise their ability to communicate.

While many pupils at Radlett Lodge School do use spoken language, the vast majority have moderate to extremely severe language difficulties. Their understanding and / or use of language is delayed or disordered. Pupils may have difficulties with:

- Learning the meaning of new words
- Learning to use new words
- Being able to easily think of and say words that they know the meaning of
- Combining words creatively e.g. “more juice”, “red juice”, “no juice”, “want juice”
- Putting words in the right order when speaking or writing

- Using correct grammar, such as “is / are / were” and “-ing” / “-ed” / “-s”

- Talking about events beyond the immediate situation
- Organising their thoughts clearly (when speaking or writing)
- Telling cohesive stories (when speaking or writing)
- Listening to, understanding and recalling information from spoken language
- Understanding and recalling information from written language
- Understanding figurative and non-literal language such as idioms, metaphors, sarcasm and jokes.

A number of pupils at Radlett Lodge School use spoken language and present with fluency difficulties (e.g. a stammer) or speech sound difficulties such as phonological disorder or developmental verbal dyspraxia.

A few pupils at the school have mild language difficulties but significant needs related to social interaction. For example, they may have difficulties with reading social situations; understanding sarcasm or non-literal language; coping with their own and others' emotions; appreciating the thoughts and feelings of others; and following conversational conventions.

ENTITLEMENT:

All of the children and young people at Radlett Lodge School have an identified need for support to develop their communication and interaction skills, which is defined within their Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The EHCP will describe the type of adjustments and supports that must be provided by the teacher, class team, residential team, and parents. For most pupils there will also be a specified entitlement to Speech and Language Therapy input.

Our Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs) will provide the input detailed in each young person's EHCP as a minimum. In fact, the onsite Speech and Language Therapists will usually work with all pupils, even those who may have joined the school without Speech and Language Therapy stipulated on their EHCP. During the baseline assessment period, a Speech and Language Therapist will assess a new pupil's communication strengths and needs and make recommendations regarding the type and level of support that is required. The EHCP is reviewed annually, at which time the SaLT and / or parents may request any changes needed based on the young person's progress and ongoing needs.

IMPLEMENTATION – WHOLE SCHOOL, UNIVERSAL LEVEL OF SUPPORT:

Good autism practice and good communication practise share many similarities. Crucially, good autism practice must take account of communication differences, and good communication practise for people with autism must take account of the individual's sensory needs, interests, opinions and ways of thinking and learning. As stated in the Positive Behaviour Support Policy:

“Good general proactive strategies that take into account the factors that influence the wellbeing and behaviour of autistic people are vitally important to reduce the likelihood, severity and frequency of behaviours that might become problematic for the person themselves, staff or the wider public.”

Across the school and residential provision, a variety of communication strategies are used that build on areas of relative strengths and aim to reduce heightened levels of anxiety and distress. These are adapted to meet individual needs and may include:

- Use of clear language that is of an appropriate developmental level
- Supporting spoken language and communication by using and responding to simple actions, gestures, facial expressions, key Makaton signs, objects of reference, pictures, photographs, and written words (Total Communication Approach)
- Modelling use of AAC when communicating with a pupil who uses AAC (known as aided language stimulation)
- Recognising and responding to the young person's interests and regulatory needs
- Visual supports for activities
- Structuring the environment in a way that is visually clear to the individual
- Organising activities and resources to help individuals predict what they are doing, how long they might be doing it for and what they will be doing next
- Use of transition supports for all changes. This may include pictorial or written timetable, objects of reference or photographs, timers and auditory cues
- Low arousal (not no arousal) environments
- Explaining clearly reasons for decision, boundaries and expectations

The speech and language therapist is responsible for leading the development and monitoring the use of visual communication strategies within the school and residential environment. The actual implementation of agreed strategies is carried out collaboratively by the whole school and residential team. This includes a responsibility to make and maintain communication resources that are used across the school and residential site. Specific responsibilities in relation to the provision and maintenance of AAC resources are laid out in Appendix 1.

Training

To support the implementation of good communication practices across the whole school, all permanent employees receive training from the SaLT team as part of their induction. This training covers:

- Typical communication development
- Common differences in the communication and interaction profiles of autistic individuals
- Strategies to support communication development
- Alternative and Augmentative Communication

The SaLT team frequently deliver additional workshops to class teams and residential teams, and whole school training on topics such as Cued Articulation, Play and SCERTS during INSET days.

Equal Opportunities

In line with the *Equality Act 2010*, Radlett Lodge School promotes equal opportunities and strives to eliminate discrimination, be it through gender, racial, cultural, gender, disability, health, family status, age and any other protected characteristic. The Equality Act lays out a legal requirement for schools to make reasonable adaptations to their practices to ensure pupils with disabilities are not disadvantaged compared to pupils who are not disabled. In addition, the act states that all reasonable steps must be taken to provide access to auxiliary aids if these are required to avoid disadvantaging a pupil with disabilities.

This can be translated into a duty for all staff members to support our pupils by:

- Respecting and responding to all modes of communication
- Planning activities and lessons carefully so that they are fully inclusive of those with complex communication needs
- Taking reasonable steps to ensure information is accessible to all (e.g. considering language complexity, font size, and visual support needs)
- Making sure that pupils using AAC aids have access to them at all times

The *Equal Opportunities in NAS Services Policy* describes specific standards for its schools that are relevant to our communication and AAC practices:

“Services will ensure they are inclusive, respecting the needs and any values that are important to any individual or their family as appropriate.”

Before a pupil even starts at Radlett Lodge School, our admissions procedures ensure we have a clear understanding of what is important to the pupil and their family. This includes finding out about the pupil’s existing communication modes, languages spoken in the home, and what the family and / or pupil would like to work on. This information is

used to develop specific support plans for the pupil to help them have a positive transition to our school.

We continue to work with parents throughout a pupil's journey at our school. There are regular opportunities for face-to-face meetings through parent consultations, therapy clinic days, our parent network meetings, and annual reviews. Whenever possible, pupils are supported to tell us their own views, values and aspirations, through the use of pupil questionnaires, Talking Mats, debrief and daily reflections. Please see the *Radlett Lodge Advocacy Policy* for further information.

“Pupils will be made to feel that they are valued, that their identity is respected”

At Radlett Lodge School, we respect and value all modes and styles of communication. We tackle discrimination linked to communication differences and strive to provide equal opportunities to all of our pupils. This includes providing high quality AAC resources for those pupils who benefit from them and educating others about AAC use. Resources used regularly across the school and residential environments include: picture exchange or pointing style communication books, individual communication boards, and whole class, large core boards.

Where the Speech and Language Therapist's assessment indicates that a high tech communication aid may be beneficial, we endeavour to provide a device to trial in school, although there may be a waiting list if all devices are already on loan. The long-term aim of trials is to seek funding for a device from Specialist NHS services if the trial is successful; this allows the individual to have access to their communication mode in all settings including at home. Parents must be willing and able to commit time to attend training and support use of the communication aid at home.

“All members of the school will be entitled to a balanced, broadly-based and relevant curriculum, with a wide range of achievements celebrated”

The pathways and stages of our curriculum have been carefully designed so that each young person has access to a relevant and meaningful curriculum, delivered in such a way as to capitalise on naturally occurring communication and interaction opportunities. This ensures that every pupil regularly experiences success in their' learning and interactions. Achievements are celebrated through our recording of “Magic Moments”, daily Well Done sessions, and certificates given out in our whole school assemblies. All pupils are supported to participate in special events such as school performances. This may involve the use of Makaton, high tech AAC devices, or meaningful objects.

“A secure and welcoming environment”

All areas of the school and residential provision are adapted to make them as communication friendly as possible. We take action to ensure there is appropriate lighting and noise levels are conducive to learning and communication. Unnecessary

visual distraction are removed, and rooms are organised in a way that makes the purpose of each area clear. School signage includes pictures and symbols to make it as accessible

as possible to all and resources or belongings are clearly labelled. Communication boards are available in classes and the playgrounds.

IMPLEMENTATION – TARGETED AND SPECIALIST LEVEL OF SUPPORT

Assessment

The Speech and Language Therapists are responsible for assessing each young person's communication strengths and needs. A baseline assessment is carried out for each child or young person as they enter Radlett Lodge School (within the first term of joining). In collaboration with other members of the therapy team, the SCERTS¹ assessment framework is used to structure observations of the pupil in class, at play, and during community based education trips and residential activities if appropriate. SCERTS assessments are supplemented by the use of standardised speech and language therapy assessments when appropriate. The therapy team also meet with parents during this period to gather further information and find out if there is any support that the family needs.

This detailed assessment process provides a profile of the pupil's communication, interaction and emotional regulation strengths, and highlights the next steps for development. Communication and Interaction Personal Learning Objectives (PLOs) are set jointly with the child's teacher, occupational therapist, psychology team and, where appropriate, residential care worker. Parent and pupil views are sought to ensure objectives meaningful and relevant to the young person within the context of their family life. As a team, we identify what support needs to be in place to help the pupil achieve these next steps. In the SCERTS framework these are known as the Transactional Support and include:

- Modifications and adaptations to the environment e.g. reduced visual distractions, soft lighting, different desk or work station arrangements
- Tools to assist learning (such as picture timetables, written timetables, AAC, and sensory supports)
- The way in which partners can adapt their own interaction and communication style in order to respond to the young person's needs and interests

Formal re-assessment takes place annually and the Speech and Language Therapist summarises the results of this in writing, for the pupil's EHCP Annual Review.

Targeted SaLT interventions

¹ *The SCERTS Model: A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders – Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support*

Universal speech and language supports, as outlined above, are an essential component of the provision at Radlett Lodge School as they ensure that pupils' communication skills are respected, celebrated and promoted at all times. However, as a school, we believe that pupils experiencing complex and ongoing communication difficulties require more than the universal level of support.

In a discussion of the research relating to different level of SaLT provision, Ebbels and colleagues (Susan H. Ebbels et al, 2018) concluded the following:

“Good evidence exists for SLTs delivering direct individualized intervention and we should ensure that this is available to children with pervasive and/or complex language disorders”

The majority of pupils will receive direct therapy sessions delivered by a Speech and Language Therapist. Some pupils respond better to intervention that is delivered by a highly familiar adult, and in these cases a SaLT programme containing targets and support plan will be delivered by a member of the class or residential team and overseen closely by the SaLT. Pupils with mild speech and language difficulties may also respond well to a SaLT programme delivered indirectly. SaLT targets and therapy plans are reviewed regularly, with progress and next-steps being shared with parents and teachers in writing.

At the Targeted Level therapy is usually provided within the class group. Depending on the goals, therapy sessions may take place:

- Within the classroom (following a structured “lesson” format)
- In the hall (to work on reciprocal play or using action words in context)
- In the playground (to target play and interaction skills)
- On Community Based Education trips (to practise social communication skills in “real” situations)

Activities are adapted to ensure all pupils in the class can participate and work towards targets that are relevant to their own strengths and needs. Sessions may be planned and delivered collaboratively with the class teacher or led by the SaLT only. The SaLT will expect the teacher to be present for the majority of sessions in order to facilitate carry over of strategies into regular lessons and daily activities.

Specialist SaLT interventions

At certain points in time, pupils may require one-to-one therapy sessions due to:

- A stipulation in their EHCP

- Lack of progress within group therapy sessions
- A specific speech or language need that cannot be addressed with group sessions (for example, the pupil requires intervention for a speech sound disorder and this is not relevant to other members of the class or school)

Where one of the above applies, the SaLT team will provide blocks of one-to-one or paired therapy, subject to half-termly review (and / or annual review in the case of EHCP stipulations).

Additionally, colleagues from the school or residential teams, and parents are able to refer individual pupils for additional support if there is a concern regarding their well-being or educational progress (See Appendix 2 for the referral form). Referrals are triaged by the therapy team on a weekly basis, and a decision is made regarding the urgency of the referral and which professional is best placed to lead the referral. This may be a SaLT, but on other occasions it could be a Positive Behaviour Support Coordinator, Occupational Therapist, Deputy Principal, or Autism Lead Practitioner. The aims of any intervention will be defined and the pupil's parents and teacher will be informed of the initial plan of action. Referrals will be closed once the aims have been achieved or are no longer appropriate (due to a change in the situation or presentation of the pupil).

CONSENT

Parental consent

When a pupil joins Radlett Lodge School, their parents will be asked to review and sign a therapy consent form. Consent may be withdrawn at any time by notifying the school in writing.

Pupil consent – under 16 years of age

Speech and Language Therapy interventions must always be delivered in a manner that is respectful of the individual and mindful of their feelings, views and regulatory state. If a pupil communicates that they do not want to participate (via any communication mode), initially the staff member will make adaptations to the environment, task demands, activity, or their own interaction style in an attempt to support the pupil to engage. Breaks may be given or the activity may be delayed until a later time. If the pupil continues to protest or show signs of distress/ significant dysregulation, the session will be stopped for the day.

The staff member delivering the session should reflect on the situation (for example, using their reflective journal or during a reflective supervision) and encourage the pupil to do the same when possible. Advice may be sought from colleagues and family members and an action plan for future therapy sessions should be made. Where the pupil continues to reject the intervention or show unusual levels of dysregulation during sessions, the

approach and method of delivery (e.g. direct/ indirect, group/ individual, frequency/ length of session) will need to be changed.

Pupil consent – 16 years of age and older

In England, individuals over the age of 16 years are legally able to consent to their own medical treatment (including speech and language therapy). However, many pupils at Radlett Lodge will find it challenging to understand and weigh up information about a potential therapy plan and then communicate a decision.

Mental capacity refers to the ability to make an informed decision. Mental capacity is time and decision specific. If the SaLT, other staff members, or parents think that a pupil aged over 16 years may struggle to make a decision about whether or not to consent to therapy, a mental capacity assessment should be completed. The Mental Capacity Act is the legal framework used in England that describe how this assessment should be completed. The mental capacity assessment will indicate whether the pupil can make the decision independently, with support, or needs others to make it on her/his behalf, in her/his “best interests”.

See also Early Years and Post 16 Policies.

References

Susan H. Ebbels, Vicky Slonims, Julie E. Dockrell , Courtenay Frazier Norbury (2018). Evidence-based pathways to intervention for children with language disorders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*.