Supporting Communication for Children of Various Ages and Developmental Levels in the Classroom

Many children in early childhood classes may have conditions that affect their development, including developmental delays, autism, neurological and perceptual disorders, or vision, hearing, speech, or language impairments.

Children with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) have a specific plan to help them meet their personal goals, and very often these children will need changes or adaptations to daily routines, the classroom environment, and curriculum.

In addition, many children who do not have disabilities might also have difficulty communicating for a variety of reasons, for example, family and cultural dynamics, lack of experiences including lack of opportunities to practice communication skills.

It is often challenging for teachers, therapists, and other providers to accommodate and support the needs of varying levels of developmental skills within a classroom. It is important to plan for supporting children throughout the routines of the day, through interactions with adults and peers, through play and center time.

When children experience difficulties for any reason (age, delays, disabilities, lack of practice) it is important that difficulties in participation are not misinterpreted as "behavior", noncompliance, or lack of motivation and that adults respond in respectful and supportive ways.

During young ages (or during young or delayed stages of development) children often experience difficulties such as those listed below:

- Unable to formulate a message and use sounds, gestures, and actions to convey needs and preferences
- Understanding directions with multiple parts.
- Engaging in activities which require responses related to multiple domains (listening, following motions, recalling the information from such activities)
- Recalling facts and concepts from lessons
- Manipulating and completing fine/gross motor tasks
- Engaging with and initiating interactions with peers
- Making choices, engaging in pretend and/or group play.

A Key Factor:
Gaining interest in order to develop skills in listening, engaging, and responding.
Consider ways to increase interest of children with varying developmental levels.

Toys and play – Many young children enjoy simple action toys that might not require "pretend" or fine-motor skills.

- Adults should interact with children who prefer "one-player" toys. Comment, ask to take turns, encourage a peer buddy who will interact.
- Set a switch toy or a wind-down toy to end its action so that the child has to make a request to start it again.
- Engage in simple games which don't require a long time to play. Include games which accept gestures, motions, sounds or those in which visual symbols are involved.

Highly engaging activities help to initiate engagement.

Switch toys support children with motor difficulties and facilitate interaction.
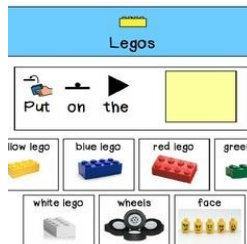
Step-by-step visuals help children who have difficulty processing multiple steps.

Social stories with photographs help children understand the connection between "real-life" and pretend play.

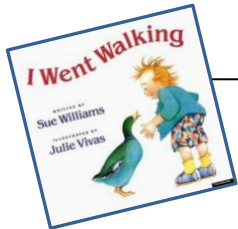**Music** – Use songs with simple rhymes and motions

- Make up songs that include children's names, daily routines, and common actions.
- Include familiar songs with themes from favorite characters.
- Use repetitive songs with easily-repeated sounds or words.
- Music can be worked into practically any activity.
  - Opening and closing routines
  - Transition routines
- Make a music center available to children throughout the day. If funding is an issue, most public libraries will loan out cassettes with sing-along books.
- Choice boards which support children in making choices of classroom songs are important for developing communication and participation skills.
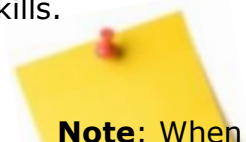
Note: When developing supports for song/book activities it is important to use combinations of supports with songs: visuals, books, motions, interactive and hands-on activities.

Books – Use high-interest books and repetitive text. Remember the developmental level of children when selecting books.

- Choose books with recognizable drawings and photos.
- Read repetitive books. Leave some final words out and give children a chance to fill in the word – Remember to allow wait time.
- Create class books using familiar book patterns but using names of children in the class.

Resources for lists of Repetitive and Predictable Books and Songs for Early Childhood:

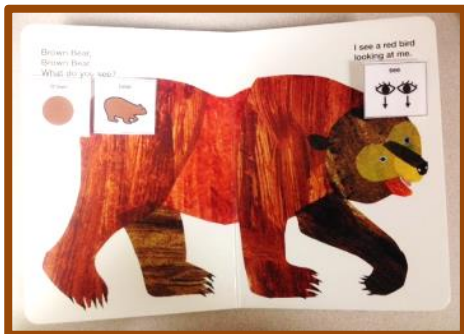http://www.aacintervention.com/home/180009852/180009852/Images/repeated%20line%20books.pdf

http://www.talkingkids.org/p/repetive-books-for-language-learning.html

https://bussongs.com/learning-songs

Example: Using the familiar pattern and repetitions of Brown Bear, Brown Bear for class-made books with children's photos and drawings.

Use interactive books to support all children in responding to classroom read-alouds and shared reading. Interactive books help to maintain attention and aid in teaching vocabulary.