



Total Communication Approach

Document Purpose: To provide a consistent, inclusive, and personalised approach to communication across Remedicare Education.

Audience: All staff working with learners at Remedicare Education.

Reviewed By: Senior Leadership Team

Annual or following significant changes in communication practice.

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Total Communication Approach

Communication is at the heart of learning

At Remedicare Education, we believe that every learner has a voice and every learner communicates.

Communication is not limited to spoken words. For many of our learners, communication begins through movement, facial expressions, eye gaze, sounds, body language, sensory responses, gestures, objects, symbols, signs, AAC systems, and interactions with trusted adults.

Our Total Communication Approach ensures that every learner is supported to understand, express themselves, develop relationships, make choices, and participate meaningfully within their learning environment.

This framework provides staff with the knowledge, understanding, and practical strategies required to support learners with Severe Learning Disabilities (SLD), Autism, complex needs, and additional communication needs.

The approach is embedded throughout Remedicare Education and supports consistent practice between staff, families, schools, Speech and Language Therapists, and Local Authorities.

1. What is Total Communication?

Total Communication is an approach that combines different communication methods to support both understanding and expression.

At Remedicare Education, we recognise that communication can include:

- Spoken language
- Vocalisations
- Facial expressions
- Eye gaze
- Body movements
- Gestures
- Signs
- Objects of reference
- Photographs
- Symbols
- Communication books

- AAC devices
- Intensive Interaction

The purpose of Total Communication is not to replace speech but to provide every learner with the most effective way to communicate.

Staff must always consider:

“How is this learner communicating with me, and how can I support them to communicate more independently?”



2. Communication Development: The Language Development Pyramid

Communication develops gradually. Learners need strong foundations before they can develop more advanced language skills.

The Language Development Pyramid helps staff understand that communication development begins with:

Attention and Regulation

Before communication can develop, learners need to feel safe, regulated, and connected.

Staff support this through:

- Predictable routines
- Understanding sensory needs
- Building relationships
- Creating motivating experiences

Interaction and Engagement

Learners begin to:

- Notice other people
- Share attention
- Respond to others
- Enjoy interaction

This stage is supported through Intensive Interaction.

Understanding Communication

Learners develop understanding through:

- Repeated language
- Visual supports
- Objects

- Routines
- Consistent communication partners

Expressive Communication

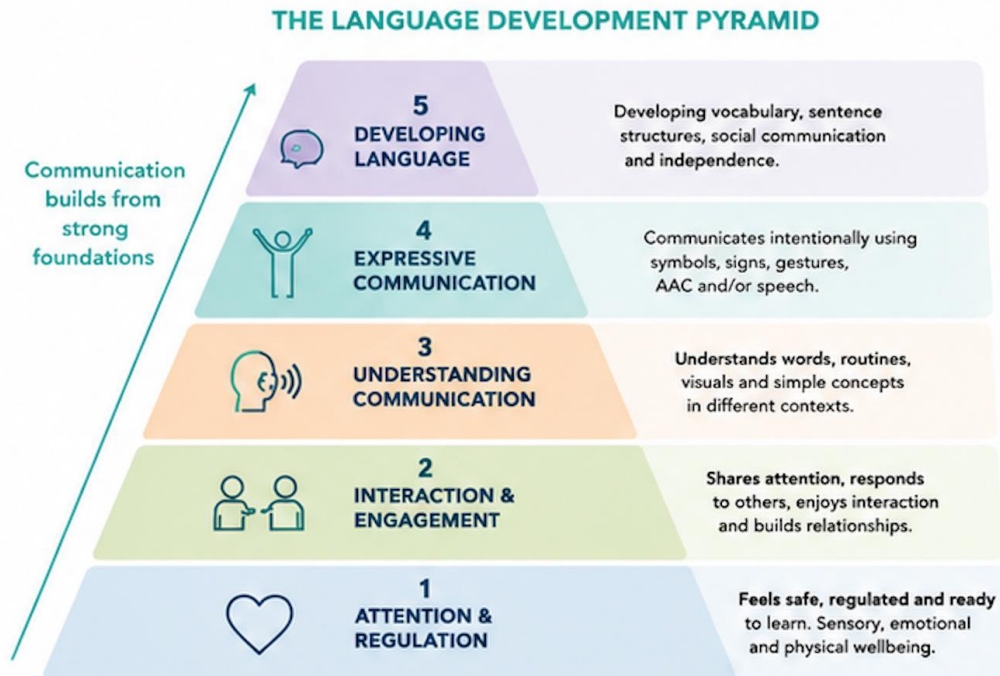
Learners begin to communicate intentionally through:

- Choices
- Gestures
- Symbols
- Signs
- AAC
- Speech

Developing Language

Learners develop:

- Vocabulary
- Sentence structures
- Social communication
- Independence



3. Intensive Interaction: Building the Foundations of Communication

What is Intensive Interaction?

Intensive Interaction is an approach used to support learners who are developing early communication and social interaction skills.

It focuses on building meaningful relationships by joining the learner's communication style and creating enjoyable shared experiences.

Intensive Interaction helps learners develop:

- Awareness of another person
- Attention and engagement
- Shared enjoyment
- Turn-taking
- Communication intent
- Social connection
- Initiating interactions

For some learners, Intensive Interaction may be the first step towards developing intentional communication.

INTENSIVE INTERACTION RECORDING - KEY INDICATORS							
LEVEL NAME	ENCOUNTER	AWARENESS	ATTENTION AND RESPONSE	ENGAGEMENT	PARTICIPATION	INVOLVEMENT	INITIATING INTERACTIONS
Key Indicator	Absence of responses <i>to what is happening socially</i>	Fleeting sensory awareness <i>of what is happening socially</i>	1-3 seconds attention and Emotional response or Physical response <i>to what is happening socially</i>	3+ seconds attention and Sequence of responses One-way-ness <i>to what is happening socially</i>	Turn-taking Two-way-ness Flow	Restarting the flow of 'two-way-ness' after a pause	Starting the flow of 'two-way-ness' independently Practitioner does not have to approach
Example interactions	Person continues with what they were doing before the practitioner approached No evidence that the practitioner's approach has influenced the person in any way	Fleeting eye contact Other body language cues indicating awareness through hearing/touch/smell/taste	Eye contact (or other sensory attention) A smile Reaching out Making a sound A movement Pushing away Brief sign of positive/negative mood Making a demand for an object or sensory experience	Sustained eye contact (or other sensory attention) Repeated sounds Holding hands Leading the practitioner somewhere Person gives objects to the practitioner Person demands objects or sensory experiences in a 'one-way' interaction	The person's response is influenced by what the practitioner does and vice versa The content of the interaction is co-created and involves something new Taking turns making vocal sounds Taking turns tapping	After a short pause, the person returns to the practitioner and attempts to restart the two-way-ness The key is that the person is asking for an interaction that is co-created in contrast to simply demanding an object or sensory experience.	This level describes an interaction when the person is eager for the co-created dialogue and tries to get it going irrespective of whether the practitioner approached or is working to be available for interaction

The Principles of Intensive Interaction

Follow the learner Staff should observe what the learner enjoys and use this as the starting point for interaction. Examples: • Copying movements • Responding to sounds • Joining repetitive actions • Matching facial expressions	Be responsive The adult responds to the learner's communication attempts. A movement, sound, look, or change in behaviour may be the learner saying: • "Notice me" • "I like this" • "Continue" • "Stop" • "I want to interact"
Create two-way communication The aim is not for the adult to lead the interaction. The interaction should become shared.	Value small communication attempts Every response matters. A learner:

Examples: Learner makes a sound → adult copies sound → learner responds → interaction continues.	• Looking towards an adult • Smiling • Moving closer • Making a sound • Reaching out • Turning away is communicating.
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Intensive Interaction Development Levels

Staff should understand that learners progress through different stages.

Level 1: Awareness of Interaction	The learner may show limited awareness of another person. Staff focus on: • Being available • Building trust • Recognising responses •
Level 2: Attention and Response	The learner begins showing responses such as: • Eye contact • Body movements • Sounds • Changes in emotional state

Level 3: Engagement	The learner begins to: • Sustain attention • Enjoy interaction • Repeat responses
Level 4: Participation	The learner begins to: • Take turns • Influence the interaction • Respond to another person
Level 5: Initiating Interaction	The learner begins to: • Start interactions • Request social engagement • Restart interaction after pauses At this stage, the learner is communicating for connection, not only to obtain an object or activity.

4. Seven Levels of Communication

The Seven Levels of Communication framework supports staff to identify how a learner currently communicates and what support they need next.

Level 1: Pre-intentional Communication	Communication is shown through: • Facial expressions • Body movements • Behaviour changes Staff responsibility: Observe, interpret, and respond.
Level 2: Intentional Communication	The learner begins to intentionally communicate. Examples: • Reaching • Looking

	• Vocalising
Level 3: Unconventional Communication	Communication may include: • Pulling an adult • Moving towards something • Physical prompts Staff should acknowledge the message and introduce more effective communication methods.
Level 4: Conventional Communication	The learner uses: • Gestures • Pointing • Facial expressions
Level 5: Concrete Symbols	The learner communicates using: • Objects • Photos • Real-life items
Level 6: Abstract Symbols	The learner uses: • Symbols • Communication boards • AAC
Level 7: Language	The learner communicates through: • Speech • Written language • More complex communication systems

5. Core Vocabulary

What is Core Vocabulary?

Core vocabulary refers to a small group of highly useful words that make up a large proportion of everyday communication. These words are not linked to one specific activity or object; instead, they can be used across different environments, people, and situations.

For many of our learners, developing communication is not about learning lots of individual nouns (for example, “car”, “apple”, “ball”), but about developing meaningful words that allow them to express their thoughts, choices, feelings, and needs.

Core vocabulary gives learners the ability to communicate messages such as:

- What they want.
- What they need.
- What they think.
- How they feel.
- What they want to happen next.
- How they want to interact with others.

At Remedicare Education, core vocabulary is embedded throughout the whole day and is modelled consistently by all staff.

Staff should consistently model words such as:

Actions	Social Communication	Independence
• Want • Need • Help • Stop • Go • More • Finished	• Hello • Goodbye • Like • Don't like • Yes • No	• My • Mine • I • You • Different • Again

Why is Core Vocabulary Important?

Core vocabulary supports learners to become active communicators rather than passive participants.

It helps learners to:

Develop independence

Learners can communicate directly rather than relying on adults interpreting their behaviour.

For example:

Instead of a learner pushing an activity away, they can communicate:

“Stop”

“Finished”

“Don’t like”

Core Vocabulary and Total Communication

At Remedicare Education, core vocabulary should be supported through all communication methods, including:

- Speech
- Signs
- Symbols
- Communication boards
- AAC devices
- Objects of reference
- Gestures

A learner does not need to use speech to develop language. Communication develops when adults consistently model meaningful language using the learner's preferred communication system.

Teaching Core Vocabulary

Core vocabulary should not be taught only during planned communication sessions. It should be modelled naturally throughout the learner's day.

Staff should:

Model language

Adults should demonstrate communication by pointing to symbols, signing, or using AAC while speaking.

Example:

During an activity:

Adult says:

"More bubbles?"

Adult models:

MORE + BUBBLES

6. Visual Communication

Supporting Understanding, Independence and Expression

At Remedicare Education, we recognise that many learners benefit from information being presented visually. Visual communication supports learners to understand the world around them, anticipate what is happening, make choices, express themselves, and become more independent.

Many of our learners process visual information more effectively than spoken language alone. Spoken language is temporary and disappears once it has been said, whereas visuals provide a consistent and permanent reference point that learners can return to.

Visual communication supports learners by making information:

- Clearer
- More predictable
- Easier to understand
- Less overwhelming
- More accessible

Visual supports are used alongside spoken language to strengthen understanding and provide learners with additional ways to communicate.

Staff should use:

- Visual timetables
- Now and Next boards
- Choice boards
- Symbols
- Photos
- Objects of reference

Visuals should always be:

- Consistent
- Accessible
- Individualised
- Used alongside spoken language

Why Do We Use Visual Communication?

Visual communication can support learners to:

Understand expectations

Visuals help learners understand:

- What is happening now.
- What is happening next.
- What is expected of them.
- What choices are available.

For example, a learner may not fully understand the spoken instruction:

“After maths, we are going outside.”

A visual sequence can make this clearer:

Maths → Outside

Reduce anxiety and uncertainty

Many learners experience anxiety when routines change or when they do not know what is happening next.

Visual supports provide:

- Predictability.
- Reassurance.
- Preparation for transitions.
- Support during changes.

Develop independence

Visual communication helps learners rely less on adult prompts.

Instead of an adult repeatedly telling a learner what to do, the learner can access the information themselves.

Examples:

- Checking their timetable.
- Selecting from a choice board.
- Following a visual sequence.

Support communication and choice

Visuals allow learners to express:

- Preferences.
- Needs.
- Feelings.
- Opinions.
- Decisions.

Examples:

“I want...”

“I need help.”

“Finished.”

“Stop.”

“Different.”

7. Now and Next

Supporting Transitions and Reducing Uncertainty

A Now and Next board is a simple visual support that shows learners what is happening **now** and what will happen **next**.

It supports learners to understand immediate expectations and prepares them for transitions between activities.

Example:



Staff should:

- Refer to the board regularly
- Support transitions
- Reduce anxiety around change

Why Do We Use Now and Next Boards?

Now and Next boards support learners to:

- Understand sequences.
- Prepare for change.
- Move between activities.
- Develop flexibility.
- Reduce anxiety.
- Increase independence.

For learners who find change difficult, knowing what is coming next can provide reassurance and confidence.

How Staff Should Use Now and Next

Staff should:

1. Introduce the Now and Next board before an activity begins.
2. Refer to it throughout the activity.
3. Use clear and consistent language.
4. Celebrate when the learner completes the “Now” activity.
5. Move to the “Next” activity visually.

Example:

“First swimming, then lunch.”

The adult points to:

Swimming → Lunch

Important Considerations

Now and Next boards should:

- Show meaningful activities.
- Use visuals the learner understands.
- Be positioned where the learner can access them.
- Be used consistently by all staff.

The aim is not compliance; the aim is supporting understanding and helping learners feel secure.

8. Working Towards Boards

Supporting Motivation, Achievement and Independence

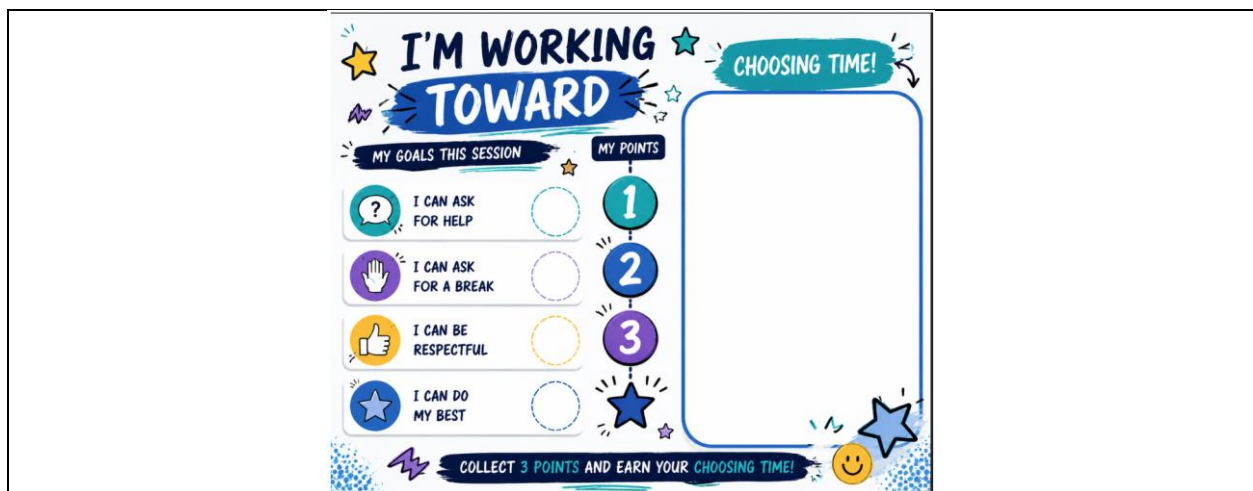
Working Towards boards are visual tools that help learners understand goals, expectations, and achievements.

They support learners to see:

- What they are working towards.
- How they are progressing.
- What success looks like.

Working Towards boards are particularly useful for learners who benefit from seeing a clear purpose or outcome.

Example:



Why Do We Use Working Towards Boards?

They support learners to develop:

Motivation

Learners can see that completing an activity leads towards something meaningful.

Understanding

Learners develop an understanding that:

“First I complete this, then I can access the next activity.”

Independence

Learners begin to recognise their own progress without needing constant adult reassurance.

Effective Use of Working Towards Boards

Staff should:

- Ensure the goal is meaningful for the learner.
- Use motivating outcomes.
- Keep expectations realistic.
- Celebrate achievements.
- Avoid using boards as a reward system only.

Working Towards boards should support engagement and understanding rather than being viewed as a behaviour management tool.

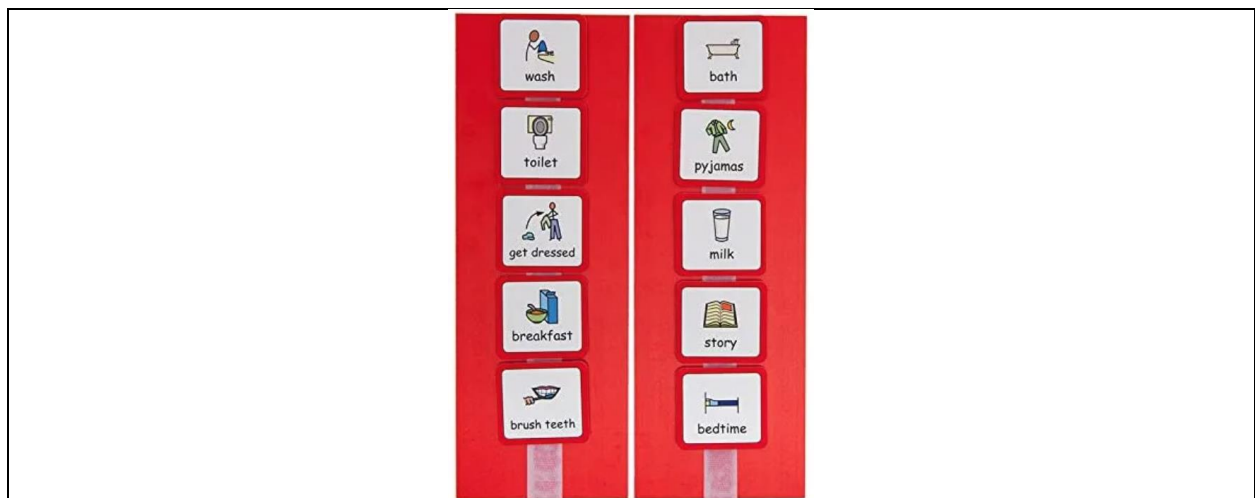
9. Visual Timetables

Visual timetables provide structure and predictability.

They support learners to:

- Understand routines
- Prepare for changes
- Develop independence

Staff must ensure timetables are reviewed throughout the day and adapted when routines change.



Why Are Visual Timetables Important?

Visual timetables support learners to:

- Understand routines.
- Prepare for transitions.
- Develop independence.

- Understand time and sequence.
- Reduce uncertainty.
- Participate more confidently.

For many learners, knowing what is happening throughout the day helps them feel safe and ready to learn.

Different Types of Visual Timetables

Depending on the learner's needs, timetables may be:

Whole-Day Timetable

Shows the overall structure of the day.

Individual Timetable

Designed specifically for one learner.

Activity Sequence

Shows smaller steps within an activity.

Example:

Making a drink:

1. Get cup
2. Pour drink
3. Stir
4. Drink
5. Finished

Remedicare Education Visual Communication Commitment

At Remedicare Education, visual communication is not an additional resource; it is a fundamental part of how we support learners to understand, communicate, and participate.

Every visual provided to a learner should have a purpose:

To increase understanding.

To develop independence.

To support communication.

To give every learner a voice.

10. Communication Boards

Supporting Learners to Express Their Voice

At Remedicare Education, communication boards are an important part of our Total Communication Approach. They provide learners with a consistent and accessible way to express their thoughts, choices, needs, feelings, and ideas.

A communication board is a visual tool that contains symbols, photographs, words, or a combination of these, allowing learners to communicate by selecting, pointing, looking, touching, or indicating their chosen message.

Communication boards support learners who:

- Are developing early communication skills.
- Have limited spoken language.
- Require additional support to understand and express language.
- Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).
- Benefit from visual structure and support.

Communication boards do not replace speech. They support communication development by providing learners with another way to communicate while adults continue to model spoken language alongside visuals.

The Purpose of Communication Boards

Communication boards support learners to:

Make choices

Learners can express preferences and have control over their environment.

Examples:

- “I want...”
- “I like...”
- “I don’t like...”
- “Choose”

Express needs and feelings

Learners can communicate:

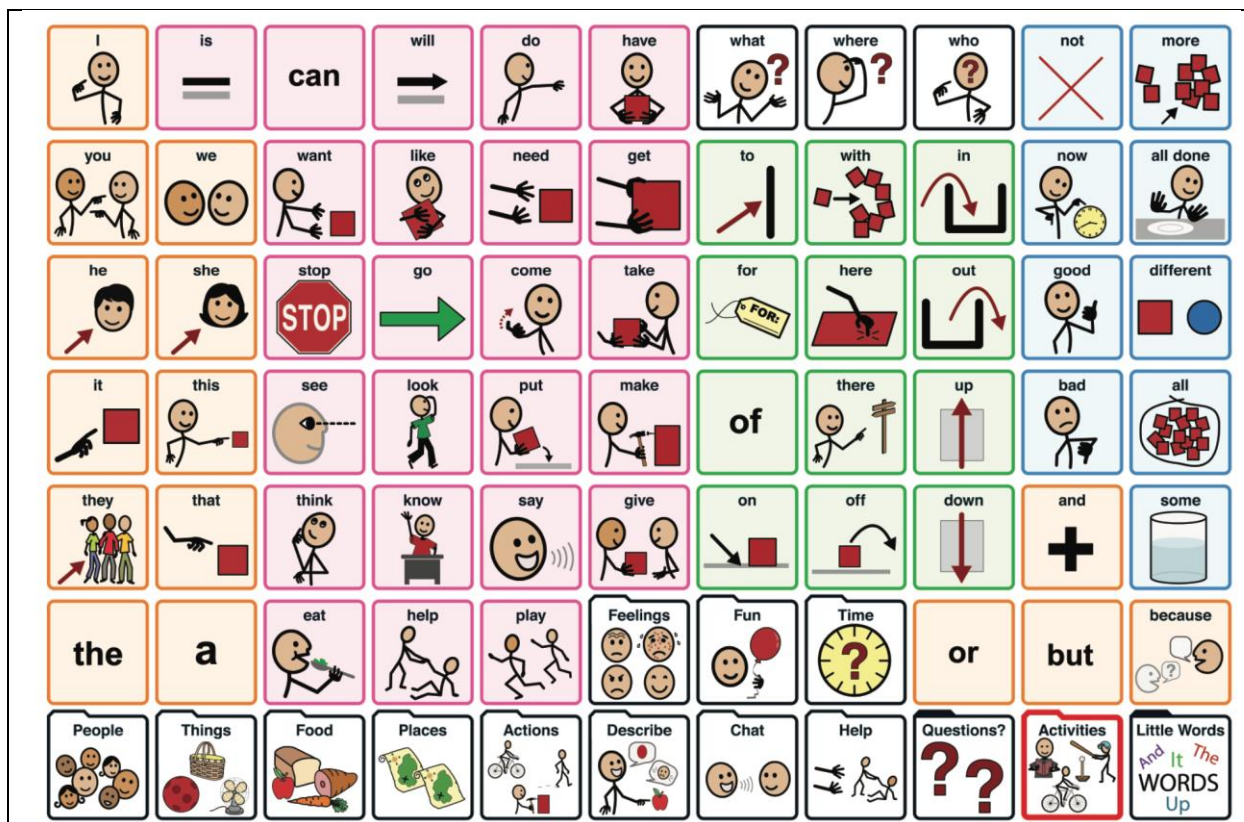
- Help
- More
- Finished
- Stop
- Happy
- Sad
- Worried
- Tired

Develop independence

Communication boards reduce reliance on adults interpreting behaviour and enable learners to communicate directly.

Boards provide opportunities for learners to:

- Learn new vocabulary.
- Combine symbols.
- Develop sentence structures.
- Understand language.



11. Staff Expectations

Every Interaction is an Opportunity for Communication

At Remedicare Education, every member of staff has a responsibility to support, recognise, and develop learner communication.

Communication is central to learning, emotional wellbeing, independence, relationships, and participation. Staff must understand that communication occurs in many forms and that every learner has the ability to communicate when provided with the appropriate support, opportunities, and communication systems.

All staff are expected to create an environment where learners feel heard, understood, valued, and empowered.

Staff Must:

Assume Competence

Staff must always presume that every learner has the ability to communicate and express themselves.

Staff should:

- Recognise that behaviour is a form of communication.
- Look beyond the behaviour to understand the message.
- Provide appropriate communication opportunities.

Recognise and Respond to All Forms of Communication

Staff must recognise communication in all its forms, including:

- Speech.
- Vocalisations.
- Facial expressions.
- Eye gaze.
- Body language.
- Gestures.
- Signs.
- Objects of reference.
- Symbols.
- Communication boards.
- AAC systems.

All communication attempts should be acknowledged and valued.

Use the Total Communication Approach Consistently

Staff must use a range of communication strategies throughout the learner's day, including:

- Spoken language alongside visuals.
- Core vocabulary modelling.
- Communication boards.
- AAC systems.
- Intensive Interaction.
- Visual supports.
- Choice-making opportunities.

Consistency between staff members is essential to enable learners to develop confidence and independence.

Model Communication Throughout the Day

Staff should actively model communication rather than waiting for learners to initiate.

This includes:

- Using core vocabulary.
- Pointing to symbols.
- Modelling communication boards.
- Using signs where appropriate.
- Demonstrating AAC use.

Learners develop communication skills when they see communication being used meaningfully around them.

Provide Meaningful Communication Opportunities

Staff should create opportunities for learners to:

- Make choices.
- Express preferences.
- Request support.
- Reject activities.
- Share enjoyment.
- Express emotions.
- Initiate interaction.

Communication should not only happen when adults ask questions; learners should have opportunities to communicate throughout the whole day.

Use Visual Supports Effectively

Staff must ensure visual supports are used consistently and meaningfully.

This includes:

- Visual timetables.
- Now and Next boards.
- Working Towards boards.
- Choice boards.
- Communication boards.

Visuals should support understanding, reduce anxiety, develop independence, and prepare learners for transitions.

Support Intensive Interaction and Social Communication

Staff should recognise that communication begins with connection and interaction.

Where appropriate, staff should use Intensive Interaction approaches to support:

- Attention and engagement.
- Shared enjoyment.
- Turn-taking.
- Two-way interaction.
- Initiating communication.

Staff should follow the learner's lead and value small communication attempts.

Promote Independence

The aim of communication support is to reduce dependence on adults and increase learner autonomy.

Staff should encourage learners to:

- Access their own communication systems.
- Make choices independently.
- Express opinions.
- Advocate for their own needs.

Record, Share and Review Communication Progress

Staff must contribute to understanding each learner's communication development by:

- Recording significant communication changes.
- Sharing successful strategies.
- Updating learner communication profiles.
- Working collaboratively with families and professionals.

Follow Individual Communication Plans

Every learner's communication profile is unique.

Staff must:

- Understand individual communication needs.
- Follow agreed strategies.
- Use preferred communication systems.
- Ensure consistency across environments.

Communication Commitment

At Remedicare Education, we believe:

Every learner has a voice.

Every interaction has meaning.

Every communication attempt matters.

Communication is not something that happens only during a planned session; it is developed through every relationship, activity, and interaction throughout the learner's day.

Through our Total Communication Approach, Intensive Interaction, core vocabulary, communication boards, AAC, visual supports, and consistent staff practice, we ensure every learner has the opportunity to communicate, connect, and develop their voice.