The key features of a communication-friendly classroom

It is widely recognised that the environment can make a big difference to communication, and there is a growing amount of evidence which identifies the key features that make a classroom or a school 'communication friendly'.

There are a number of similar terms which different people and organisations use, such as 'communication supportive' or 'communication friendly spaces'™ but we're going to stick with how to make your classrooms 'communication-friendly'.

The purpose of communication-friendly schools and classrooms

A communication-friendly classroom should make communication as easy, effective and enjoyable as possible. It should provide opportunities for everyone to talk, listen, understand and take part, and will support learning and social and emotional development too.

Communication-friendly classrooms are great for supporting everyone's communication skills and usually include features which will also be particularly beneficial for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

HOW DOES THIS LINK TO THE CODE?

Learning environments are mentioned in the 2014 SEND Code of Practice. All schools **must** publish information on their website about how they implement their policy for SEN (known as the SEN Information Report). Within this, schools **must** include information on 'how adaptations are made to the curriculum and the learning environment of children and young people with SEN' (section 6.79 of the Code). This factsheet will help you think about what these adaptations might be; as well as being an element of quality first teaching, developing a communication-friendly classroom can also be a way of supporting better communication for all pupils.

There are some simple things you can do to make your classroom more communication-friendly, and lots of useful tools and resources to help you think about what will work best in your setting. Below you'll find some suggestions of things to try and recommendations for further guidance. First, though, you may want to consider the three key features of a communication-friendly classroom.

Key features of communication-friendly classrooms

Communication-friendly classrooms can be broken down into 3 key areas, listed below.

1. **The language learning environment,** which could include the following features:

   - ✓ **Space, light and layout**
     Are there cosy, comfortable places to talk? Can you see people's faces when they are talking? Can you rearrange the layout of the room to suit different opportunities for talking – as pairs, or in small or large groups?

   - ✓ **Noise levels**
     What is the general level of noise like? Are there noisy distractions from inside or out? Are there ways to gain people's attention? Can everyone hear and be heard? Are there times of quietness?

   - ✓ **Using visual support**
     Signs, symbols, photographs and sometimes writing are features of many approaches to a communication-friendly classroom. How widely and consistently are they used? Are they used as labels, to support routines, or as timetables? Are parents shown how they work? Is there the right amount and kind of visual support for the age and development of the children or young people?

   - ✓ **Clear and consistent routines**
     How does the classroom environment help children to know what to expect and when? How well are visual supports used to help children understand and follow routines?

2. **Language Learning Interactions,** which could include the following features:

   - ✓ **The role of adults in the classroom**
     The ways in which adults listen and talk with pupils is absolutely fundamental in creating a communication-friendly classroom.

   - ✓ This might include modelling the type of language they would want to hear, supporting students to ask key questions to facilitate thinking and learning, extending and expanding on what students say, and introducing and explaining new words for learning and specific subject areas.

3. **Language Learning Opportunities,** which could include the following features:

   - ✓ **How opportunities are planned and created to support communication throughout the day**
     Almost all events, encounters or activities within the day can support speech, language and communication, so a communication-friendly school looks to make sure all these opportunities are planned for and used. Alongside this, activities specifically designed to focus on communication should be planned.

   - ✓ This might include small group work, guided group activities, structured conversations, strategies to encourage discussion and collaborative learning, project and investigative work, and simple speaking and listening strategies such as hot-seating, snowballing, etc.

Key features also include the ways in which parents, carers and others are part of the school's approach to supporting communication.

There are a number of tools and resources which you might find useful; many of these are set out as audits or checklists. It's entirely up to you as a school how you use the information available. You could simply have a read and pick one or two things you'd like to try out in your classrooms; you could decide that you want to evaluate your approach fully and work through one of the audits.

When you've decided what you want to try out, make a plan and give it a go! Don't forget to note down how well it worked, what you might do next and how you'll share this with other people.

Some ideas for communication-friendly classrooms

Here are some simple things you could try...

- Have a comfortable space in your classroom or around school for quiet times to talk
- Label areas of your classroom or whole school with photographs, pictures or symbols; develop interactive displays to support communication
- Build in an opportunity for pupils to have structured conversations with you or other adults
- Introduce activities where pupils have structured opportunities to talk with their peers
- Make a poster using visual support for classroom routines
- Try out different room layouts for group work and discussions
- Model and teach students how to use their language for thinking and learning

Further guidance for communication-friendly classrooms

Here are some resources, tools and information on communication-friendly approaches which are available free of charge:

- The *All Together Now* toolkit was developed to help organisations plan their involvement in Hello, the national year of communication. The Toolkit contains a checklist on communication-friendly environments to get you started (download from The Communication Trust website).
- The Inclusion Development Programme is a series of materials aimed to support teachers, teaching assistants and trainee teachers to increase their knowledge and skills in working with children and young people with a range of special educational needs. You can find PDFs and interactive materials on SLCN, including a section on communication-friendly environments, at www.idponline.org.uk.
- The Better Communication Research programme has developed a Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool, based on research evidence. This provides a framework for professionals to profile the oral language environment in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms and other early years learning spaces through a structured observation, although many of the principles apply to classrooms for older children too. The Tool separates out features into: the Language Learning Environment (the physical space); Language Learning Opportunities (structured opportunities in the classroom to support communication and Language learning Interactions (how adults talk with pupils). You can find it on The Communication Trust website.

- The Symbols Inclusion Project (SIP) website has lots of useful information, mainly from an inclusion perspective, on communication-friendly environments, including visual support, communication, environment and examples, available at www.symbolsinclusionproject.org/evidence/cfe/warwickshire.
- You can read more about the evidence on the impact of environment on children's communication skills in C4EO's report *Grasping the nettle: early intervention for children, families and communities* (2010).

Taking it further

If you're really keen on looking at becoming communication-friendly, you might be interested in taking a look at Step 3 of the Commitment, as there are currently a number of different schemes, including some that can lead to an accreditation if you wish.