



Fostering Communication Skills Through Connection

INTRODUCTIONS

Today's Facilitators



PAL Participants

Please introduce yourself in the **chat**:

- Your **NAME**
- **Shelter** where you volunteer

GOALS FOR THIS TRAINING

We hope you'll leave this session prepared to ...

- Understand why communication matters
- What communication looks like in the Playspace
- Your role as a volunteer in supporting communication
- Why we don't correct or pressure
- Strategies to try in the Playspace

Shared Practices



Safety First

- *We create spaces where children feel physically and emotionally safe.*

Consistency & Predictability

- *We offer consistent schedules, clear communication, and stable relationships.*

Collaboration & Shared Ownership

- *Shelter staff, Horizons staff, and PALs work together to build and maintain healing environments.*

Empathy & Understanding

- *We approach children & families with empathy, recognizing that behaviors often reflect traumatic experiences.*

Empowerment & Voice

- *We respect the voices and choices of children & families whenever possible to promote autonomy and self-confidence. This is critical for children impacted by trauma.*

Cultural Humility & Respect

- *We honor the diverse backgrounds & strengths of the children & families we serve.*

Why Communication Matters



Communication is about how children learn to:

- Share ideas and feelings both with words and without words
- Connect with others and build relationships
- Express needs and emotions
- Understand the world around them



Communication skills are the building blocks of social-emotional development. They help children feel confident, connected, and understood.

What this looks like in the Playspace



Children practice communication when they:

- Use sounds, gestures, or words to express needs
- Ask for help, comfort, or attention
- Take turns talking and listening in play
- Share stories or describe what they are doing
- Show pride in learning a new word or expressing an idea



Even small moments—like babbling, naming a toy, or responding to a smile—help strengthen a child’s ability to connect and communicate.

Your Role as a Volunteer



As a Playspace volunteer, you are not expected to be a speech therapist or language teacher. You are here to:

- Create a safe, warm space where children feel heard and valued
- Follow the child's lead and respond with interest
- Model rich, gentle language and joyful interactions

This helps children feel confident communicating and helps build the trust they need to grow in all areas.



Why We Don't Correct or Pressure



We don't:

- Correct grammar or pronunciation
- Pressure to “say it right” or repeat words
- Finish their sentences

Why?

- Communication takes courage, especially under stress or trauma
- Focusing on correctness can discourage expression
- Language builds through warm, responsive interactions

Instead: Model naturally, celebrate efforts, and meet them where they are.



Try These Strategies



| What you can do | Why it helps |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Get down to eye level | Builds connection |
| Use simple language | Supports Understanding |
| Hold objects near your face | Helps focus |
| Label environment | Builds vocabulary |
| Pause | Gives times to respond |
| Reflect and expand | Models language |
| Narrate | Builds vocabulary and awareness |
| Listen fully | Encourages communication |
| Make eye contact | Build connection |

Scenario: Sharing Ideas and Feelings



Age: 4 years old

What Happens:

During a craft activity, a child proudly holds up their drawing and says, "This is my house." Another child responds, "That's not a house!" The first child frowns and puts the paper down.

What Not to Do:

The PAL says, "It's just pretend. Don't worry about it," and moves on to another group.

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Misses the opportunity to validate the child's expression.
- Doesn't model respectful communication between peers.

A Better Way:

The PAL smiles and says:
"Wow, you worked hard on that! Can you tell us about your house? I love hearing everyone's ideas—each one is unique."

Why This Works:

- Encourages the child to share more about their creation.
- Shows that different perspectives are welcome.
- Strengthens confidence in self-expression.

Skills Supported:

- Verbal expression
- Respectful listening
- Confidence in sharing ideas

Scenario: Connecting and Building Relationships



Child Age: *5 years old*

What Happens:

A new child sits alone during free play, watching others build with blocks but not joining in.

What Not to Do:

The PAL says from across the room, "Go play with the other kids!"

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Puts pressure on the child without offering support.
- Doesn't create a bridge for connection.

A Better Way:

The PAL sits next to the child and says: "Those blocks look fun. Would you like to build something together? Maybe we can invite a friend to join us."

Why This Works:

- Models how to initiate social connection.
- Provides a safe entry point into group play.
- Builds trust and relationship skills.

Skills Supported:

- Social initiation
- Cooperative play
- Relationship-building

Scenario: Expressing Needs and Emotions



Child Age: *3 years old*

What Happens:

A child starts crying during circle time but doesn't say why.

What Not to Do:

The PAL says, "Stop crying. We're trying to read a story," and continues without checking in.

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Ignores the child's emotional need.
- Misses the chance to teach healthy emotional expression

A Better Way:

The PAL kneels down and gently says: "I can see you're upset. Can you show me or tell me what's wrong? Let's see if we can make it better together."

Why This Works:

- Validates the child's emotions.
- Encourages them to express needs in words or gestures.
- Promotes problem-solving.

Skills Supported:

- Emotional vocabulary
- Asking for help
- Self-awareness

Tip Sheet



TIP SHEET

Fostering Communication Skills though Connection



Why Communication Skills Matter

Communication is about how children learn to:

- Share ideas and feelings - both with and without words
- Connect with others and build relationships
- Express needs and emotions
- Understand the world around them

Communication skills are the building blocks of social-emotional development. They help children feel confident, connected, and understood.

What This Looks Like in the Playspace

In a Playspace, children practice communication when they:

- Use sounds, gestures, or words to express needs
- Ask for help, comfort, or attention
- Take turns talking and listening in play
- Share stories or describe what they are doing
- Show pride in learning a new word or expressing an idea

Even small moments—like babbling back and forth, naming a toy, or responding to a smile—help strengthen a child's ability to connect and communicate.

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TIP SHEET

Fostering Communication Skills though Connection



Your Role as a PAL

As a Playspace volunteer, you are not expected to be a speech therapist or language teacher. You are here to:

- Create a **safe, warm** space where children feel heard and valued
- Follow the child's lead and respond with interest
- Model rich, gentle language and joyful interactions

This helps children feel confident communicating—and helps build the trust they need to grow in all areas.

Why We Don't Correct or Pressure

We don't correct children's grammar or pronunciation, pressure them to "say it right" or repeat words, or finish their sentences for them—and here's why:

- Many children in shelter are managing stress or trauma; communication takes courage.
- Focusing on "correctness" can discourage them from trying to express themselves.
- Children build language through warm, responsive interactions—not correction.

Instead of correcting, we **model language naturally, celebrate their efforts, and meet them where they are.**

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TRY IT YOURSELF!

Fostering Communication Skills though Connection



Build trust and connection through play by being present, responsive, and kind—this helps children feel heard and valued.

| WHAT YOU CAN DO | WHY IT HELPS |
|---|---|
| Get down to the child's eye level | Builds connection and helps them feel heard |
| Use simple, clear language | Supports understanding and language growth |
| Hold objects close to your face when talking about them | Helps babies and young children focus attention |
| Label things in the environment: "Look, a red ball!" | Builds vocabulary and awareness |
| Pause and wait after speaking | Gives children time to process and respond |
| Reflect and expand: "You said 'dog'—yes, a big brown dog!" | Models language and affirms their communication |
| Narrate actions and feelings: "You're reaching for the blocks!" | Builds vocabulary and emotional awareness |
| Listen with full attention, without distractions | Shows respect and encourages more communication |
| Gently gain eye contact when possible | Supports engagement and connection |

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Final Thoughts



Every moment of play is a chance to nurture trust, connection, and communication.

You don't have to say the perfect thing just be present, responsive, and kind.

That's how children learn that their voice matters.