TOTAL COMMUNICATION POLICY

Recognising every voice. Enabling communication. Increasing independence.



RIVERSIDE BRIDGE SCHOOL

INSPIRE, EMPOWER, ACHIEVE

This policy forms part of the Riverside Bridge School Policy Framework and should be read alongside any related policies, procedures and guidance.

RIVERSIDE BRIDGE SCHOOL
INSPIRE, EMPOWER, ACHIEVE

OUR COMMITMENT

At Riverside Bridge School, every policy reflects our commitment to creating a safe, inclusive and ambitious school community in which every pupil is valued, every voice matters and every family is respected and supported.

Our policies translate our values into consistent practice. They support high expectations, clear responsibilities, effective partnership and informed decision-making, ensuring that the needs, rights, wellbeing and future outcomes of our pupils remain at the heart of our work.

We work collaboratively, act with integrity and continually reflect upon and improve our practice to achieve the best possible outcomes for every pupil.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

Our Policy Principles underpin how we work together and guide the decisions and actions we take to support every pupil and their families.



POLICY PURPOSE & FRAMEWORK

Riverside Bridge School policies set out the expectations, responsibilities and approaches that support safe, consistent and high-quality practice across the school. They translate our values, statutory responsibilities and professional expectations into clear guidance for everyday decision-making and practice.

Each policy forms part of the Riverside Bridge School Policy Framework and should be read alongside any related policies, procedures, statutory guidance and school frameworks referenced within the document.

Policies apply to the members of the school community identified within each document, including staff, governors, parents and carers, volunteers, contractors and other professionals where relevant. Everyone is expected to understand and apply the requirements appropriate to their role and to seek further guidance where clarification is required.

CURRICULUM DRIVERS



Our Drivers provide a shared golden thread across curriculum, school life, policy and leadership, helping ensure that our decisions and practice remain focused on the experiences and futures we want for every pupil.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

This policy sets out Riverside Bridge School's approach to Total Communication. It explains the principles, expectations, responsibilities and arrangements that ensure every pupil is supported to understand, express themselves, make choices and participate meaningfully using the communication methods that are most accessible and effective for them. It establishes Total Communication as a whole-school approach, recognising that communication may include speech, signs, symbols, Objects of Reference, gesture, facial expression, body movement, AAC and other individualised communication systems.

At Riverside Bridge School, communication is recognised as a fundamental human right and as the foundation of learning, relationships, wellbeing, safeguarding, independence and participation. Every pupil is a communicator, and every pupil has the right to be understood, to express themselves and to influence what happens in their lives.

Our learners have diverse and individual communication profiles. Communication may take many forms, including speech, gesture, facial expression, body movement, vocalisation, signing, symbols, Objects of Reference, photographs, written language and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). No single method of communication is appropriate for every learner, and communication differences are recognised and valued.

Riverside Bridge School therefore adopts a Total Communication approach. This means creating environments in which all appropriate forms of communication are recognised, respected and consistently supported, with approaches personalised to the individual learner.

Communication is not confined to particular lessons, interventions or professionals. It is embedded throughout the curriculum and across the school day. Every member of staff has a responsibility to understand how individual pupils communicate, adapt their own communication accordingly and create meaningful opportunities for interaction.

Our approach is centred upon ensuring that learners have the Means, Reasons and Opportunities (MRO) to communicate. Pupils should have access to appropriate communication systems and support; genuine reasons to communicate; and frequent opportunities to communicate with different people, for different purposes and within different environments.

Through consistent partnership between pupils, families, education staff, Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals, we aim to develop communication that is meaningful, functional, increasingly spontaneous and transferable beyond the classroom. The ultimate purpose of our Total Communication approach is to enable every learner to have a voice, exercise greater choice and control, build relationships, access learning and participate as fully and independently as possible in school, their community and adult life.

Our Responsibilities to pupils and young people

At Riverside Bridge School, we will:

- recognise every pupil as a communicator and value all meaningful forms of communication;
- ensure that communication is treated as a fundamental right and not something that must be earnt;
- develop a detailed understanding of how each learner communicates, understands others and expresses their needs, preferences, ideas and emotions;
- provide each learner with appropriate and accessible means of communication throughout the school day;
- use a Total Communication approach that draws upon the communication methods most appropriate to the individual rather than expecting pupils to conform to one system;
- ensure staff understand and consistently use each pupil's personalised communication approaches;
- create communication-rich environments in which learners have genuine Means, Reasons and Opportunities to communicate;
- recognise communication attempts and respond meaningfully to them, including communication expressed through gesture, movement, facial expression, vocalisation, behaviour and other non-verbal means;
- provide access to AAC, visual communication, signing, symbols, Objects of Reference and other communication supports where appropriate;
- model communication rather than requiring pupils to demonstrate skills before they have experienced them consistently;
- provide sufficient processing time and adapt adult language to the communication needs of the learner;
- promote spontaneous communication, choice-making, self-advocacy and increasing independence rather than creating unnecessary reliance upon adult prompting;
- embed communication within teaching, routines, relationships, community experiences, personal development and preparation for adulthood;
- ensure pupils can communicate about their health, wellbeing, safety, relationships and personal needs;
- work collaboratively with Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals so that specialist recommendations become part of meaningful everyday practice;
- work in partnership with families to promote consistency and support communication across home, school and the wider community;
- provide staff with appropriate training, modelling, coaching and professional development;
- regularly evaluate communication provision to ensure that it remains responsive to the changing needs of individual learners;
- continually seek to increase every pupil's ability to communicate, participate, make choices, develop relationships and influence the world around them.

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Section 01

COMMUNICATION AT RIVERSIDE BRIDGE SCHOOL

Recognising communication. Building understanding. Enabling participation.

Communication is central to every aspect of education at Riverside Bridge School. It enables pupils to express themselves, understand others, develop relationships, access learning, make choices, communicate needs, participate within their communities and exercise increasing control over their own lives.

Our pupils have diverse communication profiles and may communicate in many different ways. Some use spoken language, while others communicate through gesture, movement, facial expression, vocalisation, signing, symbols, Objects of Reference, photographs, written language, AAC or combinations of these approaches. Communication may also be expressed through changes in behaviour, regulation, attention and interaction. Staff therefore seek to understand the meaning of each learner's communication rather than valuing one form of communication above another.

Riverside Bridge School adopts a Total Communication approach, recognising that communication is most successful when learners are provided with a range of appropriate and mutually supportive ways to understand and express meaning. The communication methods used with each pupil are personalised according to their individual communication profile and may change and develop over time.

Communication development is not the responsibility of one curriculum area or professional. Although Speech and Language Therapists provide specialist expertise, every adult who interacts with a pupil has a responsibility to support communication. Staff therefore adapt their language and interaction, provide appropriate communication resources, allow sufficient processing time, recognise and respond to communication attempts and create meaningful opportunities for pupils to communicate throughout the school day.

Communication is developed through authentic experiences rather than being confined to isolated activities. Opportunities to communicate are embedded within learning, play, relationships, routines, personal care, mealtimes, community participation, enrichment, enterprise and preparation for adulthood. This enables learners to experience communication for genuine purposes and supports them to use their developing skills across different people, places and situations.

Our aim is not simply for pupils to acquire communication systems or vocabulary. It is for every learner to become an increasingly effective, spontaneous and empowered communicator who can express preferences, make choices, develop relationships, communicate needs and emotions, contribute ideas, advocate for themselves and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives.

Section 02

THE PRINCIPLES OF TOTAL COMMUNICATION

Valuing every communicator. Respecting every voice. Promoting agency.

Total Communication at Riverside Bridge School is based on the understanding that communication is individual, multi-modal and dependent upon the interaction between the learner, the communication partner and the environment.
It is not a single programme or communication system. Instead, it is an approach in which staff draw upon appropriate methods, strategies and resources to enable each learner to understand others and express themselves as effectively as possible.

Every learner is a communicator
All pupils communicate. Communication may be intentional or emerging, conventional or highly individual, and may be expressed through speech, signing, symbols, AAC, gesture, movement, facial expression, vocalisation, behaviour or changes in attention and regulation. Staff have a responsibility to notice, interpret and respond to these forms of communication and to support learners to develop increasingly effective ways of expressing themselves. A learner should never be considered to have "nothing to say" simply because they do not use spoken language.

Communication is a right. Every pupil has the right to communicate their needs, preferences, opinions, feelings and experiences and to have their communication acknowledged and respected. Learners should have meaningful opportunities to accept and reject; make choices; request and ask for help; express discomfort, pain or distress; indicate preferences; initiate interaction; comment and share experiences; ask and answer questions where appropriate; express emotions and opinions; build and maintain relationships; and participate in decisions that affect them.
Communication systems should therefore enable more than requesting. Pupils require access to a sufficiently rich range of communication to develop relationships, express personality and increasingly advocate for themselves.

All forms of communication are valued
Riverside Bridge School does not establish a hierarchy in which speech is regarded as inherently more successful than other forms of communication. The most appropriate communication is the communication that enables the individual learner to understand, express meaning and participate effectively.

Learners may use different forms of communication for different purposes, with different people or in different situations. Staff should support this flexibility rather than expecting pupils to use one method exclusively.

Communication is everyone's responsibility

Communication development is supported by every adult who interacts with the learner.

Staff are responsible for understanding and consistently using agreed communication approaches, adapting their own communication and creating opportunities in which pupils can participate meaningfully. Specialist professionals provide important assessment, advice and intervention, but successful communication depends upon strategies becoming embedded within everyday interactions rather than remaining confined to specialist sessions.

Communication should promote agency

Effective communication gives learners greater influence over their own lives. Staff should therefore create opportunities for pupils not simply to respond to adult direction but to initiate, refuse, negotiate, question, choose and influence.

Adult support should enable communication rather than dominate it. Staff should be conscious of how much they speak, question, prompt or anticipate a pupil's needs and ensure that learners are given sufficient space and time to communicate for themselves.

Communication develops through meaningful interaction

Communication is most powerful when it has a genuine purpose. Learners develop communication through interactions in which another person notices, responds and demonstrates that their communication has an effect. Teaching communication therefore involves more than practising vocabulary, symbols or signs. Pupils require repeated opportunities to experience communication within meaningful relationships, activities and situations throughout their school day.

Communication approaches develop with the learner

A pupil's communication profile is not static. Communication may change as the learner develops new skills, experiences different environments, becomes more confident or gains access to different communication systems and technology. Approaches should therefore be reviewed and adapted over time.

Section 03

UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATOR

Knowing the learner. Understanding communication. Responding meaningfully.

Effective communication support begins with understanding the individual learner.
Staff develop detailed knowledge of how each pupil communicates, how they understand communication from others, what motivates them to interact and what may create barriers to successful communication.
This understanding should inform everyday interactions, teaching, environmental adaptations and the communication systems and resources available to the learner.

Understanding expressive communication

Staff should understand how a learner currently expresses wants and needs; preferences and choices; acceptance and refusal; comfort and discomfort; emotions; attention and interest; requests for help or support; desire for interaction or time alone; and ideas, experiences and opinions where appropriate.
For some learners, these may initially be expressed through subtle changes in movement, expression, vocalisation, attention or behaviour. These responses should be recognised as potentially meaningful and interpreted within the context of what is known about the individual.

Understanding receptive communication

Staff must also consider how the pupil understands communication from other people. A learner's ability to express themselves should not be assumed to be the same as their ability to understand language.
Depending upon individual need, understanding may be supported through spoken language; gesture and signing; Objects of Reference; photographs; symbols; written language; visual structure; demonstration and modelling; contextual cues; and AAC.
Staff adapt the amount, complexity and pace of information according to the learner while maintaining age-appropriate language, dignity and expectations.

Processing time

Learners require sufficient time to notice, process and respond to communication. Adults should avoid repeatedly rephrasing a question, providing additional prompts or answering on behalf of the learner before sufficient processing time has been allowed. Processing time will differ between pupils and may also vary according to the learner's emotional state, sensory environment, familiarity with the activity and complexity of the communication.

Communication profiles

Relevant information about how a pupil communicates should be clearly understood by the adults working with them. A learner's communication profile may include information about how they express themselves; how they understand others; communication systems and resources used; important signs, gestures or individual communication behaviours; preferred interaction approaches; processing time; sensory or environmental factors affecting communication; how the learner indicates yes, no, acceptance or refusal; how pain, distress or dysregulation may be communicated; and strategies that support successful interaction.

Communication profiles should be practical working documents, not simply records of assessment. They should enable people who interact with the pupil to communicate with them more successfully.

Avoiding assumptions

Staff should not make assumptions about a learner's understanding based solely upon diagnosis, spoken language, physical ability or the communication system they use. In particular, an inability to communicate an answer through speech should not automatically be interpreted as an absence of understanding. Teaching and assessment should provide learners with appropriate ways to demonstrate what they know and understand.

Recognising changes in communication

Staff should remain alert to changes in a pupil's usual communication. A significant change may indicate developing communication; increased confidence or independence; changes in emotional wellbeing; pain or illness; sensory or environmental difficulty; changes in relationships or circumstances; or that an existing communication approach is no longer meeting the learner's needs.

Where changes are significant or persistent, staff should work with families and relevant professionals to understand them and adapt support appropriately.

Section 04

MEANS, REASONS AND OPPORTUNITIES (MRO)

Providing access. Creating purpose. Enabling interaction.

Riverside Bridge School uses the principle of Means, Reasons and Opportunities (MRO) to support communication throughout the curriculum and school day.
Effective communication requires all three. A pupil may possess the physical or technical means to communicate but have few genuine reasons to do so.

Equally, a learner may have something important to communicate but lack an accessible communication system or sufficient opportunity to express it. Staff therefore consider if the learner has a way to communicate, if they have something meaningful to communicate about and whether they are given sufficient opportunities to do so.

- Means - Learners require an accessible means through which they can understand and express communication. Depending upon the individual, this may involve speech, signing, gesture, Objects of Reference, photographs, symbols, written language, communication boards, AAC or combinations of approaches. Communication resources should be available at the point at which communication is needed. A communication system that remains in a cupboard, on a classroom wall or unavailable during community learning cannot provide an effective means of communication. Where pupils use personalised AAC or other communication resources, staff should support increasingly independent access wherever possible.
- Reasons - Communication should have genuine purpose. Staff create situations in which pupils have meaningful reasons to communicate rather than requiring communication simply to demonstrate a skill. Reasons may include requesting something wanted or needed; rejecting or stopping something; making a choice; asking for help; gaining another person's attention; commenting; sharing an experience; expressing an emotion or opinion; asking a question; solving a problem; negotiating; developing relationships; or influencing what happens next.
  Staff should avoid anticipating every need so effectively that the learner has no reason to communicate, while equally avoiding deliberately withholding essential needs or creating unnecessary frustration simply to provoke communication.
- Opportunities - Learners require frequent opportunities to communicate across different people, activities and environments. Adults should create space for communication rather than filling every interaction with instructions, questions and prompts. Opportunities occur throughout the school

day: during teaching, play, transitions, meals, personal care, social interaction, community learning, enrichment, enterprise and preparation for adulthood.

Communication opportunities should also progressively involve different communication partners and contexts, helping learners develop confidence and use their communication beyond highly familiar situations.

MRO as part of everyday practice

MRO is not a separate communication activity. It provides a way for staff to reflect upon everyday practice. Where a pupil is communicating less than expected, staff should consider whether the barrier lies with the learner or whether changes are required to the means available, the reasons being created or the opportunities being provided. This shifts the emphasis away from asking "Why isn't this pupil communicating?" towards asking "What can we change to make successful communication more possible?"

Section 05

PERSONALISED COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS AND APPROACHES

Personalising communication. Modelling consistently. Increasing ownership.

Total Communication does not mean that every learner uses every communication approach. It means that each pupil has access to the combination of communication methods, resources and strategies that enables them to understand and express themselves most effectively.
Communication provision is therefore personalised to the individual learner and informed by observation, assessment, family knowledge and, where appropriate, advice from Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals.

A multimodal approach

Learners may use one or more forms of communication, including speech and vocalisation; facial expression and body language; natural gesture; signing and Makaton; Objects of Reference; photographs and symbols; written language; communication boards and books; voice-output communication aids; high-tech AAC; and other personalised forms of communication.
These approaches may be used together. Staff should not unnecessarily restrict a learner to one communication mode where another enables them to communicate more successfully.

Consistency without rigidity

Consistency is important, particularly where learners rely upon specific symbols, signs, objects, vocabulary or AAC systems to understand and communicate. Adults working with a pupil should therefore understand the learner's agreed communication approaches and use them consistently. Consistency does not mean rigidity. Staff remain responsive to what the learner is communicating and recognise that pupils may use different methods in different circumstances.

Modelling communication

Learners should experience their communication systems being used with them, not simply expected from them. Where pupils use signing, symbols, communication boards or AAC, adults model these approaches naturally alongside meaningful interaction. Learners should not be required to prove that they can use a communication system before seeing it used consistently by the people around them. Adults should model language using the learner's communication system during natural interactions.

Access throughout the day

Communication systems must be accessible when communication occurs. Where a learner relies upon a communication book, board, AAC device, Objects of Reference or other personalised resources, staff should ensure these accompany the learner as appropriate across lessons; transitions; social times; personal care; meals; enrichment; community learning; educational visits; work-related learning; and preparation for adulthood activities.

Communication should not become unavailable simply because the pupil has moved beyond their usual classroom.

Communication systems and independence

Where appropriate, learners should be supported to access, carry, navigate and use their communication systems with increasing independence. Adults should avoid becoming the gatekeeper to a pupil's communication by holding, controlling or providing access to a system only when they decide communication is required. The longer-term aim is for the learner to have the greatest possible ownership and control of their communication.

Reviewing communication provision

Communication approaches should be reviewed as the learner develops. Staff consider whether the pupil's current system continues to provide sufficient opportunities to express wants and needs; reject and refuse; make choices; comment; express emotions and opinions; ask questions where appropriate; interact socially; share experiences; advocate for themselves; and participate within increasingly varied environments. Where the learner's communication needs change significantly, staff work with the pupil, family and relevant professionals to consider appropriate adaptations.

Section 06

COMMUNICATION-RICH ENVIRONMENTS

Creating access. Supporting interaction. Removing barriers.

The environment has a significant influence upon communication. A communication-rich environment is not defined by the quantity of symbols, displays or communication resources visible within a space. It is an environment in which learners can understand what is happening, access their communication and experience frequent meaningful interaction with other people.

Accessible communication environments - Staff consider whether the physical, sensory and social environment enables successful communication. Depending upon individual need, this may include accessible communication systems and resources; appropriate visual information; predictable routines and structures; reduced unnecessary language; appropriate sensory conditions; positioning that enables interaction; opportunities for face-to-face engagement where appropriate; sufficient processing time; access to quieter communication spaces where needed; and communication partners who understand the learner.

Environmental support should respond to identified need rather than creating unnecessary visual or sensory complexity.

Visual and environmental support

Visual information can support learners to understand routines, expectations, choices, sequences and changes. Depending upon the learner, this may include objects, photographs, symbols, written information, visual timetables, now-and-next approaches or structured work systems. The purpose of visual support is to increase understanding, predictability and independence. It should therefore be meaningful and accessible to the individual pupil rather than displayed simply because it is expected within a specialist classroom.

The communication partner

The most important part of a communication-rich environment is often the behaviour of the people within it. Adults should:

- gain the learner's attention appropriately;
- use accessible language;
- support spoken language with the learner's communication approaches where appropriate;
- allow sufficient processing and response time;
- notice and respond to communication attempts;
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- avoid excessive questioning;
- create opportunities for initiation;
- model rather than continually test communication;
- recognise refusal and rejection;
- avoid speaking unnecessarily on behalf of the learner;
- demonstrate that the pupil's communication has been heard and has meaning.

Staff should continually consider whether their own interaction style is supporting communication or inadvertently creating a barrier to it.

Opportunities for interaction - Communication environments should enable pupils to interact not only with adults but, where appropriate, with peers. Staff create opportunities for learners to share attention and experiences; take turns; participate in shared activities; make decisions together; solve problems; communicate socially; develop friendships; and experience being part of a group.
Adult support should facilitate interaction between learners rather than unnecessarily positioning the adult as the communication partner in every exchange.

Communication across environments

Learners should have opportunities to communicate across a range of environments. Communication may initially be most successful with familiar adults and within predictable situations. Over time, where appropriate, pupils should be supported to use their communication with different people and in increasingly varied contexts. Community learning is particularly important because it provides genuine opportunities to communicate with people beyond school and to experience the practical impact of communication in everyday life.

Section 07

COMMUNICATION ACROSS TEACHING & LEARNING

Embedding communication. Enabling participation. Maintaining ambition.

Communication is both a curriculum priority and the principal means through which learners access the wider curriculum. Every curriculum subject provides opportunities to develop understanding, expression, interaction and communication. Equally, pupils require appropriate communication support in order to participate meaningfully in subject learning. Communication should therefore be planned as an integral part of teaching rather than added after a lesson has been designed.

Planning for communication

When planning learning, teachers consider:

- how the pupil will understand the learning and instructions;
- what communication demands the activity creates;
- what vocabulary, symbols, signs or concepts may need modelling;
- how the learner can respond;
- what communication resources are required;
- what meaningful reasons for communication can be created;
- whether sufficient opportunities exist for initiation as well as response;
- how adult support can enable rather than replace communication.

A learner's difficulty speaking, signing, writing or physically recording a response should not unnecessarily limit the complexity of the curriculum they are able to access.

Adapting adult communication

Staff adapt their communication according to the individual learner. This may involve adjusting the amount of spoken language; sentence complexity; pace; vocabulary; processing time; use of gesture or signing; visual information; modelling; repetition; and the way questions and choices are presented.

Adaptation should make communication accessible without unnecessarily reducing the intellectual ambition or age-appropriateness of learning.

Teaching interaction rather than testing communication

Adults should be conscious of the difference between communicating with a learner and repeatedly testing what the learner knows.

A sequence of questions such as "What's this?", "What colour?", "Where is...?" may demonstrate what a pupil can answer but does not necessarily create a rich communication interaction. Staff therefore model language, comment, share experiences, respond to the learner and create space for spontaneous communication alongside purposeful questioning.

Communication and participation

Pupils should have appropriate ways to participate actively within learning. Depending upon the learner, participation might involve indicating anticipation or recognition; directing attention; making a choice; requesting continuation or cessation; using an object, symbol, sign or AAC; commenting; answering or asking questions; contributing to discussion; explaining thinking; expressing an opinion; negotiating with others; or advocating for themselves. Participation should be understood according to the individual learner rather than measured solely through spoken responses.

Communication within real experiences

Communication develops most effectively when learners experience genuine reasons to use it. Teaching therefore creates opportunities for communication through practical and authentic experiences such as cooking and shopping; play and leisure; community visits; enterprise; travel; collaborative activities; problem-solving; personal care and independence; work-related learning; and everyday social interaction. These contexts enable pupils to experience communication as something that changes what happens, rather than simply as an activity to be completed.

Specialist communication approaches

Some learners benefit from specific approaches that support interaction, attention, language or communication development.

These may include approaches already established within Riverside Bridge School such as Intensive Interaction, Attention Autism, Tacpac, Hanen-informed approaches, SCERTS-informed practice, Aided Language Input and structured communication approaches.

These approaches should be selected according to individual need and agreed professional practice rather than applied automatically because a learner has a particular diagnosis or accesses a particular Learning Pathway. Detailed expectations for their implementation belong within the Total Communication Practice Guidance.

Communication and assessment

Assessment should provide learners with appropriate ways to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. Staff must distinguish between what a learner knows and their ability to express that knowledge through a particular communication mode.

For example, where spoken language presents a barrier, a pupil may demonstrate understanding through AAC, symbols, signing, practical application, eye gaze, gesture, written response or another appropriate method. Teachers should therefore ensure that the method of assessment does not inadvertently assess a pupil's communication difficulty instead of the intended curriculum learning.

Section 08

AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION (AAC)

Providing access. Modelling communication. Increasing autonomy.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) forms an important part of the school's Total Communication approach. AAC refers to methods of communication that supplement or provide alternatives to speech and may include low-tech and high-tech systems.

AAC is not regarded as a last resort or as something that should only be introduced when other forms of communication have been unsuccessful. Where appropriate, it provides learners with additional ways to understand, express themselves and participate more fully in everyday life.

Personalised AAC

There is no single AAC system that is appropriate for every learner. Decisions about AAC are based upon the individual's communication profile, physical and sensory needs, understanding, preferences and the environments in which communication takes place.

AAC may include:

- Objects of Reference;
- photographs;
- symbols;
- communication boards or books;
- written words;
- eye-gaze systems;
- switches and voice-output devices;
- tablet-based communication systems;
- other personalised communication technology.

Learners may use AAC alongside speech, signing, gesture, facial expression and other forms of communication.

Access to communication

Where AAC forms part of a learner's communication system, it should be available when and where the learner needs it. A communication system is of limited value if it is only available during particular lessons or when an adult decides it should be used. Staff therefore ensure, as far as practicable, that learners can access their communication across the school day and within different environments.

AAC should be viewed as the learner's voice, not simply as a classroom resource.

Modelling AAC

Learners should experience AAC being used meaningfully by the people around them.

Adults model appropriate language through the learner's communication system alongside natural spoken language and interaction. Learners are given time to observe, process, explore and respond without being continually required to imitate or demonstrate particular vocabulary.

Detailed guidance on modelling and Aided Language Input will be contained within the Total Communication Practice Guidance.

Respecting AAC communication

Communication expressed through AAC should be given the same respect as communication expressed through speech.

Adults should respond meaningfully when a learner uses their system to communicate, including when they:

- reject or refuse;
- indicate that they want something to stop;
- express disagreement;
- communicate discomfort;
- request help;
- express an opinion;
- communicate something that was not anticipated by the adult.

Staff should not routinely speak on behalf of a learner who is able to communicate for themselves with appropriate time and access.

Developing independence

Where appropriate, pupils are supported to take increasing ownership of their communication systems, including accessing, carrying, navigating and using them across different environments.

The aim is not simply for a learner to demonstrate that they can operate an AAC system, but for them to use communication functionally, spontaneously and with increasing autonomy.

Section 09

COMMUNICATION, INDEPENDENCE AND PREPARING FOR ADULTHOOD

Building agency. Increasing choice. Preparing for adult life.

Communication is fundamental to independence and preparing for adulthood.

The ability to express preferences, make choices, ask for assistance, communicate needs, develop relationships, solve problems and advocate for oneself has a significant influence upon a person's ability to participate meaningfully in adult life.

Communication development therefore contributes directly to preparation for adulthood from the earliest stages of education.

Developing choice and control

From their earliest experiences at Riverside Bridge School, learners are supported to understand that their communication can influence what happens around them.

This begins with recognising and responding to expressions of preference, acceptance and refusal and develops progressively towards increasingly complex decision-making and self-advocacy.

As appropriate to the individual learner, pupils should increasingly be enabled to:

- make meaningful choices;
- express preferences;
- indicate acceptance and refusal;
- request support;
- communicate when something is wrong;
- express opinions;
- contribute to decisions;
- solve problems;
- negotiate with others;
- advocate for their own needs and aspirations.

Communication beyond familiar adults

Independence requires learners, where possible, to communicate with people beyond those who know them extremely well.

Staff therefore create age-appropriate opportunities for pupils to develop communication with different partners and within increasingly varied environments.

This may include communicating with:

- peers;
- unfamiliar school staff;
- members of the community;
- shop and café staff;
- employers and work-experience providers;
- transport staff;
- health professionals;
- people within future education, social care or community settings.

The level and nature of support will vary according to the individual learner, but communication should increasingly enable participation in the world beyond school.

Communication for everyday life

As pupils mature, communication opportunities become increasingly connected to adult-life contexts. These may include:

- shopping and managing money;
- travel and accessing the community;
- health and medical appointments;
- personal care;
- leisure and social activities;
- relationships;
- further education;
- enterprise and employment;
- accessing services;
- expressing preferences about future provision and support.

Communication teaching should therefore develop skills that have genuine relevance to the learner's present and future life.

Self-advocacy

Wherever possible, pupils should be supported to develop their own voice rather than relying upon other people to communicate decisions on their behalf.

Self-advocacy will look different for different learners. It may range from intentionally indicating yes, no, more, finished or stop through to expressing complex opinions, participating in reviews, discussing future aspirations or making informed decisions. All of these are meaningful forms of agency.

Preparing for adulthood across all learning pathways

Communication for adult life is not restricted to learners accessing a particular Learning Pathway or those who use spoken language. Learners within Flow 1a, Flow 1b, Flow 2 and Flow 3 are all entitled to age-appropriate communication experiences that support increasing choice, participation and independence. The complexity and method of communication may differ, but the underlying expectation remains the same - every learner should be enabled to exercise the greatest possible influence over their own life.

Section 10

COMMUNICATION, SAFEGUARDING AND PUPIL VOICE

Listening carefully. Respecting communication. Protecting pupils.

The ability to communicate is fundamental to safeguarding. Pupils must have accessible and reliable ways to communicate their needs, experiences, feelings and concerns and to indicate when something is wrong. For learners with complex communication needs, safeguarding practice must therefore include a detailed understanding of how the individual communicates.
Communication difficulty must never result in a learner having less opportunity to be heard.

Knowing how the learner communicates

Staff should understand how individual pupils communicate:

- yes and no;
- acceptance and refusal;
- pain or discomfort;
- fear or anxiety;
- changes in emotional wellbeing;
- requests for help;
- desire for an activity or interaction to stop;
- concerns about another person or situation;
- changes from their usual presentation.

For some learners, these messages may initially be communicated through movement, facial expression, vocalisation, changes in behaviour, withdrawal, avoidance or dysregulation rather than conventional language. Staff should know the learner well enough to recognise significant changes while avoiding assumptions about what those changes mean.

Listening to all forms of communication

Pupil voice extends beyond spoken language.
Learners may express their views through AAC, signing, symbols, Objects of Reference, eye gaze, gesture, behaviour, actions, choices or other individual forms of communication.
These should be treated as legitimate ways of expressing preference and experience.

Staff should create accessible opportunities for pupils to contribute to decisions about their:

- learning;
- support;
- relationships;
- activities;
- environment;
- health and wellbeing;
- EHCP and annual review;
- transitions;
- future aspirations.

Respecting refusal

The ability to reject or refuse is an important aspect of communication and personal agency.

Staff should recognise and respond appropriately when pupils communicate no, stop, finished, don't want or equivalent messages, whatever communication mode is used.

There will be occasions when an adult cannot simply act upon a learner's preference because of safeguarding, health, safety or other responsibilities. In these circumstances, the communication should still be acknowledged and the situation explained in a way the learner can understand as far as possible.

A pupil's communication should never be ignored simply because it is inconvenient or differs from what the adult expected.

Communication and consent

As pupils develop, they should be supported to understand and communicate about choice, personal boundaries, privacy, relationships and consent in ways appropriate to their age and developmental understanding.

Staff should be particularly aware of the importance of communication during personal and intimate care. Pupils should be enabled, wherever possible, to understand what is happening, anticipate actions, express preferences and communicate discomfort or refusal.

Responding to concerns and disclosures

Any communication that may indicate a safeguarding concern must be taken seriously and responded to in accordance with the school's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.

Staff should not assume that a learner's communication difficulty makes their account unreliable.

Where a pupil communicates something that may constitute a disclosure, staff should:

- remain calm and listen;
- allow sufficient processing and communication time;
- use the learner's established communication system;
- avoid leading questions or introducing vocabulary unnecessarily;
- avoid interpreting beyond what the learner has actually communicated;
- record the communication accurately;
- follow the school's safeguarding procedures immediately.

Where specialist communication support is required, this should be considered without unnecessarily delaying safeguarding action.

Communication passports and transitions

Where learners have highly individual communication, information about how they express important messages should be available to relevant staff and appropriately shared during transitions.

This is particularly important where a pupil may not independently be able to explain their communication system to an unfamiliar person.

Transitions between classes, schools, colleges, adult services, health settings and other provision should therefore include sufficient communication information to support both continuity and safety.

Pupil voice as an ongoing responsibility

Pupil voice should not be reduced to occasional surveys, councils or formal consultation exercises.

It is demonstrated whenever a learner is enabled to communicate a preference, make a decision, reject something, express an opinion or influence what happens around them.

For some learners, meaningful pupil voice may be demonstrated through a subtle but intentional response. For others, it may involve sophisticated discussion and self-advocacy.

The school's responsibility is to provide accessible ways for every learner's voice to be heard and taken seriously.

Section 11

PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS

Sharing knowledge. Working together. Strengthening communication.

Effective communication is strengthened when the people who know and support the learner work together. Families, education staff, Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals bring different knowledge and perspectives which, when combined, enable a more complete understanding of the individual communicator.

Partnership is particularly important where a learner's communication is highly individual or where communication changes across people, environments and situations.

Families as communication partners

Families hold valuable knowledge about how their child communicates, including subtle or individualised forms of expression that may not initially be recognised by others.

Staff work with families to understand:

- how the learner communicates at home and in other familiar environments;
- how they express preferences, acceptance and refusal;
- how they communicate pain, discomfort, emotions or distress;
- communication approaches and resources that are effective;
- interests and motivations that encourage interaction;
- changes in communication that families have observed;
- priorities for developing communication and independence.

Equally, school staff share relevant information about communication development and approaches that may support the learner beyond school.

The aim is not to make communication identical across every environment, but to promote sufficient consistency and shared understanding for the learner to communicate successfully with different people and in different contexts.

Speech and Language Therapy

Speech and Language Therapists provide specialist expertise in the assessment and development of communication.

Working collaboratively with education staff and families, Speech and Language Therapy may contribute to:

- understanding individual communication profiles;
- identifying appropriate communication approaches;
- AAC assessment and development;
- receptive and expressive communication;
- interaction and social communication;
- staff training and modelling;
- environmental adaptations;
- communication targets and EHCP outcomes;
- reviewing communication provision as needs develop.

Specialist recommendations should be integrated into meaningful everyday communication wherever appropriate rather than existing solely as isolated interventions.

Working with other professionals

Communication may also be influenced by sensory processing, physical access, positioning, hearing, vision, emotional wellbeing, cognition and medical needs.

Staff therefore work collaboratively with Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Educational Psychologists, sensory specialists, medical professionals and other relevant practitioners where their expertise contributes to understanding or improving communication access.

This multidisciplinary approach helps ensure that barriers to communication are understood holistically rather than viewed solely as difficulties within the learner.

Transitions and consistency

Effective information-sharing is particularly important during transition.

When learners move between classes, phases or provisions, relevant communication information should be shared so that receiving staff understand how the pupil communicates and how best to support them.

For significant transitions, including preparation for college or adult services, communication systems and strategies should be considered early so that the learner does not unnecessarily lose communication access or independence when moving to a new environment.

Section 12

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Sharing responsibility. Maintaining consistency. Enabling communication.

Total Communication is a shared responsibility. Every adult who interacts with a learner influences their opportunities to understand, communicate and participate. Clear responsibilities ensure that communication approaches are understood, implemented consistently and reviewed appropriately.

The Governing Board

The Governing Board is responsible for maintaining strategic oversight of communication provision and ensuring that the school fulfils its statutory responsibilities towards learners with speech, language and communication needs. Governors hold leaders to account for ensuring that learners have appropriate communication access and that staff have the knowledge, training and resources required to implement this policy.

The Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team are responsible for:

- establishing a whole-school culture in which communication is recognised as fundamental to learning, wellbeing, safeguarding and independence;
- ensuring this policy is implemented consistently;
- ensuring appropriate communication resources and specialist support are available;
- ensuring staff receive appropriate training and professional development;
- promoting effective partnership between education staff, families and professionals;
- monitoring the quality and impact of communication provision;
- identifying priorities for continued development.

Staff with designated responsibility for communication support the development of consistent and effective practice across the school. Their responsibilities may include:

- promoting the school's Total Communication approach;
- supporting staff to understand communication expectations;
- modelling effective practice;
- supporting the development of communication-rich environments;
- working alongside Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals;
- contributing to staff development;
- supporting the implementation of communication systems and resources;
- contributing to monitoring and evaluation.

Teachers are responsible for ensuring that communication is integral to teaching and learning. They are expected to:

- know the communication profiles of pupils within their class;
- ensure agreed communication approaches are understood and consistently implemented;
- plan learning that provides accessible ways for pupils to understand and respond;
- ensure appropriate communication resources are available;
- create meaningful Means, Reasons and Opportunities to communicate;
- ensure co-educators understand how to support individual learners;
- monitor communication development through ongoing assessment;
- work collaboratively with families and professionals;
- adapt provision where communication needs change.

Co-educators play an essential role in creating communication opportunities throughout the school day. They are expected to:

- know and use each learner's agreed communication approaches;
- recognise and respond to individual forms of communication;
- model communication appropriately;
- provide sufficient processing and response time;
- create opportunities for initiation, choice and interaction;
- avoid unnecessary prompting or speaking on behalf of learners;
- ensure communication systems remain accessible;
- contribute observations about communication development;
- promote increasing communication independence wherever possible.

Speech and Language Therapists provide specialist professional expertise and work collaboratively with school staff and families.

Their role may include assessment, advice, intervention, AAC support, modelling, staff development and review of individual communication provision.

Responsibility for communication does not transfer to Speech and Language Therapy. Communication remains the responsibility of everyone who interacts with the learner.

All staff are responsible for respecting and responding to pupils' communication. Regardless of role, adults should:

- communicate in ways the learner can access;
- recognise communication in its different forms;

- provide time for pupils to respond;
- respect choice and refusal;
- ensure pupils can access appropriate communication support;
- seek advice where they are unsure how an individual learner communicates.

Section 13

TRAINING, MONITORING AND DEVELOPMENT

Building expertise. Evaluating practice. Strengthening provision.

High-quality Total Communication practice depends upon staff having the knowledge, confidence and skills to communicate effectively with learners.
Communication provision is therefore supported through ongoing professional development, modelling, reflection and monitoring.

Staff induction and training

Staff should receive appropriate communication training as part of their induction and continued professional development.
Training is responsive to the needs of learners and may include:

- principles of Total Communication;
- Means, Reasons and Opportunities;
- individual communication profiles;
- Makaton and signing;
- Objects of Reference;
- visual communication;
- communication boards and core vocabulary;
- AAC and Aided Language Input;
- interaction approaches;
- processing time and accessible adult language;
- communication and safeguarding;
- other specialist approaches relevant to individual pupils.

Not every member of staff requires identical specialist training. Training should reflect role, learner need and the communication approaches staff are expected to use.
Detailed implementation expectations for specific communication approaches are set out within the Total Communication Practice Guidance rather than prescribed within this policy.

Modelling and coaching

Training alone does not ensure effective communication practice. Staff benefit from opportunities to observe effective approaches, practise them with learners, receive feedback and reflect upon their own interaction. Communication development may therefore be supported through:

- modelling;

- coaching;
- collaborative working;
- observation and feedback;
- professional discussion;
- peer support;
- joint working with Speech and Language Therapists and other specialists.

This enables professional development to remain connected to real learners and everyday practice.

Monitoring communication provision

Leaders evaluate how effectively the Total Communication approach is embedded across the school.

Monitoring may consider:

- whether staff understand how individual pupils communicate;
- accessibility and use of communication systems;
- the quality of adult interaction;
- whether learners are provided with meaningful Means, Reasons and Opportunities;
- consistency of agreed communication approaches;
- opportunities for initiation and pupil voice;
- communication within teaching and wider school life;
- communication independence;
- family and professional feedback;
- learner experience
- the impact of professional development.

Monitoring should focus on the impact of communication practice on the learner, rather than the presence of particular resources or approaches.

A classroom should not, for example, be judged communication-rich simply because it contains large numbers of symbols or communication boards. The important question is whether learners are able to access, understand and use communication meaningfully.

Evaluating impact

The impact of communication provision is considered through changes in learners' ability to:

- understand others;
- express themselves;
- initiate communication;
- make choices;
- indicate acceptance and refusal;
- participate in learning;

- develop relationships;
- communicate across different contexts;
- advocate for themselves;
- exercise increasing independence and control.

For some learners, significant progress may involve increasingly subtle intentional communication becoming recognised and consistent. For others, it may involve increasingly complex language, conversation, AAC use or self-advocacy.

Evaluation must therefore remain responsive to the individual communicator.

Continuous development

Total Communication practice continues to develop in response to learner need, professional reflection, specialist advice, technological developments and evidence-informed practice.

Where monitoring identifies barriers or inconsistency, leaders consider what support or change is required. This may include additional modelling, professional development, specialist advice, changes to communication resources or environmental adaptations.

The aim of monitoring is not to create uniform communication practice, but to ensure consistent principles alongside personalised provision.

Section 14

RELATED POLICIES & FRAMEWORKS

Connecting practice. Strengthening consistency.

The Total Communication Policy should not be read in isolation. Communication underpins curriculum access, teaching and learning, safeguarding, personal development, behaviour and wellbeing and preparation for adulthood.

This policy should therefore be read alongside:

- Curriculum Policy
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy
- Positive Support Policy
- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Preparing for Adulthood Policy
- Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) Policy
- SEND Information Report
- Accessibility Plan
- Equality Information and Objectives
- Online Safety Policy
- ICT Acceptable Use Policy

Communication gives learners access not only to education, but to relationships, choice, safety, independence and greater control over their own lives. Riverside Bridge School is committed to ensuring that every learner is recognised as a communicator, has an effective means through which to express themselves and is surrounded by people who listen, respond and enable their voice to make a difference.