



Total Communication Policy



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Total Communication One-Page Overview

Every voice matters – whether spoken, signed, or symbolised.

Intent

- ✨ Inclusive and accessible communication for all
- 💬 Empower learners to express themselves
- 👥 Partner with families and professionals
- 👉 Build readiness for life and independence

Every learner deserves full access to communication tools that meet their unique needs. The aims include:

- Providing inclusive communication methods across the school.
- Ensuring all learners can express themselves through verbal, non-verbal, and AAC strategies.
- Building communication-rich environments supported by skilled staff and engaged families.
- Preparing learners for independence and real-world interactions using functional communication.

Implementation

- 📱 Low & High-tech AAC (PECS, VOCAs, Core Boards)
- 👉 Staff Modelling (Makaton, AAC, visuals)
- 📅 Structured Approaches:
 - Attention Activities (Autism)
 - Intensive Interaction
 - TEACCH traywork
- 🏠 Calm, clutter-free classrooms
- 📝 Personalised communication targets

Communication is embedded across all aspects of the curriculum and school life through:

- Multimodal strategies including Makaton, AAC devices, PECS, transitional photos, and objects of reference.
- Modelling by staff to demonstrate and normalise use of communication aids.
- Structured approaches like Attention Autism, Intensive Interaction, and TEACCH traywork.
- Calm, low-stimulation, and visually supportive classroom environments.
- Personalised and progressive communication targets reviewed through tools like Evisense and BSquared.
- Ongoing staff training and collaboration with external professionals.

Impact

- 📊 Learner progression tracked via BSquared/Evisense
- ✨ Confidence, wellbeing, and academic growth
- 👉 Full access to the curriculum
- 🏠 Prepared for life beyond school

The Total Communication Policy:

- Promotes communication independence and confidence in every learner.
- Enables learners to access the curriculum and build meaningful social relationships.
- Enhances learner wellbeing and academic progress.
- Provides individualised pathways through communication-focused goals.
- Is rigorously monitored through audits, progress reviews, and staff observations to ensure its continued effectiveness.

Introduction

“We can never really know what a person is capable of until we provide them with the opportunity to learn and show us”

– Gayle Porter

At Cann Bridge School, we cater to a diverse learner population with varying learning needs. This spectrum includes learners diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders, sensory needs, and physical disabilities. Therefore, the cornerstone of our communication strategy is ensuring a comprehensive school-wide approach that accommodates the individual communication needs of every learner. This includes employing a variety of resources such as **Makaton**, **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**, and **ALS** for speaking, listening, and responding. Furthermore, our goal is to establish an environment that actively supports and encourages learners to articulate their thoughts, aspirations, and values in a manner that resonates with mutual respect and impactful engagement.

Our Total Communication strategy takes into consideration information gathered from numerous sources, incorporating inputs from Speech and Language Therapists, referencing the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile 2022, Development Matters 2021, Differentiated Learning Outcomes 2021, the 2021 National Curriculum, and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years. We also draw on established policies from outstanding educational providers, supplemented by dialogues with experts in the field of speech and language development for learners with Severe Learning Difficulties.

This policy ensures that learners with communication difficulties have maximum access to the curriculum, elevate their academic performance, and enhance their social interaction capabilities. It focuses on removing barriers and promoting learners’ opportunities for learning in inclusive environments within and outside school.

The school acknowledges **AAC** as a multifaceted tool fostering learner participation in classroom activities, learning, play, and social interactions. It promotes full access to the school's facilities, resources, and extends to the broader world.

Definitions

For definitions of specific acronyms or less common terminology used in this document, please refer to the appendix at the end of this policy. Words appearing in the appendix will be highlighted in green. However, some key terms to facilitate a more effective understanding of this policy are listed below:

Total Communication is a term given to describe a wide range of strategies and tools put in place in order to achieve a ‘Communication Friendly Environment’. A Communication Friendly Environment empowers all communicators with the necessary tools and strategies to build communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, tailored to the individual's needs. It is also a term used to describe the characteristics of a physical learning environment to promote an atmosphere conducive to prompting communication from learners.

The term **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)** refers to any device, system or method that improves the ability of learners with communication impairment to express themselves

effectively. AAC is used when a learner does not develop communication in a way largely consistent with their neuro-typical peers or experiences a significant delay in their development.

Although AAC is often used to refer to formal communication devices and systems such as Makaton sign language, PECS, communication boards or voice output communication aids (voca), it can also include less sophisticated means of communication such as facial expressions, non-speech vocalisations, gestures etc.

In our Total Communication environment at Cann Bridge School, we are deeply committed to promoting Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems for learners with severe and complex communication challenges. This commitment, however, does not exclusively entail high-tech devices; it typically involves nurturing skills with low-tech strategies before assessing the potential need for high-tech devices for specific learners, which may or may not be appropriate to their needs at all.

Statement of Intent

At Cann Bridge School, we hold a firm belief that every learner should have the strongest and most comprehensive access to their curriculum. Our aim is to equip them with effective communication skills for their life beyond school and college. This involves developing a robust communication system both within the school and with the wider world. Our goal is not just to facilitate communication with key individuals in their lives but also to enhance their independence, message clarity, and the efficiency of their communication methods. We strive to prepare our learners for meaningful and practical interactions with people beyond their immediate circles, including those unfamiliar with formal communication training or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) strategies.

This policy embodies our school's values and philosophy regarding the development of AAC and communication skills throughout the school. At Cann Bridge School, Total Communication encompasses a variety of strategies, including AAC, Makaton, language/system modelling, and elements of the English curriculum such as speaking, listening, and responding. It encompasses both the physical and pedagogical aspects, including the environment, resources, and teaching practices that support each learner's unique communication journey.

Our commitment extends to collaborating with learners, parents, and professionals to advance each learner's communication skills, respecting their preferred communication methods, and fostering a communication-friendly environment. We recognise the importance of parental involvement and support in using communication strategies both in and outside of school. This partnership is crucial for all forms of communication and is integral to our learners' learning, development, and journey towards independence.

By striving to create a positive environment and supportive practice to develop communication for learners at Cann Bridge School, we aim to:

- Create an environment in which all learners are encouraged to progress with their communication skills.
- Develop a learning environment which creates a need/desire to communicate.

- Ensure that the individual communication needs of our learners are met appropriately, so that all learners can develop their receptive and expressive communication skills.
- Enable all learners to communicate as effectively as possible. To value and respect every learner's method of communication and enable that learner to maximise their communication skills.
- To help learners find ways of expressing themselves using effective and appropriate functional communication, and where appropriate, to provide opportunities for learners to use various forms of AAC and Makaton signing throughout the school day.
- Deliver the whole school curriculum supported by relevant and differentiated communication systems including AAC so that the full potential of each learner is realised.
- Use a variety of different approaches to communication, including Makaton and AAC to enhance the learning of skills across all subjects in our curriculum.
- Promote a positive learning environment in which all learners are encouraged to communicate effectively, and their achievements and successes are acknowledged and built upon.
- Develop confidence in the use of Total Communication, both throughout school and in the wider community and to ensure each learner's individual communication system(s) can be used consistently across the school site and off site.
- Ensure all communication strategies are supported by developing skills, attitudes, and a shared knowledge base, to support an effective Total Communication environment.
- Create a climate in school in which staff and learners become comfortable and confident with Makaton and the application of AAC.
- Ensure that all staff share in the responsibility to contribute to, develop and maintain learners' individual communication system(s).
- To ensure that staff are aware of the availability of different AAC systems throughout the school and their role in contributing to the ongoing development of each learner using that system.
- Create opportunities for staff to acquire the necessary expertise in communication through Makaton and AAC, thus enhancing and assisting teaching and learning in all areas of the curriculum.
- Ensure that similar awareness and involvement of the learner's family in the development and use of the AAC system is actively sought after by staff.

Implementation

Total Communication forms part of English Speaking and Listening and is closely linked to aspects of the Reading and Writing curriculums and policies within Cann Bridge School. Literacy, and particularly Speaking and Listening or put more simply; “Communication”, is not just a discrete subject as communication crosses all boundaries, permeating all subjects and aspects of everyday life. Communication is concerned with developing learners’ abilities to listen, understand, respond, and express themselves appropriately in a range of different situations and for a variety of purposes.

Through communication, learners develop listening and attention skills, important in the development of understanding and use of language. Learners’ abilities to understand spoken language is developed through beginning to develop an understanding of objects, events and routines around them, progressing to understanding gestures and speech from simple to more complex structures.

Learners also learn to respond and express their needs, ideas and opinions beginning with early vocalisations and gestures progressing to using more complex grammatical structures in many different situations and for many different purposes and audiences.

In addition, learners who are functioning at a pre-linguistic/early communication level will focus on developing skills which are essential pre-requisites to language. For some learners these skills will continue to be taught throughout their education and therefore continued access to this level of language work will be provided for them.

The development of speaking and listening skills can follow a definite progression for neuro-typical learners, which, broadly speaking, may include these steps:

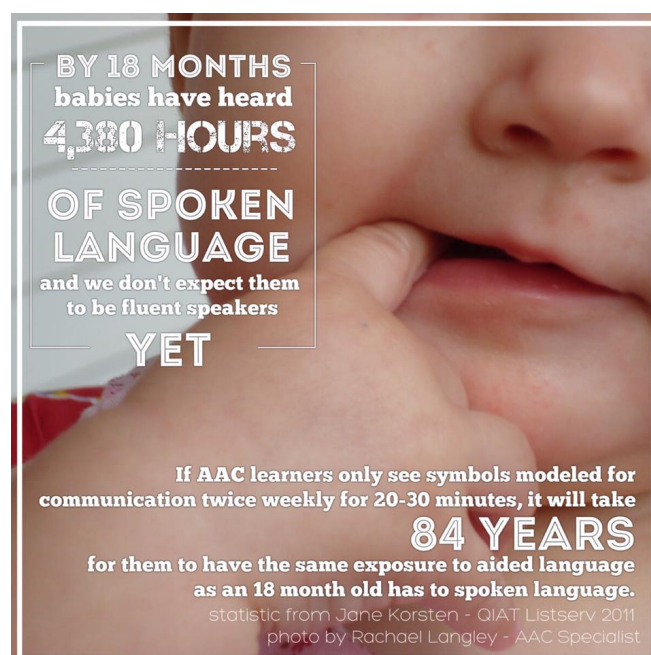
- Developing attention skills: An early stage involves learning to focus on a sound or visual stimulus, maintaining that attention, and managing distractions. This is a critical early step to effectively receive and process auditory information.
- Auditory discrimination: At this stage, learners begin to distinguish between different sounds, tones, and pitches. They learn to differentiate and recognise various sounds in their environment.
- Object discrimination: This involves the ability to distinguish between different objects based on their properties such as shape, size, colour, etc. It's an essential step in understanding object-sound relationships.
- Object handling: The learner starts to physically interact with objects and associates the objects with their corresponding sounds or words. This builds the foundation for understanding that objects have names and can be described.
- Imitation of actions: At this stage, the learner begins to mimic physical actions they observe, aiding the development of communication skills.
- Sound imitation: Here, the learner begins to reproduce sounds they hear, which lays the groundwork for verbal communication.
- Word imitation: This is the next step where the learner starts to mimic words, further enhancing their verbal communication skills.
- Production of meaningful speech: As their verbal skills progress, the learner starts forming meaningful, purposeful words that represent objects, actions, or concepts.

- Formation of single words: The learner begins to communicate effectively using single words independently.
- Formulation of multiple word utterances: This stage involves stringing together multiple words to form simple phrases or sentences, marking a critical step in language development.
- Creation of full sentences: At this stage, the learner can construct complete sentences that convey clear and detailed ideas.
- Construction of complex sentences: This stage involves creating complex sentences with multiple ideas, showing advanced language skills and the ability to convey nuanced thoughts and emotions.

As stated, this progression reflects the acquisition of listening and speaking skills that support the learner's overall language development for neuro-typical learners, however, even with a neuro-typical learner It's important to note that the speed and sequence of this progression can vary widely among individuals. For neuro-diverse learners at Cann bridge School, progression in communication can look very different due to the range of challenges individuals may have with various aspects of both expressive and receptive communication, and for many learners, a challenge to communicate verbally. Learners may also present wildly different progression orders, such as **Gestalt language acquisition**, and as such no single progression sequence is possible to demonstrate, and all communication needs must be considered on an individualised basis.

Modelling language

Staff modelling, or demonstrating the use of communication systems, **Makaton** signing, and **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)** devices, is an essential component of the Total Communication strategy at Cann Bridge School. This practice not only teaches learners how to use these communication tools effectively, but also promotes an inclusive, communicative environment. Evidence has shown that the single most important aspect in language acquisition is being in an environment that models communication continuously. Learners who may use AAC systems need those systems modelled just as much, if not more, than those learning from modelled verbal language. Jane Korsten's research succinctly puts it:



Language modelling intent:

- Exposure: Evidence shows that exposure to a learner's form of language in meaningful contexts helps them understand the language use, structure, vocabulary and semantics. Interaction in the target form of language provides opportunities for practical use to solidify learning. Exposure should be comprehensible, repetitive and contextual.
- Teaching by example: By modelling the use of different communication systems, staff can provide clear examples of how to communicate effectively using these tools. This hands-on demonstration provides more long-term positive and effective communication support than ABA based hand-over-hand strategies (see below within the PECS section of this policy.).
- Promoting consistency: Staff modelling ensures consistency in the use of communication tools across the school. This is crucial for learners who rely on these systems to communicate, as it allows them to interact with different individuals in various settings within the school and beyond.
- Encouraging use: When learners see adults using these systems, it can motivate them to use the tools as well, fostering a culture of communication.

Language modelling impact:

- Makaton: When staff model Makaton signing, it enhances learners' understanding of signs and symbols and encourages their use. It also promotes speech development, as Makaton is used alongside spoken language.
- AAC devices: By demonstrating the use of AAC devices, staff can show learners how to navigate the devices, create messages, and interact with others using these tools. This can boost learners' confidence in their ability to use the devices independently.
- PECS: As an AAC device itself, despite PECS training to the contrary, Cann Bridge School staff will model PECS use as opposed to focusing on hand-over-hand forced communication due to the latest research on ABA-related concerns detailed below within the PECS section of this policy.
- Communication systems: Modelling communication systems such as transitional photographs helps learners understand how to use these tools to express themselves, anticipate transitions, or understand new experiences.

Staff modelling reinforces the principle that all forms of communication are valued and encouraged. By showing learners how to use these tools, and by using the tools themselves, staff create an inclusive environment where all learners, regardless of their verbal abilities, can express themselves and be understood. Furthermore, staff modelling promotes the generalisation of communication skills across different settings and contexts.

Staff modelling of communication systems, Makaton, and AAC devices is an indispensable part of Cann Bridge School's Total Communication strategy. It is crucial for teaching learners how to use these tools, promoting their widespread and consistent use, and fostering a school-wide culture of effective, inclusive communication.

Meeting the needs of all learners

It is important for all learners that access to communication systems are available throughout the day, with staff modelling, encouraging learners and providing opportunities for learners to use their individual communication systems.

The delivery of communication to learners across Cann Bridge School will exhibit considerable variation, dictated by the specific needs of each individual. For instance, some learners might require visual aids to comprehend auditory information, while others might need a comprehensive multi-sensory approach to fully grasp the subject or skill being explored.

Learners with more advanced communication skills are encouraged to refine their capacity to address an audience and adjust their language in accordance with the listener's needs. The speaking and listening element of our curriculum promotes reciprocal communication within our Total Communication setting.

Effective communication is not only a critical facet of learning but also of life. Consequently, it plays an integral role in all aspects of our school life. The enhancement of learner's communication skills is a central objective of lessons and a fundamental feature of the typical school day at Cann Bridge School.

A Total Communication approach is employed at Cann Bridge School to foster the development of all learner's functional communication abilities, utilising all suitable methods of communication.

Within our Total Communication environment, we use:
(aspects highlighted in bold are given a further overview below)

- **Attention Activities** (**Attention Autism**).
- Body signing such as touch cues, gestures, and body language.
- **Learning Environment Minimum Expectations.**
- Developing verbal skills including speaking and listening.
- Facial expression, eye contact, eye pointing.
- **Intensive interaction** (An approach which facilitates the development of social and communication abilities in people with complex communication difficulties and is based on the nurturing style of caregiver-learner interaction).
- Key words in displays, worksheets etc. and where appropriate, these are symbolised to aid understanding.
- **Low and High- tech communication systems** (e.g. symbolic/ pictorial representation / core boards / **ALS** boards / iPads / Tablets).
- **Makaton signing** - Hand signs are used to represent meaning. Users are always encouraged to accompany signs with speech. This is for both receptive and expressive communication.
- **Objects of reference and transitional photographs** (Physical objects used to represent meaning).
- Pictorial menu board / Pictorial timetables.
- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).**
- Picture communication symbols accompanied by written word(s) (Via the use of Widget inPrint software).
- Reduced language i.e. sentences with less information carrying words (icw).
- **Sensory cues, including auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory cues.**
- Social stories.
- Switches and Voice Operated Communication Aids (VOCAs).

- **TEACCH traywork.**
- Vocalisation, intonation, verbalisation.
- Written text.

Attention Activities

Attention Autism, developed by speech and language therapist Gina Davies, is an innovative and practical approach designed to address the attention and communication challenges faced by many learners with autism. Within Cann Bridge School we recognise that these attention building skills are exceptionally effective at supporting the development of positive learning-behaviours and form the foundation of group-based learning for a wide range of learners with varied needs and diagnoses. These essential skills are far from exclusively only important to those with an autism diagnosis, and as such we refer to the program as 'Attention Activities' and use it for any learners with a need to develop their attention skills.

The program's aim is to spark learner's interest, evoke their attention, and create a shared focus. Davies stresses the importance of "Attention First, Language Second" and has designed a set of activities that prioritise engaging learner's attention as a precursor to building communication skills. We recognise that developing attention and engagement is key to all learning and is key across our curriculum for informal, semi-formal and formal learners no matter which Key Stage they are working in. As such, Cann Bridge School uses Attention Activities for all learners who may require it and it can be seen in practice from EYFS, through Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4 where relevant.

Attention Activities intent:

The Attention Activities program is noted for its benefits including:

- **Boosting attention skills:** The activities train and improve learner's ability to focus, sustain, and shift their attention. The program facilitates shared attention, which is foundational for social and communication skills.
- **Increasing spontaneous communication:** As learners are more engaged and motivated, they are more likely to initiate communication.
- **Encouraging group participation:** The shared nature of the activities promotes participation in group settings.
- **Providing structure:** The clear, predictable structure of the activities can help reduce anxiety and increase engagement.

Attention Activities implementation:

The Attention Activities program is structured around four stages, each introducing a different level of challenge:

- **Stage 1 - Focus on attention:** In this stage, engaging, visually stimulating activities are used to capture and sustain the learner's attention. These activities are short, fun, and designed to be motivating.

- Stage 2 - Focus on sustaining attention: Here, the aim is to develop longer sustained attention. Learners are still watching and focusing on a specific adult; however, the adult's activity is slightly longer and more varied in each session.
- Stage 3 - Turn-taking and re-engaging attention: This stage introduces simple turn-taking games. The idea is to encourage learners to maintain their attention when it's not their turn and re-engage when it is. Once learners are familiar with this stage, they will also learn that they will not always have a turn, and sometimes some learners may have more than one turn.
- Stage 4 - Shifting and re-engaging attention: The final stage involves activities that require learners to shift their attention from one task to another, promoting cognitive flexibility. These are typically completed by having learners individually leave the group to perform a task, then return to look at everyone's work one by one. Over time, Stage 4 is extended by increasing complexity, including an introduction to utilising shared resources, and then exploring a need to find resources independently.

Learning Environment minimum expectations

Learning environments are designed to be learner focused following Total Communication principles. We work to ensure a range of minimum expectations are met or exceeded to ensure learners experience a calm and clutter-free learner-focused learning environment.

Calm environments:

A calm environment is one that minimises overstimulation. This is important for our learners because:

- Reduced sensory overload: Many learners can be hypersensitive to sensory inputs. A calm environment, with controlled noise and light levels, can prevent sensory overload and the associated stress, anxiety, and disruptive behaviours.
- Improved attention and focus: A calm environment can help learners focus better on tasks at hand, enhancing their engagement, learning, and communication.
- Emotional and behavioural regulation: Calm surroundings can support learners in maintaining control over their emotions and behaviours, promoting a more conducive learning and social interaction environment.

Clutter-free environments:

A clutter-free environment is one that is organised and free of unnecessary items. This is critical because:

- Reduced distractions: Less clutter means fewer distractions, enabling learners to concentrate better on their learning and communication tasks.

- Increased independence: An organised environment where everything has a designated place can foster independence in learners. They can locate and use resources more easily, boosting their self-confidence and autonomy.
- Enhanced safety: Removing unnecessary items reduces the risk of accidents, creating a safer learning environment.
- Predictability and structure: A clutter-free environment can provide a sense of predictability and structure, which is comforting for many learners. This can foster a sense of security, reducing anxiety, and facilitating communication.

Ensuring environments are learner an integral part of Cann Bridge School practice as it directly supports the objective of facilitating effective communication and promoting learning, making it an indispensable part of our strategy. As such, teachers work with senior leaders to regularly complete learning environment minimum expectation checklists against the physical and pedagogical aspects of their classrooms, working to continually develop and improve each learning space across the school. These checklists themselves are also subject to regular review and expansion as the school continually strives to develop and improve learning environments for the benefit of all.

Intensive Interaction

Intensive Interaction is an approach to teaching the pre-speech fundamentals of communication to learners who are still at an early stage of communication development. It plays a crucial role in our Total Communication strategy and whilst it is exceptionally key in the earliest forms of communication development typically amongst informal and semi-formal learners, it is still a highly effective tool to be used with formal learners who are at any stage of their communication journey as it can develop a deeper social connection with another and validate a learners actions and impact on the world around them.

Intensive Interaction intent:

- Promotes fundamental communication skills: By focusing on the basics of communication, Intensive Interaction helps learners to develop key skills such as joint attention, turn-taking, and non-verbal communication. These are crucial for more advanced communication and social interaction.
- Supports emotional development: The responsive, personalised approach of Intensive Interaction helps learners to develop a sense of connection with others, promoting their emotional and social development.
- Inclusive approach: Because Intensive Interaction starts from the learner's current level of communication, it is suitable for learners with a wide range of abilities and needs.
- Flexibility: Intensive Interaction can be incorporated into a variety of activities and settings within the school day, making it a flexible tool for promoting communication in a wide range of situations.

Intensive Interaction implementation:

- Meeting the individual at their level: Intensive Interaction involves tuning into the learner's current behaviours, interests, and activities, and using these as a basis for interaction and communication development.
- Responsive interaction: The adult responds to and builds on the individual's attempts at communication, rather than leading the interaction. This encourages a genuine two-way conversation and fosters the development of essential communication skills such as turn-taking and eye contact.
- Enjoyment and engagement: Intensive Interaction activities are designed to be enjoyable and motivating. This ensures that the individual is engaged, which is essential for learning to take place.

Low and High-tech communication systems

Low-tech and high-tech **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)** devices and **ALS** (Aided Language Stimulation) boards are essential components in developing and supporting a learner through their communication journey. These tools can significantly enhance communication capabilities, independence, and overall quality of life for these learners.

The use of low and high-tech communication systems is crucial for many reasons, including:

- Increased communication: They allow learners who have limited or no speech to express their needs, make choices, share thoughts, and participate in educational activities.
- Promotes independence: **AAC** devices and **ALS** boards can help increase personal autonomy and decision-making.
- Supports learning: These tools can aid in cognitive and academic development and provide a way for learners to demonstrate their understanding.
- Improves social interaction: By facilitating communication, these tools can improve social interactions with peers and adults.

Low-Tech Communication Systems

Low-tech **AAC** devices and **ALS** boards do not require batteries, charging, or electricity. They can include:

- Picture cards and symbols: These can be used to represent various words, phrases, or concepts, aiding in communication.
- Communication boards or books: These can contain letters, words, or symbols, and the learner can indicate their choice through pointing, eye gaze, or other methods. Common boards used at Cann Bridge include Proloquo2Go core board, and 'Super Core' from ThinkSmartBox.

- Object symbols: Physical objects used to represent specific activities or items.

Benefits of low-tech systems include their simplicity, affordability, durability, and no requirement for power. However, they are limited in the range of messages that can be conveyed, and the range of conversations that can be held.

High-Tech Communication Systems

High-tech AAC devices are electronic systems that can generate voice output. They include:

- Speech generating devices: These can convert text or symbols inputted by the user into synthetic speech.
- Dedicated AAC devices: These devices are specially designed for AAC and can often be customised to the needs of the user.
- Apps on mainstream devices: There are numerous AAC apps available that can be installed on devices such as tablets and smartphones. Cann Bridge School holds a number of such devices with communication tools set up and ready to be used and explored with learners and as modelling tools for staff.

High-tech systems offer greater flexibility and the ability to convey a broader range of messages. They can support both receptive and expressive communication. However, they can be more expensive, may require technical support, and are dependent on power, so learners should also have equivalent low-tech communication systems available should a device fail. This will avoid a learner effectively losing their voice due to a technical difficulty.

At Cann Bridge School learners are initially supported with Low-Tech communication systems, typically in the form of PECS, Supercore and Proloquo2go. Decisions around which strategies to use, including the possibility of any High-tech systems are made in unison with the class teacher, parents, head of communication and language, and, when funding help or further advanced expertise may be required, dedicated external speech and language professionals.

Makaton signing

Makaton is a language programme that employs signs and symbols to help people communicate. It's designed to support spoken language, and the signs and symbols are utilised with speech, in spoken word order. This dual-modality approach encourages the development of communication skills. The implementation of Makaton is a vital part of the Total Communication strategy within Cann Bridge School and is supported through a dedicated Communication HLTA with exceptional Makaton signing experience working to develop Makaton adoption and modelling across all areas of the school.

Makaton intent:

- Facilitates communication: For learners who struggle with spoken language, **Makaton** offers an effective way to communicate their needs, feelings, and thoughts, as well as understand the communication of others.
- Promotes inclusion: By providing a common language, **Makaton** enables better interaction between learners, staff members and other adults.
- Supports learning: The visual nature of **Makaton** can enhance understanding and memory, thereby supporting the overall learning process.
- Encourages speech development: Because **Makaton** is used alongside speech, it can encourage the development of spoken language skills.

Makaton implementation:

- Signs and symbols: **Makaton** uses a unique set of gestures that correspond to essential key words, making it easier for individuals to express themselves and understand the communication of others.
- Supports spoken language: The use of signs is always complemented with speech, reinforcing the auditory element of language learning and promoting speech development where possible.
- Progressive learning: **Makaton** is structured in stages, allowing learners to start with simple concepts and gradually progress to more complex ones. Learners can experience vocabulary development as staff plan key **Makaton** vocabulary within various sessions such as topic/theme learning or stories. Learners also have access to a Signing Choir where significant levels of new vocabulary can be explored.

Makaton complements other communication methods and strategies, such as **AAC** devices or Intensive Interaction, to ensure a multi-modal approach to communication. Regular training and refreshers for staff, learners, and parents are held to ensure effective implementation and consistency in its use across the school.

Objects of reference and transitional photographs

Objects of reference, or **OOR**, are tangible items utilised to signify an activity, individual, or location. These are most typically used with informal learners but can be found in use for any learner where relevant. Items serve a similar function to words, acting as symbolic representations. For instance, a learner may associate the act of getting their coat with going outside, creating a sense of anticipation.

Objects of reference intent:

The purpose of utilising objects of reference is to gradually foster an association among the word, the object, and the corresponding activity for the learner. It's important to note that this link will require time to establish.

Once a learner grasps the concept of objects of reference, it can aid them in multiple ways:

- Enhancing awareness
- Supporting memory and recall
- Anticipating upcoming events and reducing uncertainty
- Sequencing events, understanding what's happening now and what will occur next
- Recognising the completion of an activity
- Enabling choice-making

Objects of reference implementation:

The progression with OOR should immediately precede a change of POLE (person, object, location, event).

- Stage 1: At this initial stage, learners might not acknowledge the OOR. They may disregard it, refuse to hold it, or throw it. Their awareness of the OOR may be limited, and they are wholly reliant on others while working with OOR.
 - Objectives: Foster awareness, encourage response, enhance notice, increase tolerance, and promote exploration.
- Stage 2: At this stage, learners will accept and tolerate a presented OOR, though they may have little to no comprehension of its representational purpose.
 - Objectives: Increase acceptance, awareness, and tolerance; promote holding and exploration of the OOR.
- Stage 3: Learners begin to respond to OOR at this stage. While their understanding might not be comprehensive, they may exhibit some level of awareness regarding impending changes. They start to recognise a few OOR and may move towards the POLE when the OOR is presented.
 - Objectives: Facilitate recognition of the change in a POLE when an OOR is presented; encourage holding the OOR on the way to the POLE; promote independent movement to the POLE upon presentation.
- Stage 4: At this stage, the learner can discern the appropriate OOR from a selection of two, beginning with the incorrect object held behind the correct one to guide the learner's choice. The learner independently forms a connection between the OOR and POLE.
 - Objectives: Encourage independent movement to the POLE upon presentation.
- Stage 5: In the final stage, the learner starts to independently choose from an array of OOR to express their needs or requests.
 - Objectives: Initiate communication using OOR, express needs using OOR.

Objects of reference list:

Object	Transitional meaning
Silver foil blanket square	1Cann
Green tinsel	2Cann
Purple tinsel	3Cann
2 cotton reels on a clear cable tie	Bus
Shammy car sponge	Soft play
Plastic spiral	Immersive room
Glitter baton	Sensory room
Perforated plastic ball	1Cann playground
Plastic spoon	Food
Spiky soft rubber ball	Rebound
Wooly pom pom	Group
Spiral ring dog toy	Primary playground
Green scourer	Senior playground
Shower puff	Soft play
Red foam golf ball	Asda field
Swimming bag/clothes	Warm water pool

Transition photographs intent:

Transition photographs are a potent tool in assisting to comprehend changes in routine or environment and to prepare for upcoming events. They are a crucial part of Cann Bridge School's Total Communication strategy, designed to enhance understanding, manage expectations, and alleviate anxiety and learners move on to using **transitional photographs** once they have mastered at least Stage 3 of **OOR**. Stages 4 and 5 of **OOR** may be worked on whilst also developing an understanding of the photographic symbolic representations found in **transitional photographs**.

Transitional photographs are actual pictures that represent various environments, activities, people, or events that a learner may encounter, they are provided as a progression beyond **OOR** with benefits including:

- Enhanced comprehension: Real pictures can be easier for some learners to understand compared to abstract symbols or drawings.
- Reduces anxiety: By helping learners know what to expect next, **transitional photographs** can reduce anxiety related to changes or new experiences.
- Promotes independence: Using **transitional photographs** to represent routines or sequences of activities can promote self-management and independence.
- Encourages communication: Photos can also serve as conversation starters, aiding in both expressive and receptive communication.

Transition photograph implementation:

Transitional photographs are initially provided alongside known and understood OOR (at least Stage 3 understanding). They begin with single photos being provided to learners who develop skills in holding these and placing them on specific transition boards for the required location or handing them to the required person. In time, learners will progress to have transitional photo strips of increasing complexity that will enable them to see a timetable of their next few learning experiences. They learn to accept a transition representing this timetable, typically an image of themselves, and then select the transition photograph on the timetable that is closest to the top and therefore their next experience.

Transitional photographs and timetables can be used to:

- Visualise change: These photos can help learners understand upcoming transitions, such as moving from one activity to another or one setting to another.
- Prepare for new experiences: Photos of new environments or people can help prepare learners for new experiences.
- Reinforce routines: Photos can be used to create visual schedules, aiding in understanding and adhering to daily routines.

The use of transitional photographs complements other strategies and tools in our Total Communication approach. They align with the goal of enhancing all forms of communication – verbal, non-verbal, and alternative – to ensure learners can effectively express themselves and understand others. As with all tools in the communication policy, the use of transitional photographs should be individualised to meet each learner's needs and regularly reviewed and updated.

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an alternative communication method specifically designed to enhance the communication skills of individuals with various cognitive and physical impairments. It is a form of AAC but deserves its own specific mention for a variety of reasons, including its prevalence within Cann Bridge School as well as controversy over its typical implementation and the ways in which Cann Bridge School addresses these concerns.

PECS intent:

- Facilitates communication: PECS allows learners who have limited or no speech to express their needs, thoughts, and feelings effectively.
- Promotes initiation of communication: Unlike some other systems, PECS encourages learners to initiate communication, an important skill in social interactions, although the level of this 'encouragement' is one of the controversial aspects noted lower.
- Boosts confidence: Being able to communicate reduces frustration and can improve confidence and self-esteem in learners; PECS typically supports this frustration-reducing communication relatively quickly.

- Flexibility: **PECS** can be used in various settings – classroom, playground, home, etc., making it a versatile communication tool.

PECS implementation:

Key aspects of PECS include:

- Visual symbols: **PECS** uses images and pictograms to represent objects, activities, and concepts, enabling non-verbal or minimally verbal learners to communicate their wants and needs.
- Exchange principle: Learners are taught to exchange a picture for the item or activity it represents, thus initiating communication.
- Structured teaching: **PECS** is taught in distinct, progressive phases, beginning from simple requests to more complex sentences.

PECS 'phases':

- Phase I - How to communicate: Learners exchange single pictures for items or activities they really want.
- Phase II - Distance and persistence: Still using single pictures, learners generalise this new skill by using it in different places, with different people and across distances. They are also taught to be more persistent communicators.
- Phase IIIa - Simple discrimination: Learners select from two or more pictures to ask for something they are known to like where the other option(s) are things they are known to dislike. These are placed in a **PECS** communication book—a ringed binder with self-adhesive hook fastener strips where pictures are stored and easily removed for communication.
- Phase IIIb – Conditional discrimination: Learners now select from two or more desirable pictures to ask for specific things from a range of things they are known to enjoy.
- Phase IV - Sentence structure: Learners construct simple sentences on a detachable sentence strip using an “I want” picture followed by a picture of the item being requested.
- Attributes - Attributes and language expansion: Learners expand their sentences by adding adjectives, verbs and prepositions.
- Phase V - Responsive requesting: Learners use **PECS** to answer questions such as “What do you want?”
- Phase VI – Commenting: Learners are taught to comment in response to questions such as, “What do you see?”, “What do you hear?” and “What is it?” They learn to make up sentences starting with “I see”, “I hear”, “I feel”, “It is a”, etc.

PECS is included with our Total Communication strategy as it has a proven record of providing quick improvements to communication skills and is a tried and tested way of reducing communication-based anxiety and communication-based undesirable behaviours.

However, Cann Bridge School desires to remain at the forefront of latest research and developments within the world of communication and **AAC** and is very conscious of recent concerns around **ABA** (Applied Behaviour Analysis) practice which is integral to the official training and use of **PECS**.

ABA-based concerns with PECS:

While the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an invaluable tool that aids in augmenting the communication skills of learners with severe learning disabilities, some concerns have been raised about its relationship with Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), particularly regarding the potential negative impacts of ABA's approach. This section explores these concerns and their implications within the context of our Total Communication strategy

Understanding ABA and PECS:

ABA is a therapeutic approach that seeks to modify behaviours through conditioning, often using reward-based systems. PECS, which was developed based on principles of ABA, involves the exchange of picture cards to communicate desires or needs, often with a reward (the desired item or action) given in response.

While ABA and PECS have proven effective for many, some criticisms include:

- **Overemphasis on compliance:** Some critics argue that ABA's reward-based system may overly focus on compliance, potentially leading to a lack of spontaneous communication or limiting the development of autonomy in learners.
- **Decontextualised learning:** Critics suggest that ABA-based methods, including PECS, often teach skills in isolated, decontextualised situations, which may not generalise well to other contexts or natural settings.
- **Potential for increased dependence:** If not applied carefully, the focus on reward in exchange for communication might lead to increased dependence on external motivation, potentially hindering the development of intrinsic motivation.
- **Not a robust language system;** significant focus on requesting with more limited experience of communication in facets of communication, such as responding to queries or maintain back-and-forth communication. There are also limitations based on the number of symbols present in a learner's book.

Addressing concerns with PECS:

In response to these concerns, our Total Communication policy advocates for a balanced, learner-centred approach:

- **Holistic communication development:** We recognise the importance of spontaneous and initiated communication. While PECS might be a part of the communication tools we support, we aim to ensure it's used as part of a broader strategy that encourages all forms of positive communication and not view it as the as a 'go-to-only-option'.
- **Flexibility and acceptance:** We break from the traditional PECS training of insisting on only accepting very exacting and precise use of PECS to move more progressively to a pedagogy which fosters an acceptance of all forms of valid communication. The only exceptions to this are for relatively short-lived periods when specific next-step skills on how to use PECS itself

are being taught and learnt, or if there is a need to ensure communication is understood by a wider audience.

- Contextual learning: All interventions, including PECS, should be used within meaningful, naturalistic contexts to promote generalisation of skills. PECS, or any communication strategy, should be used far more widely than just requesting specific items, as this is only one very small aspect of communication.
- Focus on intrinsic motivation: While we may start with reward-based systems for initial learning within the PECS phases, the ultimate goal is to develop learners' intrinsic motivation to communicate in all forms, and this will be regularly reviewed to ensure we do not have PECS books filled with symbols that merely provide the ability to request.
- Regular review and individualisation: The use of any communication method, including PECS, is to be regularly reviewed and adjusted based on each learner's progress, preferences, and needs, and is not provided as 'the only way' or left to stagnate without pushing for and expecting progress.
- Modelling: PECS based learning will be modelled and supported by staff with their own PECS books, in contrast to the traditional PECs-training methodology. Modelling reasoning and strategies for all forms of communication have already been mentioned earlier in the document.

While we recognise the potential benefits of PECS as a communication tool, particularly as a method of supporting communication with the wider public, we are also aware of the potential concerns linked to its roots in ABA. As such, our Total Communication strategy underscores the necessity of a balanced, individualised, and contextually meaningful approach to all communication strategies.

The inclusion of PECS within our Total Communication policy ensures a multimodal approach to communication, enhancing inclusivity. The use of PECS can be successfully integrated with other strategies such as Makaton, AAC devices, Intensive Interaction and modelling practice depending upon individual learners' needs.

Sensory cues, including auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory cues.

Within the learning environment and/or learning sessions, classes may utilise specific sensory, auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory cues. These may vary from class to class and learner to learner as needs require, however, it is typically expected that learning sessions have a consistent and common auditory and visual opener to begin, typically in the form of a musical video linking to the subject.

Learners with additional sensory needs may have their own bespoke sensory tactile cue to support understanding of the beginning of a specific session. These will be specific and individual to the learner based on their sensory profile, however, they must not change as the learner moves from class to class. i.e. if a learner develops an understanding that a wet sponge means a maths session is beginning, then this must remain the cue when they move into a later class or key stage.

Olfactory cues work in a similar manner, however, by their nature they are a shared sensory experience and so must remain more consistent for all learners. Due to this, all olfactory cues used are to be kept consistent across the school with the following list updated when and if more are used (at present, only olfactory cues for weekday days of the week are used).

In a similar manner, some specific experiences are linked to a colour. For example, the days of the week. Bellow is a list of the olfactory and colour based cues for each weekday.

Meaning	Olfactory cue	Colour cue
Day of the week – Monday	Essential oil – Orange	Red
Day of the week – Tuesday	Essential oil – Cinnamon	Orange
Day of the week – Wednesday	Essential oil – Lavender	Yellow
Day of the week – Thursday	Essential oil – Peppermint	Green
Day of the week – Friday	Essential oil – Ylang ylang	Blue

TEACCH traywork

The **TEACCH** (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped Learner) approach was developed in the early 1970s at the University of North Carolina, USA. It's a structured teaching methodology that has also been widely adopted for use in many contexts, including for learners with severe learning disabilities.

TEACCH intent:

The intention of **TEACCH** traywork is to provide a structured and systematic way for learners to undertake tasks independently. This is achieved by breaking down tasks into manageable chunks and providing clear visual instructions. The approach aims to build the learners' skills, confidence and autonomy, while reducing anxiety and reliance on direct adult prompting.

Traywork can be utilised to teach a broad range of academic, vocational and self-care skills. The intention is to develop independence and problem-solving abilities, as well as improving focus and attention to tasks. Additionally, traywork can help to generalise and reinforce skills learned in other contexts.

TEACCH implementation:

The implementation of **TEACCH** traywork involves several key steps:

- **Workstation setup:** A dedicated workstation is set up, typically a desk or table, which is free from unnecessary distractions. It should be clear where the start and end of the work area is. The colour green is utilised to represent where work starts, and red is used for trays or locations where work should be left when completed.
- **Task organisation:** Each task is organised into a separate tray or box. The tasks are broken down into simple steps and presented from left to right, mirroring the direction of reading in English.
- **Visual supports:** Clear visual cues are provided to indicate the sequence of activities. This could be through photographs, pictures, symbols, or written instructions depending on the individual's comprehension level. Most learners in Cann Bridge use symbols on a vertical timetable to indicate the sequence of their tasks.

- Independent work: The learner is encouraged to complete the tasks independently, beginning with the first tray and working systematically through the tasks. Completed work is typically placed in a designated finished box or area (red).
- Clear routine: Consistency is key. The process of going to the workstation, completing the trays, and tidying away should follow a clear and predictable routine.
- Individualisation: The tasks and level of support provided are tailored to the individual's needs and abilities. As the learner's skills improve, tasks can become more complex, but they should always be tasks that are known to be within the learner's capability to complete independently.
- Review and feedback: Once the tasks are completed, there's a review of the work, providing an opportunity for praise, reinforcement and feedback.

In summary, the TEACCH traywork method is a structured teaching approach that supports independence, reduces anxiety, and promotes skill acquisition and generalisation for learners with autism and other communication challenges.

Impact

The Total Communication Policy at Cann Bridge School has a profound impact on fostering inclusivity, enhancing communication and independence skills, and empowering every learner to thrive. By embracing various modes of communication such as speech, sign language, symbols, and AAC devices, we create an environment where every learner's unique needs and abilities are recognised and supported. Through this comprehensive approach, we witness remarkable progress in academic achievement, social interactions, and overall well-being, ensuring that every learner can engage with their learning, actively communicate their needs and wants, reach their full potential, preparing learners well for their next steps in further education, employment, training or bespoke packages.

All learners have a communication-based Personalised Learning Goal, and this enables staff to plan and assess communication progress for each individual learner and ensure that activities are based at the correct language levels for them. These progression steps are based on the individual systems in use, i.e. progressing to a new phase within PECS, or developing an increased vocabulary of 20 words with Supercore, and as such there is no single progression document available. All progression steps are highly individualised and specific to each learner. Class teachers working on communication next steps can do so using their CPD developed understanding of various strategies as well as discussing progress and developments with either the Communications HLTA or Communication, Language and Literacy Lead.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Review of Communication

At Cann Bridge School, the impact of communication teaching is monitored by the Communication, Language and Literacy lead, alongside the Headteacher and the school's Quality of Education Link Governor.

Once the baseline assessment is completed for each learner six weeks after entry to the school, teachers' assessment of communication is ongoing through the next steps process and in line with each learner's individual EHCP targets. Each learner will work towards their individualised Personalised Learning Goals with evidence of this stored in the online system 'evisense' and assessment will be made against steps within the 'Connecting Steps' system, both of which form part of Cann Bridge School's 'BSquared' assessment tool.

Cann Bridge School monitors learners' progress using a variety of methods across the year. The senior leadership team undertake observations of teaching and learning across the year; a communication audit is completed each year by qualified speech therapists; teachers attend twice yearly Learner Progress Reviews, and curriculum leaders monitor next steps and undertake book looks and learning walks. Moderation is also a time for teachers to have professional discussions around best practice in teaching communication to learners with complex needs to ensure we remain up to date with current practice and continue to deliver the best strategies to our learners.

Staff support and training

All staff are trained in Total Communication as part of their induction training package. Refresher training on core communication skills is delivered annually, alongside further training as and when it is required. Staff can also draw upon the expertise of wider professionals for specific support e.g. support from the Teacher of the Deaf, the Visual Impairment Teacher, Speech and Language Therapists, the Sensory Integration Occupational Therapist etc.

The school aims to ensure that all permanent teachers are trained in using [PECS](#), [TEACCH](#), [Makaton](#) and [Attention Autism](#) within the first few years of starting at Cann Bridge School.

Further information on staff training, and its impact, can be found in the CLL action plan and via the Deputy Head, who is responsible for staff CPD.

Links

The Policy has been developed in conjunction with other key policy documents listed below:

- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile 2022
- Development matters 2021
- 2021 National Curriculum
- Special needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years
- Differentiated Learning Outcomes 2021

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following Cann Bridge policies:

- Child Protection & Safeguarding Policy
- Pathway to Independence Curriculum Policy

- Planning, Assessment, Marking, Recording and Reporting Policy
- English Policy
- Reading Policy
- Reading at Home Policy
- Writing Policy
- See Key Stage long term plans on the school website for the rolling English programme

APPENDIX – Definitions

- **AAC – Augmentative and Alternative Communication** – This is a range of strategies and tools used to support those without, or with limited, verbal communication. It may include picture or symbol-based representations of words or objects, the use of widely available IT such as tablet devices or computers, the use of highly specialised software on IT, or specialised IT devices. It can also include low-tech communication tools.
- **ABA – Applied Behaviour Analysis** – a type of therapy that has historically been used extensively with learners with communication challenges. It's goal is to increase helpful behaviours and decrease behaviours that are harmful. In recent years it has become the subject of some controversy which is explored further within the **PECS** section of this document.
- **ALS – Aided Language Stimulation** – A type of **AAC** which can be picture based on or a digital device.
- **Gestalt Language Acquisition** – A form of language development where learners start with understanding entire phrases or 'Gestalts' to have a specific meaning, and are supported to slowly reduce these to sentences, groups or words and then assigning meaning to individual words.
- **Hand-over-hand** – The act of guiding a learners hand to do something. Typically used within **PECS** as an **ABA**-based practice.
- **Makaton** – A language program that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable individuals to communicate. Within Cann Bridge School **Makaton** physical signing is used by both staff and many learners to support clear communication.
- **Objects of reference (OOR)** – A physical object used to represent a transitional change to support understanding of that change. Typically used for any change to a **POLE**.
- **Olfactory cues** - Olfactory cues refer to any signals or prompts that are detected through the sense of smell, also known as olfaction.
- **PECS** – Picture Exchange Communication System – A widely used **AAC** system used to develop language skills in pre-verbal learners. System has some controversy due to **ABA**-based practice which is explored further within the **PECS** section of this document.
- **POLE** – A term typically used when considering **Objects of reference** or **transitional photographs**. Stands for 'Person, Object, Location, Event' and is a way of explaining when a new **OOR** or **transitional photograph** may be required.
- **TEACCH** – A programme that provides teachers with strategies to develop learner's flexibility, independence and self-efficacy through structured routines and practice.
- **Transitional photographs** – photos of areas within a classroom, the school or the wider world that learners can use to solidify their understanding of where they are due to explore learning opportunities next. They may be offered to a learner directly, or form part of a transition strip timetable to visualise the next few learning opportunities to that particular learner.

