

Special Needs in Daycare: Supporting Communication



How can I support children with limited language?

Use simple, consistent strategies throughout the day:

- **Get close and get on their level** (face-to-face helps).
- **Use short phrases** (2–5 words): “More snack,” “All done,” “Help please.”
- **Slow down and wait** (silent wait time matters—count to 5).
- **Model the words you want them to use** (don’t force them to repeat).
- **Repeat and expand** what the child communicates:
 - Child: “Ball.”



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

- Adult: “Ball! Throw ball.”
- **Pair words with gestures** (pointing, nodding, “stop” hand).
- **Give communication opportunities** (pause before giving an item so the child can signal “more”).

Tip: If a child uses gestures or sounds, treat it as communication and respond—then model the word/sign/picture.

What are functional words and phrases to teach first?

Start with words that help children get needs met quickly:

Needs

- help
- more
- all done
- stop
- break

Choices

- yes
- no
- mine / my turn
- go



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

- wait

Feelings (simple)

- mad
- sad
- scared

Daily routines

- potty/bathroom
- drink
- eat
- wash hands

How can basic sign language help in daycare?

Basic signs are a great support for children with speech delays, autism, limited language, or big feelings. Signs can reduce frustration because children can communicate even when words are hard.

Which signs are most helpful to start with?

Choose a small set and use them all day:

- **More**
- **All done**
- **Help**



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

- Stop
- Yes / No
- Bathroom/Potty
- Please
- Thank you

How do I teach signs the easy way?

- Say the word **and** do the sign every time.
- Help the child do the sign gently if they allow it.
- Respond right away when they try (even if it's not perfect).
- Keep it consistent—same sign, same word, every day.

Example:

- Adult: "You want **more**?" (say it + sign it)
- Child attempts sign
- Adult: "Great asking! Here's more."

Tip: You don't need to teach lots of signs at once. Start with **3–5** signs and build slowly.

How do I use pictures to support communication?

Pictures help children understand routines and express needs—especially during transitions, waiting, or stress.

What types of picture supports can I use?



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

- **Item pictures:** snack, water, toy choices, bathroom
- **Routine pictures:** wash hands, clean up, sit, line up
- **Feeling pictures:** happy, mad, sad, worried
- **Choice pictures:** two options to pick from
- **Yes/No cards:** clear answers without guessing

Where should I put picture supports?

- On the wall at child level (daily schedule)
- Near key areas (bathroom, snack table, cubbies)
- On a ring or lanyard for staff
- On a small board the child can carry

Tip: Pictures work best when the adult **points** to them while speaking.

How do I use Yes/No supports (so I'm not guessing)?

Many children can answer yes/no before they can explain with words.

Try these yes/no tools:

- **Yes/No cards** (child points)
- **Two picture choices** (child touches one)
- **Thumbs up/down** (if appropriate)
- **Nod/shake head** (model it clearly)



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Example:

- “Do you want **outside**?” (show YES/NO)
- “Do you want **playdough** or **blocks**?” (show two pictures)

Tip: If yes/no is confusing, start with choices instead of questions.

How can I support communication during behavior challenges?

Challenging behavior often happens when a child can’t communicate their needs.

Teach these “replacement communication” tools:

- “Help” (sign or picture)
- “Break” (picture card)
- “Stop” (hand signal)
- “All done” (sign)
- “My turn” (simple phrase or picture)

Use short scripts during conflict

Teach and practice these phrases:

- “Turn please.”
- “Help please.”
- “Stop.”



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

- “My turn.”
- “I’m done.”

Tip: Practice scripts during calm play, not during a meltdown.

What should I do if a child is nonverbal or uses very few words?

You can still build strong communication.

Try:

- Respond to any attempt (pointing, looking, reaching).
- Offer two picture choices.
- Use signs for needs.
- Model simple phrases without pressure.
- Celebrate communication: “You showed me! Great telling me!”

If a child uses a device or communication system from home or therapy, ask families what works best and try to be consistent.

How can I build communication into everyday routines?

Use routines as “practice moments”:

Snack

- “More?” (sign/picture)



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

- “All done?” (sign/picture)

Bathroom

- Show bathroom picture card and say “Bathroom.”
- Praise: “You told me bathroom!”

Centers

- Offer picture choices: “Blocks or art?”

Transitions

- Point to schedule: “Clean up, then outside.”

Quick reminders for daycare staff

- Communication is more than talking.
- Don’t make children “earn” communication tools (pictures/signs should always be available).
- Praise attempts, not perfection.
- Keep your words short and consistent.
- When in doubt, offer choices and visuals.



Free resource developed by www.ChildCareED.com

Licensed Under [CCBY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)