

# Signing up to inclusion

Sophie is four years old and attends a mainstream nursery for five mornings a week, where she receives full-time support from a trained nursery nurse. Sophie has a rare chromosomal translocation associated with speech, language and learning difficulties. She has a significant delay in her language development and Makaton\* signing was introduced when she was 18 months old. At the start of the block of therapy described in this article, Sophie was using approximately 30-35 single signs. I was visiting Sophie on a weekly basis at nursery for individual sessions to target specific vocabulary acquisition and language comprehension, as well as to provide support to staff working with her.

Nursery staff were struggling with Sophie, due to their limited knowledge of Makaton signing and lack of confidence with incorporating it into her daily routine. They were due to attend a Makaton Foundation Workshop run by the Department of Speech and Language, but her parents and the involved professionals were concerned that Sophie's interaction would still be somewhat limited to adults, as her peers would not be able to understand her signing. Sophie's parents also received two individualised signing sessions from another member of our team and were very keen for Sophie's friends to be able to communicate with her too.

## Adapting the learning environment

As more and more children with special needs are included in mainstream educational settings, speech and language therapists have the challenge of providing increased levels of training and support to schools and carers. According to the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 'barriers to learning and participation arise from the interactions between learners and the learning environment' (2002, point 3). As professionals working to facilitate the educational process, we need to work to reduce these barriers by adapting the learning environment itself.

Baumgart & Giangreco (1996) support this view, suggesting that not only the individual with communication impairment but also the communication partner require specialist services to enhance their communicative interaction. Our profession is experienced in supporting parents to facilitate their children's communication (for example through Hanen workshops, see <http://www.hanen.org>) and also training education staff in working with children with communication difficulties (for example ELKLAN, see <http://www.elklan.co.uk>). However, von Tetzchner & Martinsen (1992) state that, for children requiring augmentative communication, it is advantageous if key people in a

Do we give enough time and attention to training clients' peers to support their communication strategies? Following her experience with a preschool child called Sophie, Anna Westaway suggests this is not only desirable but should be integral to our early years' intervention strategies.



## READ THIS

IF YOU WANT TO

- REDUCE ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION
- HELP OTHER WORKERS INCREASE THEIR SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE
- DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE OF AAC IN EVERYDAY SETTINGS

nursery environment - including peers - can be taught strategies which may include signing skills. They also encourage facilitation of communicative opportunities with a child's peers, in order to offer more varied conversation (also supported by Sutton, 1982) and to give children the chances to be involved in everyday experiences and challenges. But do we give enough time and attention to training our clients' peers to support communication strategies? Should this be integral to our early years' intervention strategies?

We explained to all the children that we were going to learn about 'talking with our hands', and also pointed out that Sophie knew how to do this already.

With these questions in mind, we discussed the way forward with Sophie. To maximise her social and communicative development, we wanted to expose her friends in nursery to Makaton signing. Although staff and Sophie were signing throughout the day, it seemed important to create an environment where signing was fully acknowledged as an acceptable way to communicate, and where Sophie's peers could support and help her to develop her communication skills.

As part of Sophie's input at nursery, the staff and I agreed that I would deliver the nursery 'circle time' once a week during my visits throughout the Autumn term 2003. We explained to all the children that we were going to learn about 'talking with our hands', and also pointed out that Sophie knew how to do this already. The children were incredibly accepting and none of them questioned what we were doing.

Every week, I selected a topic for signs to introduce during circle time. Some of these were related to Sophie's targets, some requested by the nursery and some to coincide with special events. Some broad topics, such as food, took two weeks to cover due to the amount of vocabulary. I provided the resources and led an activity for 20-30 minutes, using a combination of comprehension and expression activities to learn signs during a game (figure 1, p.8). I selected the resources from those already available within our department, such as postboxes, toy food, books and picture materials; I rarely had to spend time preparing resources for the sessions. The staff then reinforced the signs throughout the week. Symbols were used alongside the sign prompts that we placed in specific nursery areas such as the house corner, book corner and music corner. Sophie also received a 30-minute individual therapy session to target comprehension, attention and listening skills and specific signed vocabulary. ▶

Figure 1 Games for learning signs

Vocabulary topic	Group activity
Home and my family	Big picture book
Animals	Posting pictures into a postbox
Food	'Pass the Parcel' with individually wrapped toy food items
Toys	Feely bag
Nursery areas	Asking children to place sign cues in each area as a prompt
Colours	Making coloured paper hats for staff and children to wear
Christmas	Sticking pictures onto a large Christmas tree

◀ The children were very enthusiastic about the weekly visit from a new friendly face - especially one who brought stickers! Each week, they eagerly watched, listened and practised using signs - and showed remarkable recall of signs that they'd learnt in previous weeks. They were keen to demonstrate the signs that they had remembered when I returned each week and were motivated to learn more. With the staff's support, the children began to use Makaton signs every day in functional contexts, such as using key word signing during their planning time to indicate 'I am going to work with paint' (underlined words = signed words).

### Prior knowledge

The nursery staff reported that the support they were receiving in nursery encouraged and gave them the confidence to attend the Makaton Foundation Workshop that our department was running. They were able to start the course with some prior knowledge of Makaton rather than going in 'cold' as complete beginners.

Within the nursery setting the staff became more confident in working with Sophie, both in terms of their own Makaton signing and understanding Sophie's signs. One member of staff reported that Sophie was able to use a combination of speech and sign to tell her that she had been swimming and had worn a yellow and green swimming costume. She would previously have found this very difficult to understand and was pleased to be able to interpret it, say it back to Sophie, and have Sophie confirm it. Staff also found that the other children consistently supported Sophie with her signing. For example, if they were outside playing they would ask her, 'Do you want a turn on the car?' or 'Do you want to play in the house?' (underlined words = signed words).

The staff independently identified several ways that Makaton use could be incorporated into the daily nursery routine, such as planning time in the morning and signing a carol at their Christmas nativity play. After the term's input I was able to withdraw my weekly support knowing that the team was successfully integrating Makaton into nursery life for all the children.

For Sophie this meant there were particular benefits:

- Sophie became a more confident and assertive communicator, using signs more regularly during her time at nursery to comment, request, reject, and for social purposes.
- The circle time gave her a chance to be the nursery 'star', as she had a head-start in Makaton signing. She was able to demonstrate signs she already knew to her peers and so play a role in helping them

to develop their skills in communicating with her.

- Around this time, Sophie began to expand her expressive language by using occasional two element phrases (eg. word + sign, sign + sign). The use of Makaton signing at planning time provided her with an excellent model to do this.
- Sophie was able to participate more fully in activities in nursery, such as joining in with signing the Christmas carol. As the children practised the carol before the concert, it was rewarding to see Sophie gradually sign more and more along with the other children and to see at the final dress rehearsal how much of the carol she had learnt.
- Pleasingly, Sophie's acquisition of signed vocabulary increased (to 55-60 signs / words) through the regular use of signs at nursery. During individual sessions she was seen to use several signs that hadn't been targeted individually, showing how much she benefited from the signing environment. She was also keen to show me new signs she had learnt, and often demanded my attention specifically to do this.

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The input that I provided in the nursery supported all those involved: Sophie, her peers, and the staff. Using a range of simple, easily available resources to carry out activities meant that there was a minimum of preparation time required for each session. It was an effective way of delivering therapy within this setting, as it targeted a number of different needs at once:

- Sophie's need to develop her expressive language skills through signing
- Sophie's need for those around her to understand and support her signing
- The nursery staff's need to learn Makaton to facilitate Sophie's involvement in nursery
- Sophie's peers' need to understand and communicate with her, in order to build on their friendships with her.

Since the weekly input ended I have visited Sophie in nursery once or twice each term to update sign vocabulary, to learn a song with the children at circle time and to review her communication development. The staff are confidently using Makaton in nursery and, when Sophie began to attend whole days, the staff extended its use to the afternoon children as well. Sophie

was offered and attended a weekly group session run in clinic to build on her speech and signing skills and has continued to grow in confidence and communicative ability.

### Ensuring sustainability

Sophie will start mainstream reception in September (2004) and the nursery nurse who supported her in the nursery setting will continue to work with her there. Members of staff from her new school are also receiving Makaton training from our department. As some children from Sophie's nursery will also be attending reception with her, she can continue to build on the friendships she has developed, as they in turn support her communication development. Bell *et al.* (2001) highlight the importance of ensuring sustainability of intervention after support is withdrawn, and the training provided to Sophie's peers means that the work begun in nursery can transfer to reception with them.

Our Special Needs team is continuing to support children with augmentative and alternative communication needs in mainstream settings and we are hoping to support other Makaton users by offering similar packages of care to nursery and reception settings this coming year. Having established a therapy plan that can be adapted to suit the needs of each individual child, we would like to measure further the benefits of our input, as well as developing the package. We plan to:

- Take an accurate measure of both receptive and expressive language skills before and after input;
- Observe communicative interaction with adults and peers before and after input (including number of formal communicative turns and analysis of function of communication);
- Develop a resource library within our department of topic-based sign sheets and generalisation games / ideas for nursery to carry out each week;
- Encourage nursery staff to lead sessions to increase their confidence.

We also intend to explain our involvement in a letter to parents of other children in the nurseries.

Since Sophie has left nursery the staff have continued to use Makaton signing on a daily basis, although they currently have no children with a specific need for signing. They see it as an investment for children in the future who are using signs to support their communication, and as part of offering a supportive environment to include children with a range of needs and abilities.

Working with Sophie, her peers and the dedicated nursery staff gave me the opportunity to experience an interdisciplinary team with common goals, an essential element of collaborative teamwork (Giangreco, 1997) and fundamental to the principles of inclusive education (Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997). All professionals involved with Sophie benefited from the team approach, with chances to share ideas, troubleshoot and extend Sophie's individualised education plan targets as she progressed. The progress that Sophie has made is a credit to her, her parents and all the hard work and enthusiasm from the nursery staff in acquiring new skills and adapting

# News extra

the nursery environment to create an inclusive atmosphere that all children and adults could take part in sustaining.

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\*Makaton is a communication system using signs and symbols alongside speech, used by a range of individuals with communication impairments. See <http://www.makaton.org>.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff of Hedworthfield Nursery, Jarrow for their commitment to meeting Sophie's needs and also her parents for giving me their permission to write this article.

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## Communication on the political agenda

Communication impairment was on the Scottish political agenda in June, first with a working group at the Scottish Parliament and then with people who stammer presenting evidence at an equal opportunities inquiry.

The short-life working group was organised by the Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists and Speech and Language Therapy Managers Network 'Communication Impairment Action Group'. The MSPs agreed to appeal directly to ministers for a Scotland-wide strategy for people with communication impairment. In addition, they will seek a members' debate and examine all legislation for its impact on people with communication impairment.

The Action Group is calling for comprehensive research to identify and quantify those who have a communication impairment in Scotland as a unique group. They want the impact on health and wellbeing to be better recognised and all policy and practice to take account of the needs of people with communication impairment.

[www.rcslt.org](http://www.rcslt.org)

Meanwhile, eight people who stammer have also visited the Scottish Parliament with the British Stammering Association's Scotland Development Manager, Jan Anderson. They gave oral evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee's 'Removing Barriers: Creating Opportunities' inquiry which is exploring barriers and identifying positive strategies for challenging inequalities. The group commented on the three key areas of work, further and higher education and having a social life. It also called for greater recognition of stammering amongst teachers and speech and language therapists from an early age to adulthood and for improvements in speech and language therapy provision.

[www.stammering.org.uk/scotland](http://www.stammering.org.uk/scotland)

## Inclusion needs genuine choices

The National Autistic Society has joined in the debate on inclusion with a call for sufficient training, resources and support to enable genuine choice to meet the individual need.

The society points out that, as there are 90,000 children in the UK with autism and approximately 7,500 specialist educational placements for this population, the reality for most is mainstream education. It believes that while some children with autism may do well in mainstream schools with varying levels of support, those with more complex needs may have a more inclusive experience in a specialist setting, and that this provision should not be cut as long as it is necessary for any child with

autism. The Society also believes that, although statements are bureaucratic, unless there is adequate teacher training, resourcing and accountability for progress of children with autism in schools, parents will not have the confidence that their child's needs can be met without a statement. The National Autistic Society response came as shadow education spokesman David Cameron MP called on the government to fulfil its mini-manifesto promise of a national audit of special school provision and meanwhile to have a moratorium on special school closures, and Baroness Warnock suggested the time was right for a rethink of the policy of inclusion and the special education system.

[www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

[www.conservatives.com](http://www.conservatives.com)

Baroness Warnock's pamphlet 'Special Educational Needs: A new look' is available from The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, see [www.philosophy-of-education.org](http://www.philosophy-of-education.org).

## Position statement on cochlear implants

Defeating Deafness is calling for more funding to be made available to enable every adult who would benefit from a cochlear implant to have one.

The charity says there are now more than 4,000 cochlear implant users in the UK but that, while most children who would benefit now receive one, many adults are missing out. It has produced a position statement which it hopes will encourage health authorities to make more funding available. Cochlear implants are designed for people with severe to profound sensorineural hearing loss as they work by stimulating the auditory nerve, bypassing damaged sensory cells in the cochlea.

[www.defeatingdeafness.org](http://www.defeatingdeafness.org)

## Practice consultation

The Health Professions Council is inviting comment on proposals about returning to practice and managing fitness to practise.

The full documents are online and comments can be submitted by post or e-mail. The consultation period ends on 9th September.

[www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/](http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/)

Meanwhile, the Health Professions Council has joined forces with the NHS Counter Fraud and Security Management Service to target bogus health workers, people stealing the identities of real healthcare professionals, and professionals committing fraud.

The chief executives of the two organisations have signed a protocol designed to safeguard patients and staff in England and Wales through sharing information and closer working.

[www.cfsms.nhs.uk](http://www.cfsms.nhs.uk)

## REFLECTIONS

- DO I UNDERSTAND THAT WORKING WITH AN INDIVIDUAL CAN INFLUENCE COMMUNICATION SUPPORT FOR OTHERS?
- DO I CONSIDER INCLUDING FRIENDS AND PEERS AS SUPPORTERS OF THERAPY PROGRAMMES?
- DO I GIVE CLIENTS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE THE EXPERT?