

Social Communication

Understanding Social Communication

Social communication is how we **understand, use, and respond to language and social interaction**.

It is built on key skills such as:

- **Joint attention (sharing focus with others)**
- **Language and understanding**
- **Perspective-taking (understanding other people's thoughts and feelings)**



For neurodivergent pupils, differences in social communication are common, particularly for those with conditions such as autism, ADHD, or developmental language disorder.

This means pupils may experience communication and interaction in **different ways**, rather than there being a single "correct" way to communicate.

How might social communication differences present in school?

You may notice that a pupil:

- **Finds it difficult to understand spoken instructions or expectations**
- **Needs more time to process language and respond**
- **Struggles with perspective-taking or understanding others' viewpoints**
- **Finds it hard to engage in shared attention or group interaction**
- **Experiences difficulty initiating or maintaining interaction**

These differences are often linked to:

- **Processing speed**
- **Executive function**
- **Sensory regulation**

It is important to recognise that these differences are part of a pupil's **individual neurodivergent profile**, sometimes described as a "spiky profile" where strengths and needs vary across areas.



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Why This Matters

Social communication differences can affect:

- **Access to learning and instructions**
- **Participation in classroom activities**
- **Relationships with peers and staff**
- **Emotional regulation and engagement**

Where needs are not understood or supported, this can contribute to:

- **Dysregulation or behaviour that challenges**
- **Reduced participation**
- **Increased risk of exclusion or absence**

For some learners, feeling misunderstood or unable to communicate effectively may also impact their **sense of belonging in school**.

Practical Strategies for Teaching Staff

Understanding and planning

- Use an **Assess–Plan–Do–Review cycle** to understand the pupil's communication profile
- Identify strengths as well as areas of need
- Ensure support plans are consistent across staff

Communication and language

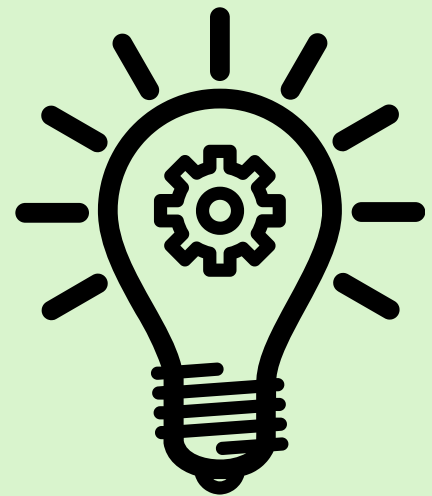
- Use **clear, straightforward language**
- Avoid unnecessary complexity or too many instructions at once
- Break information into manageable steps
- Check understanding rather than assuming it

Using direct and supported language can help pupils access tasks more effectively.

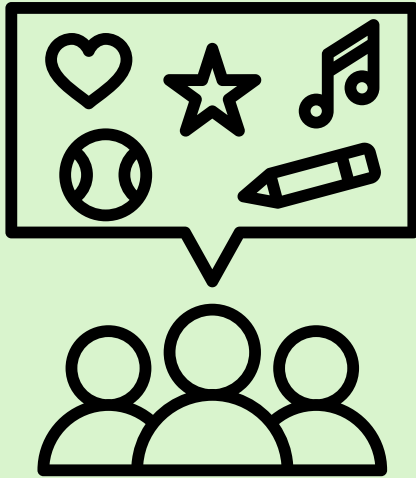
Processing and response

- Allow **additional processing time** for instructions and responses
- Avoid putting pupils on the spot
- Provide time to think before expecting a reply

Neurodivergent learners may need significantly more time to process language and information.



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Supporting interaction and understanding

- Support **joint attention** through shared activities
- Model and scaffold interaction where needed
- Support perspective-taking through explanation and discussion
- Use a pupil's **interests** to encourage engagement

Adapting teaching approaches

Small adjustments can make a significant difference:

- **Adjust rate** – give more time
- **Adjust volume** – reduce the amount of information
- **Adjust complexity** – simplify instructions
- **Stage tasks** to support understanding
- **Prioritise key learning**

You can also:

- Change how tasks are presented
- Allow different ways for pupils to respond or complete work
- Use additional supports such as visuals or seating plans

Relationships and environment

- Build strong, supportive relationships with pupils
- Create a sense of belonging and safety
- Use **relational practice** to support engagement

Strong relationships can reduce barriers to communication and support participation.

Sensory and regulation awareness

- Recognise that sensory differences can affect communication
- Support pupils to remain within their **window of tolerance**
- Adapt the environment where needed

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What to avoid

- Using vague, indirect or overly complex language
- Expecting pupils to process and respond quickly
- Assuming lack of engagement is deliberate
- Overloading pupils with too much information at once
- Focusing only on difficulties rather than strengths



In Summary

- Social communication is a key area of difference for many neurodivergent pupils
- It is influenced by language, processing, executive function, and sensory needs
- Each pupil will have a unique profile of strengths and needs
- Clear, structured, and flexible approaches can significantly improve access and engagement
- Strong relationships and a sense of belonging are central to effective support

Questions to consider

- How clear and accessible is my communication?
- Am I allowing enough time for processing and response?
- How am I supporting joint attention and interaction?
- What adjustments could I make to improve access?
- How am I building relationships and supporting belonging?