



## **Understanding Communication: Intensive Interaction - Parent/Carer Guide**

### **What is 'Intensive Interaction'?**

'Intensive Interaction' is a way of having nice interactions with – and building positive relationships with – individuals who find communication very difficult.

It is also a way of teaching lots of important early communication skills (such as eye contact / turn-taking / enjoying being with others) in a motivating, fun and naturalistic way.

The approach is built around sensitive and playful imitation of the child. When we engage in this sensitive imitation, the child often shows more interest in us and wants to interact further. By doing lots of these interactions the child learns to enjoy being with others. The desire to interact with others is critical to nearly all other types of learning (including learning sophisticated communication skills such as talking) so this is often the best place to start for individuals who find communication very difficult.

### **Who is Intensive Interaction for?**

Intensive Interaction is for people who are at an early stage of their communication development. These individuals will often be pre-verbal (i.e. they won't yet be talking) but some children who use speech can benefit from the approach too.

Intensive Interaction has been used successfully to develop communication skills in children with a range of learning disabilities / multi-sensory impairments / autism.

The approach appears to work especially well with autistic children. Because it 'follows the lead' of the child, the child does not feel under undue pressure but can simply be themselves and enjoy interacting with another person.

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## **What are the benefits of using Intensive Interaction?**

Intensive Interaction is a fantastic way of 'getting to know' your child if they find it hard being around people. It can allow your child to build up positive and trusting relationships - even if they have very limited communication skills. When you have a nice positive interaction with your child they will feel good and you will feel positive too! Everyone's a winner!

As well as having nice interactions with your child, Intensive Interaction is a great way of teaching your child a whole range of very important early communication skills including:

- Enjoying being with others
- Listening and paying attention to others
- Learning to play and have fun
- Learning to take turns
- Understanding and using facial expressions
- Understanding and using eye contacts
- Understanding and using vocalisations

By having positive and fun interactions you can help develop your child's skills in all of the above areas with minimal effort! Although the above areas may sound very simple and obvious, they are in fact incredibly important skills that lay the foundation for nearly all other learning.

## **How do I do Intensive Interaction at home with my child?**

In a quiet room, carefully observe what your child is doing for a few minutes. Then sensitively and playfully imitate something that your child does. This might be making the same noise as them; it might be imitating their movements; it might even be imitating their breathing pattern. Watch and see if they become aware of this imitation - they may stop what they are doing, establish eye contact, or even approach you. Repeat this several times and turn it into a fun 'game'. You are not looking for your child to 'do' anything in particular - you are just "joining them in their world" and learning to be with them in a way that they can understand and enjoy.

### **Top Tips!**

- Find a nice quiet space if you can - a lounge, a conservatory, a garden - where you can really concentrate on your child and where they can really concentrate on you. Don't have the

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television on - or iPads left round: these can be too distracting. If you don't have a quiet room, find a quiet time - e.g. when other people are out.

- Watch your child carefully. What movements do they seem to frequently make? What facial expressions do they use? What rhythm do they tap on the wall or table? What vocalisations do they make? (Do they make a long "eeee" sound or an "ah-ha" sound or something totally different?). By carefully watching and listening to your child you will begin to see the behaviours that you can then use to connect with them in a way that they will understand.
- After imitating a behaviour closely several times, begin to subtly vary your imitations. E.g. if your child makes the following sound [ooh-eee] you could imitate them by making the sound [ooh-ahhh] - a similar but not identical sound. Your child may then imitate the sound you have made. Repeat this again with a subtle variation.
- Your imitations don't always have to be exact replications of your child's behaviour. For example, if your child moves their head in a particular rhythmical way, you could try breathing loudly in the same rhythm - or tapping your feet on the floor in the same rhythm.
- Let your child 'lead' the interaction. This approach is not about giving your child specific instructions to follow or explicitly 'teaching' them. It is about letting the child show what actions or sounds are important and meaningful to them. If you allow them to do this - and if you are willing to "join them in their world" - they will learn lots of important communication skills from you naturally and spontaneously!
- Don't carry on interacting if your child no longer seems to want to do it. It's better to have short positive interactions than to try to do longer, less fun sessions. Try again at a different time.
- Explain to others (family members / friends etc.) that gentle and sensitive imitation can allow your child to feel more relaxed and can help them feel more connected to others.
- Watch some videos online about the approach. There are some good examples from the Intensive Interaction Institute on YouTube.
- Don't worry about looking silly - celebrate your successes - and most of all, have lots of fun! Communication is about joyful connection!

This information was based on a leaflet created by the Speech and Language Therapy Team at Whitefield Schools.

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