**Building Early Communication Skills**

What is Communication?

Communication has many forms and we all communicate in our own individual ways. This might look different depending on our preferences, differences, or the environment we are in. We may use more than one way to communicate at any particular time. Here are some examples of communication that we might use at an early stage:

* Babbling/vocalisations
* Looking/ gazing
* Signs/ gestures
* Taking/leading by the hand
* Reaching out
* Tapping
* Pointing
* Waving
* Facial expressions

'Serve' and 'Return' Interactions

When a child uses these ways of communication they are looking to interact. We can develop these ways of communicating further by 'serve' and 'return' interactions. 'Serve' and 'return' is a two-way interaction between a child and an adult. 'Serve' and 'return' interactions can be thought of like a game of tennis. A child ‘serves’ the ball using many different forms of communication (see above). The adult responds to their 'serve' by 'returning' the ball. 'Serve' and 'return' interactions are needed to develop communication.

How do children ‘Serve’?

All children are individual therefore every child will ‘serve’ communication in a way that works best for them. The way a child ‘serves’ can change depending on their environment and who they are ‘serving’ too, for example, a child may ‘serve' differently with member of their family compared to a nursery staff member. Remember that we can never return every 'serve' (no one is perfect here!). What we can do is try to understand each child's individual ways of 'serving' so that we know when they are communicating with us.

How can we ‘Return’?

1. Be Approachable

Try to be mindful of your own communication. Think about your body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. Try to come down to your child’s level to see what they are communicating from their perspective.

1. Expanding Sounds and Vocabulary

Repeat and copy back any babble or sounds that your child makes. Try to communicate as if you were welcoming and inviting a response back. Remember all the different ways we/your child can communicate a response (even the subtle ones). Sometimes it can be helpful to turn your sentence into a song or rhyme to add some playfulness.

1. Make use of Daily Routines

Throughout the day make the most of the daily routines you are already doing such as bath-time, getting dressed and meal time. When out and about, for example a shopping trip, you could try thinking aloud - "I wonder what we need to get next. Milk!". Try adding words that sound like sounds (onomatopoeias) such as 'whoosh', 'bang', and 'pop' to make daily routines fun. 'Ready, steady, go' games can also be used to increase anticipation and encourage children to 'serve'.