Universal Design for Supportive Conversations

Developed by: Dameri Watson, Anna Winneker, and Christy Miller

Every child should be meaningfully included and feel a sense of belonging in their classroom community. Creating communication-rich, inclusive spaces starts with how we interact with children every day. Supportive conversations are a practical, relationship-based approach that helps ensure every child has opportunities to participate, connect, and express their perspectives in ways that work for them.

This resource offers ideas for universal, class-wide practices and support. It guides programs and practitioners in using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to engage in inclusive, supportive conversations with every child in their care throughout daily routines, activities, and play. Supportive conversations that expect and include the many ways children communicate strengthen relationships, increase engagement, and ensure every child has a voice in their classroom community.

Universal Design for Learning and Communication

UDL is a teaching framework focused on creating inclusive environments where each and every child's strengths are honored, making it possible for them to participate in and access all spaces, routines, and activities. In early childhood environments, UDL principles help practitioners consider and accommodate a continuum of child strengths and support needs, learning styles, and communication preferences from the start of daily planning. The three principles of UDL include multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. Within the Pyramid Model, by planning with flexibility, offering multiple ways for children to express themselves, and responding intentionally to all forms of communication, teams can promote children's full participation.

Communication is how young children connect, learn, and build relationships. Some children use spoken words, others use gestures, pictures, signs, or devices, and many use a combination of these. Intentionally planning for and supporting children to share their thoughts, needs, ideas, and feelings in ways that work for them helps them feel understood and included. When adults apply UDL principles alongside evidence-based communication supports within everyday routines and activities, environments become more inclusive and supportive of children's interactions, social-emotional development, and learning. These intentional, responsive interactions are the foundation of supportive conversations that help children feel understood, valued, and connected.

The remainder of this resource is organized to support programs and practitioners to:

▶ Understand and support multimodal communication across everyday routines, activities, and interactions;

▶ Reflect on how each child's unique ways of communicating are recognized, responded to, and built on during supportive conversations; and

▶ Consider Pyramid Model practices as they connect to UDL principles to promote and plan for inclusive, supportive conversations.

Multimodal Communication

Multimodal communication refers to the various ways we communicate with one another, including facial expressions, gestures, sign language, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and spoken words. Children (and adults) use a combination of multimodal communication throughout their day. For this resource, we have defined, categorized, and provided examples of four types of communication modalities: no tools, low-tech tools, mid-tech tools, and high-tech tools.

No Tool Communication: Things we do naturally, like using gestures, facial expressions, and body language.	Low-Tech Tools: Simple, inexpensive, non-electronic supports that are easy to use.	Mid-Tech Tools: Involve some electronics, such as devices that require batteries or a power source, and offer more features than low-tech options.	High-Tech Tools: Advanced, computer-based devices that use specialized software and often require training to use effectively.
• Gestures • Facial expressions • Body language • Eye gaze • Sign language • Spoken words • Sounds and vocalizations • Tone/volume/rhythm of voice • Cries/whines • Laughter	• Picture symbols • Choice visuals • Photo-based communication • Object/tactile symbols • Written words • Labels • Communication books/binders • Core boards • Visual schedules and schedule supports	• Single-message buttons (e.g., BIGmack buttons [1]) • Sequenced message devices • Simple tablets • Switch-activated device	• AAC apps • Eye-gaze systems • Speech-generating devices

Practitioners can consider these communication modalities to identify, thoughtfully plan, and offer options and supports to all children during routines and activities. Children may choose different forms of communication depending on the activity, their mood, or what they are trying to express. An important part of planning for and including multimodal communication is ensuring these communication options remain available and accessible throughout the day, are child-directed to the greatest extent possible, and are valued as legitimate forms of expression that support, but never require, spoken words. Planning and offering multiple communication modalities can help all children participate, connect, and share their ideas during supportive conversations.

What is that tool?

Core boards organize core vocabulary (e.g., go, stop, want, more, you, I, help, that) into a grid of symbols for the individual to use.

Sequenced message devices are speech-generating devices that let you record multiple short messages and play them back in order, one press at a time.

Switch-activated devices respond to the activation of an external switch, supporting a person to control toys and tools with movements such as pressing, touching, or moving a switch.

Eye-gaze systems track a person's eye movements so they can select words, letters, or messages using only their eyes.

High technology speech-generating devices support individuals to generate messages and access large vocabularies to generate speech output.

Reflecting on Supportive Conversation Practices

Supportive conversations help children feel heard and connected. While it is not possible to plan for every conversation, planning with UDL principles helps ensure children have access to multimodal communication and meaningful opportunities to engage in back-and-forth interactions. Ongoing reflection aligned with UDL principles helps promote more inclusive, supportive conversations.

Practitioners can use the reflective questions below to consider how they recognize, respond to, and build on each child's unique ways of communicating in daily interactions to create opportunities for belonging and language development. Then, they can use their reflections to guide their practice and ensure that classroom conversations are responsive and centered on children's communication preferences and strengths. The five dimensions of supportive conversations come directly from the Pyramid Model Practices Implementation Checklist for Preschool (2-5) Classrooms.

Pyramid Model Supportive Conversation Practices	Reflective Questions to Consider
Reflect and expand on children's verbal and nonverbal communication.	*How do I recognize and respond to all the ways children communicate?*
Respond to children's communication by asking questions, making comments, and providing opportunities for children to take turns.	*How do I make sure every child has a chance to take a conversational turn in a way that works best for them?*
Join children's play to have conversations about their interests and activities.	*When I join play, how can I build on the child's ideas and preferred communication?*
Communicate using alternative strategies with children who are non-speaking, have a language delay, or are dual language learners.	*How do I ensure every child has a preferred way to express themselves in our classroom community?*
Engage in conversations initiated by children in supportive and empathetic ways.	*When children initiate conversation, how do I respond in ways that show empathy, patience, and genuine interest?*

UDL, the Pyramid Model, and Supportive Conversations with Every Child

Using UDL principles and Pyramid Model practices can help practitioners plan for, promote, and have more inclusive, supportive conversations with young children. The examples that follow connect Pyramid Model supportive conversation practices with foundational UDL considerations to offer ideas practitioners can use in their early childhood environments.

Foundational UDL Considerations

▶ **Connection:** Building trusting, caring relationships with children so every child feels they belong and are valued

▶ **Environment:** Creating warm, welcoming, and adaptable spaces that support inclusion, play, and learning

▶ **Access:** Ensuring all children can fully participate by providing needed supports and removing barriers

▶ **Engagement:** Encouraging curiosity and participation in learning and play activities through a deep understanding of children's strengths and interests

Pyramid Model Supportive Conversation Practices	Connection	Environment	Access	Engagement
Reflect and expand on children's verbal and nonverbal communication.	Respond warmly to all communication attempts (e.g., "You're pointing to the sandbox! You want to play there!").	Embed choices in the environment in multiple modalities (e.g., objects, picture symbols, choice visuals, switches) so every child can communicate their preferences. Reflect on children's choices (e.g., "You chose the animals") and expand on them by adding language, materials, or play opportunities related to the selection.	Provide low-tech tools like picture emotion cards and feeling thermometers, or mid-tech tools like voice-output buttons, for children to express how they feel.	Use songs, puppets, or expressive gestures that reflect children's interests and build on their strengths to make responding and reflecting fun and inviting. During a group music activity, a child uses signs, a switch, or an eye gaze system to indicate a preferred song. Teachers and peers respond by singing or playing instruments along with the child's choice.
Respond to children's communication by asking questions, making comments, and providing opportunities for children to take turns.	Comment on the toys or activities that children are engaging with, modeling on AAC when appropriate (e.g., "I see that you have been busy cooking with your friends. What are you making next?").	Add visual or object turn-taking prompts (e.g., "My Turn/Your Turn" cards or tactile cues) to small-group activity areas in the environment.	Offer picture symbols or AAC devices that include phrases like "My turn," or "Can I try?". Teach gestures for turn-taking, like tapping one's chest for "My turn!", tapping in the direction of a classmate for "Your turn!", and gestures for waiting (e.g., wiggling fingers).	Model conversational curiosity (e.g., "You made a tall tower! What could go on top?") Keep turn-taking active through songs, chants, and games that build rhythm (e.g., "Pass the beanbag, say your name!"). Use gesture cues to invite participation. Consider using single-message buttons to allow all children to participate.

Pyramid Model Supportive Conversation Practices	Connection	Environment	Access	Engagement
Join children's play to have conversations about their interests and activities.	Follow the child's lead and join in their pretend play or building project and comment on their ideas. Model using AAC to comment.	Arrange classroom centers to include children's interests. Make core boards or picture symbols available. Join children in their play, notice what they are doing, and use the boards or visuals to reflect their ideas and invite conversations.	Use object symbols, role-play picture cards, or voice-output buttons (e.g., "Let's cook!" "Can I help?") to help children express ideas in play.	Use silly voices, props, or story extensions that reflect children's interests and build on their ideas.
Communicate using alternative strategies with children who are non-speaking, have a language delay, or are dual language learners.	Use the child's preferred form of communication, for example, learn and use key words from the child's home language, use picture symbols, or AAC devices.	Label classroom materials and routines in multiple languages and include visuals/tactile symbols. Use single-message buttons around the room for common ideas and needs (e.g., "Hi friend", "I want to play", "I need help").	Offer multimodal tools: gestures, sign language, core word boards, picture exchange systems, or AAC apps or buttons for greetings and requests. Provide all children with access to all the multimodal tools to initiate and respond to teachers and peers.	Celebrate all communication attempts (verbal, gestural, facial expression, or device-based) with enthusiasm. Celebrate engagement by acknowledging effort (e.g., "You showed me 'more' with your hands! Let's do that again").
Engage in conversations initiated by children in supportive and empathetic ways.	Observe, pause, and listen when a child approaches. Reflect their feelings (e.g., "You look excited! You want to tell me something!").	Provide cozy conversation nooks with visual supports (e.g., family photo books, communication books, drawing pads) that children can use to start a conversation.	Offer multiple tools to initiate conversations: voice-output buttons (e.g., "Look!" "Come see!"), object symbols, or picture symbols, to share ideas.	Show genuine excitement and follow the child's lead. Use wait time and encouraging body language (e.g., a smile, a nod, or a gesture) to invite continued interaction.

Individualized Communication Support

This resource offers ideas for universal, class-wide support for inclusive, supportive conversations with children. Individualized communication support, family partnerships, and collaboration with specialists, such as Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs), are also important for promoting each and every child's communication. Universal and individualized communication supports work best when implemented together and planned and used in partnership with families and specialists.

Families are experts on their children, and teaming with them to ensure consistency across all environments is essential. While early childhood professionals are experts in classroom routines, activities, and social interactions, SLPs and other therapists are experts in assessing communication needs and providing specific content knowledge about AAC that a child can use across environments. If a practitioner believes a child may benefit from more individualized communication support and the child is not already receiving services, starting a conversation with the family is an important first step. Practitioners can help families seek an evaluation for additional services through early intervention (birth-3), the local school district (ages 3-5), or private insurance, if applicable.

Endnotes

1   BIGmack is distributed by AbleNet® https://www.ablenetinc.com/