



# Meeting Children Where They Are: The Developmental Science of Communication

A Caregiver Guide by 2villages



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# A note to Caregivers

If communication feels hard in your home, you are not alone. It can be exhausting to repeat yourself, to interpret behaviors, to wonder why your child isn't expressing what seems so clear in your own mind. When words don't come easily, or don't come at all, it can create frustration on both sides.

Communication is a developmental process built layer by layer. And when we understand where our children are in that process, we can respond in ways that reduce stress, strengthen connection, and support real growth.



# Communication is More Than Words

Communication includes speech, sign language, gestures, facial expression, body movement, eye gaze, pictures, and augmentative systems. Verbal and non-verbal communication work together to help children express needs, connect socially, regulate emotions, and develop independence.

For some children, especially those with motor differences, hearing differences, neurodevelopmental conditions, or genetic diagnoses, spoken language may not be the primary or most accessible form of communication. That does not mean communication is absent. It may simply be expressed differently. When we widen our definition, we reduce pressure and increase access.



# The Science Behind Communication Development

Communication requires coordination between multiple brain systems: social engagement networks, language processing centers, motor planning pathways, and executive functioning skills. These systems develop gradually and are strengthened through responsive, relational interaction.

When expectations exceed a child's developmental capacity, whether due to age, regulation, fatigue, sensory overload, or disability, the nervous system shifts into stress. Stress reduces access to language, flexibility, and connection. Meeting children where they are is not lowering expectations. It is creating the neurological conditions required for development to occur.



## STAGE 1: CONNECTION BEFORE INTENTION

In the earliest stage, communication may not yet be purposeful. A child may focus more on objects than people, show limited shared attention, or not consistently respond to social bids.

For some children with developmental differences, this stage may last longer or look different than expected.

Support at this stage centers on connection. Get face-to-face. Follow the child's lead. Use people-based play. Respond to glances, movements, sounds, or shifts in attention as meaningful.

Before expecting language, spoken or not, we build shared attention and safety.





## STAGE 2: INTENTIONAL REQUESTING

At this stage, children begin to understand that others can help meet their needs. They may reach, point, vocalize, sign, use pictures, or move toward desired objects intentionally. For children using AAC or alternative systems, this stage may involve learning that communication tools reliably produce a response.

Support this stage by offering clear choices, pausing to allow processing time, modeling simple words or signs, and reinforcing every intentional attempt.

If motor planning or speech production is difficult, honor alternative communication equally. The goal is not complexity; it is strengthening intentional communication.



## STAGE 3: EARLY INTERACTION & EXPRESSION

Here, children begin using more consistent symbols: words, signs, pictures, or devices. Turn-taking may emerge. Preferences and early ideas become clearer.

For children with disabilities, expressive language may expand unevenly, and regulation may impact consistency.

Support by expanding on what the child communicates, modeling short combinations, and encouraging interaction beyond requesting such as commenting or sharing. Keep pressure low and response high. Development grows in environments where communication attempts are acknowledged and built upon.



## STAGE 4: EMERGING CONVERSATION

Conversation requires executive functioning: organizing thoughts, taking another's perspective, regulating emotions, and shifting flexibly between ideas. Even children who speak fluently may struggle here if regulation, processing speed, or working memory are taxed.

Support by asking open-ended questions, modeling emotional vocabulary, and helping repair breakdowns in communication. Recognize that stress, fatigue, or sensory overload may temporarily shift a child back to earlier stages. This is not regression; it is nervous system protection.



# COMMUNICATION IS NOT LINEAR

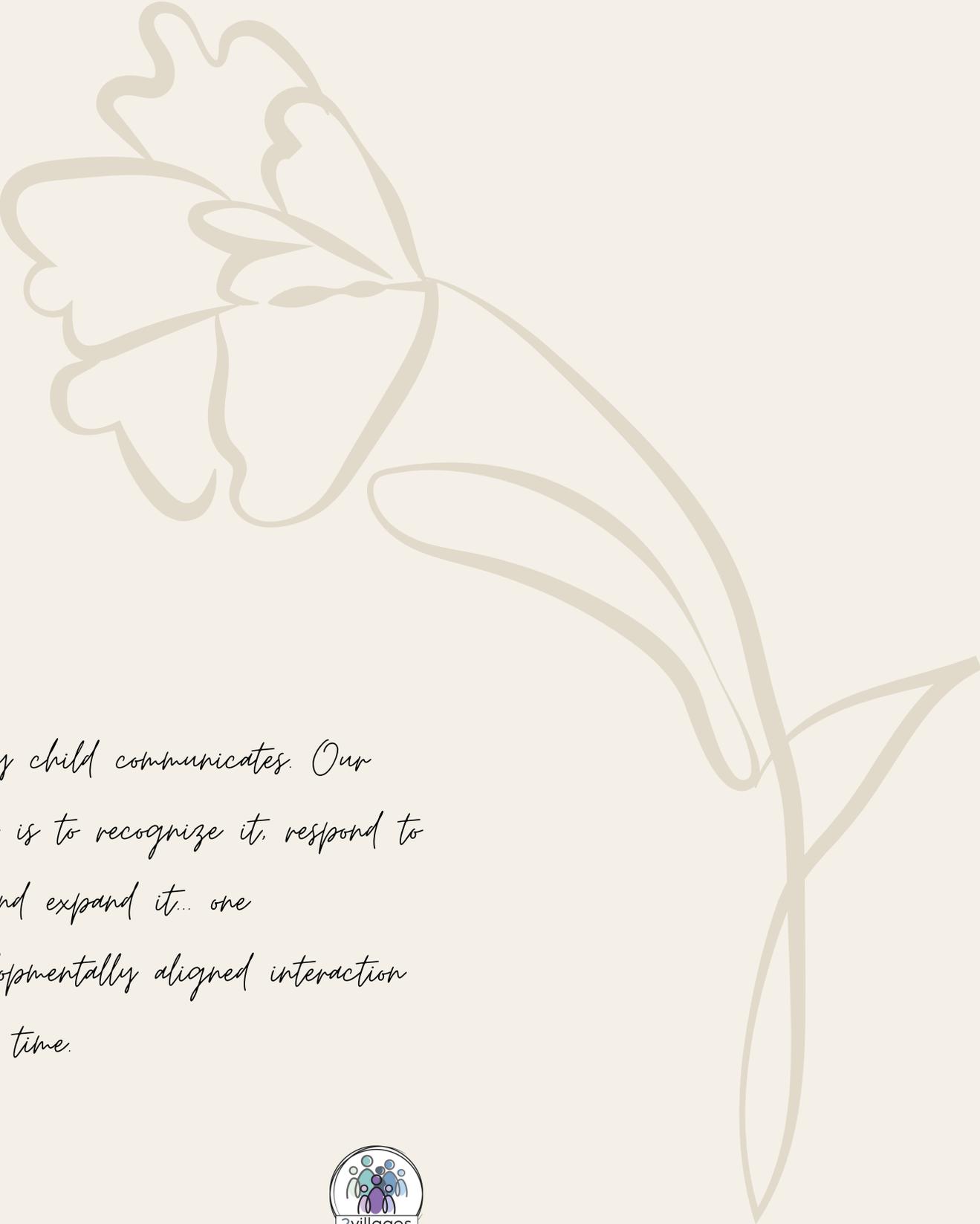
Children do not move through communication stages in a straight line. Development may plateau, surge, or fluctuate.

For children with disabilities, progress may look slower in some areas and stronger in others. What matters most is not speed; it is alignment.

When we respond to the stage our child is operating in, we protect connection and support growth.

Communication is not about pulling children forward faster. It is about building the bridge beneath them so they can move forward with confidence.





*Every child communicates. Our work is to recognize it, respond to it, and expand it... one developmentally aligned interaction at a time.*

