What is communication?

Communication (say kom-you-ni-kay-shun)

Animals communicate with each other at some level. Humans have developed many different ways of communicating with each other such as using words, movements of their face and body, and writing.

There are lots of different reasons for communicating. These are some of the most important for us:

- getting things we need to live – food, shelter, love
- giving and getting news and information
- sharing ideas and feelings with others.

There are also different ways that we communicate, such as:

- Talking face to face with each other
- Using phones or email
- Using 'social networking', such as using Facebook
- Writing letters
- Listening to the TV or radio

Verbal communication - talking

Talking to someone needs lots of skills if you are going to get the right messages and understandings passing between each other.

- You need to speak clearly and loud enough for them to hear, but not so loudly that they don't want to listen.
- You need to use the sort of language you can all understand.
- You need to speak and behave respectfully if you want to be listened to.
- You need to actively listen to others
  - Look at them, to show that you are giving them your full attention. Don't overdo it though. Staring hard at someone makes that person feel uncomfortable. In some cultures it can be bad manners to look at a person’s face when he is talking to you.
  - Make 'listening noises' (but not interrupting). You know the sort of thing - saying "Uh huh", "yes" or "no" in the right places.
  - Watch their body language.

Written communication

When we write to communicate we need to use many different ways (styles). Would you write a letter to your friend in the same style as you would write a story, write up a science
experiment or tell someone how to build a kite? No, because each needs a different style of writing.

Here are some of the skills you need.

- You need to learn to read and write.
- You need to learn how your language works (grammar and spelling).
- You need to learn about different styles of writing. You need to learn how to write for the people who will be reading it.
- You need to learn about editing and revising your work.
- You need to learn about different ways of writing – on paper, on your computer screen, emails, social networking sites, discussion boards, SMS and instant messaging.
- You need to learn how to present data in many ways including pictures, graphics and charts.

**Non-verbal communication (body language)**

When you were a baby you couldn't talk but you were able to communicate your needs to the adults around you in ways that did not use words (non-verbal communication). Animals don’t talk but we can often tell what our pets want or how they feel by the way they behave and the sounds that they make.

Humans communicate in non verbal ways.

- How people are feeling can show on their faces. This can tell us they are happy, sad, and angry, and whether or not they are interested in what we are saying or doing.
- The tone of our voices can express our feelings very well.
- The ways we move our bodies (gestures) can help us tell the story.
- We use touch too, e.g. we may shake hands, and pat, stroke, hug or kiss people to show that we care about them.

We learn that our body language sometimes doesn’t match what we are saying! Have you ever been asked to do something and didn’t really want to do it? You may have said, "Yes okay", but what did your tone of voice, your face and your gestures say?

We are often very quick to make judgements about people by the way they look, the clothes they wear or the way they speak. This can affect the way we communicate with a person or even whether we communicate at all or feel afraid to.

**Other ways to communicate**

Some people cannot hear very well or may not be able to hear at all. They may be able to communicate by using a sign language. In Australia they may use Auslan, or sometimes they use writing or picture boards.

Some people are unable to see at all but can still read books because they are written in a special language called Braille.

Each letter on the page is made up of dots which can be felt by fingers moving across the page to ‘read’ the words. Our topic on Problems with eyesight - blindness can tell you more.
We can communicate our feelings and send messages to others through art and pictures. You don’t have to be a great artist to get your message across. Nowadays people can send or share photos, ideas, video clips, etc. across the world in an instant.

But you need to know that this kind of communication can have its dangers. See our topics on mobile phones, cyber bullying and the internet to find out more.

Did you know?

> Animals use sound, scent and sight to communicate with others. Dogs sniff each other when they don't know each other. Cats purr when they are happy.

> Many animals use touching to show what they feel. When they want to show that they care about each other elephants twine their trunks together, baboons shake hands and giraffes rub their necks together.

> Cats knead [say ‘need’], which means they pat the same spot stretching their claws when they are happy. If your cat's tail is trembling when she is near you then she really loves you. If the tail starts thrashing about then move away fast - she’s feeling angry!

> Morse code is an alphabet of dots and dashes which was used to send messages along telegraph wires. Some amateur radio operators still use it today. It can also be sent using special lights so that ships at sea can communicate with each other. The Morse for SOS (when you need help) is . . . --- . . . The dash is 3 times longer than the dot (dit dit dit, d-a-h, d-a-h, d-a-h, dit dit dit)

> Ships sometimes still use different flags to send messages. They might send flags up the mast to send a message, or they may send a message using 'Semaphore' - when a person holds a flag in each hand and spells out words by moving the flags into different positions. Some of you may know about this if you are in the Scouts.

> Sometimes people use secret codes to send secret messages to each other.

Dr Kim says

Learning to communicate well is really important. It’s always a good idea to make sure you have understood something like instructions before you go off and do something. Try saying back the instructions in your own words and ask questions if you need to.