

Effective Communication with Individuals (Factsheet for Professionals)

What is Communication?

Good communication is more than just about a two-way method of exchanging and understanding information. It enables us:

- To work more effectively with individuals and their families
- To understand and be understood
- To have clarity in child-centred or person-centred approaches
- To engage with friends and the wider community

What can happen if there is a lack of communication?

A lack of good communications can for example, lead to:

- Missed appointments
- Inability to understand what is being asked or what the issues are
- Neglect
- Inappropriate decision-making
- Confusion over capacity

Why is clear communication so important?

As well as being able to clearly convey a message, there is the need to also listen in a way that gains the full meaning and intent of what is being said and makes the other person feel heard and understood.

Why can communication be difficult?

Physical and mental health conditions might impact on a person's ability to communicate. A wide range of long term and chronic conditions might affect individuals' ability to communicate verbally. This includes those with Dementia, Autism, Brain injury, multi-sensory impairments, Motor disorders, Stroke, neurological disorders, voice disorders and hearing impairments. In addition, there are approx. 1.5 million people with learning disabilities in the United Kingdom*. Of these between 50% to 80% will have some degree of communication difficulties*

Skills for Care suggests that about 60% of people with learning disabilities overall have some skills in symbolic communication using pictures, signs or symbols. About 20% have no verbal communication skills but do demonstrate a will to communicate, expecting a response.

Exploring different communication methods:

Spoken and written communication language methods have emerged as the primary means of communication in today's society. However, it is important to recognise other methods that can be used to convey meaning. Objects, pictures, signs and symbols

might be used to communicate. Other methods such as Braille, Makaton and British Sign Language might also be employed.

There is an expectation that organisations who work with people with learning disabilities produce and disseminate materials in accessible formats, which might include the use of new technology such as Graphics, and other communication methods and aids.

People with learning disabilities might work with a professional speech language therapist (SALT), who is qualified to provide tailored individual communications plans.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods can be used to solve everyday communication challenges. AAC covers a huge range of techniques and resources which can be used to support or replace speech/ spoken words. These include gestures, signing, symbols, word boards, books, communication boards and Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA) or by contacting a specialist organisation such as Communication Matters. There is no 'best' type of AAC. Specialist assessment, by a trained professional, can help to find out each individuals' preferences based on their situation, abilities and needs.

People who have more severe or complex needs, and who are unable to use more formal communication methods might need to rely on other people to advocate and interpret their needs and choices through observation and picking up on non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions.

How can Advocates help with communication?

Advocacy refers to receiving support from another individual, such as an Advocate, to assist in expressing your views, wishes and opinions, so that your voice is heard in decision making about your life and things that are important to you. Examples include issues relating to home, education, care and support, relationships, and health and wellbeing.

Top Tips for Effective Communication:

Follow these tips for effective communication:

- **Find a quiet location** - if possible, find somewhere that is quiet, private and has good lighting. Be aware that noise might be a distraction.
- **Think about what you are saying** - use a greeting for example 'hello', provide accurate information, use 'open ended questions (don't have a simple yes or no response), repeat and rephrase if the person does not understand, avoid using jargon, slang or long words that might be difficult to understand; always use accessible language
- **Go at the person's pace** - check that you have both understood what has been said to avoid confusion/ misunderstandings. Follow the lead of the person who you are communicating with.
- **Be prepared to use alternative or creative communication methods** - other than spoken or written communication such as gestures, facial expressions, pictures, drawings or photos

- **Speak clearly and slowly** - Do not mumble or speak too quickly, allow time for the other person to respond.
- **Ask for help if necessary** - Do not be hesitant to ask for help from carers or parents, translators, interpreters
- **Observe the person-** Body language, hand movements and facial expressions can also be a good communication method
- **Allow Time** - Do not rush communication
- **Show interest** - You can do this by occasional nodding, smiling, making eye contact, saying 'yes', leaning forward.
- **Do some research beforehand** - Find out before you meet with the person how they best communicate. This will allow you to make suitable preparations or arrangements before you meet with them, to make communication easier.

Useful information and resources:

- AAC Community American website which contains free downloadable resources <https://aacccommunity.net/about/>
- Abilitynet provides digital and technology accessibility solutions for people living with disability or impairment in their own homes, at work and in education. <https://abilitynet.org.uk/>
- ACE Centre provides free AAC resources and publications which can be downloaded and printed <https://acecentre.org.uk/resources/>
- Advocacy: Get your voice heard information from Disability Rights UK <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/advocacy-get-your-voice-heard>
- Communication Matters supports people with little or no clear speech <https://communicationmatters.org.uk/>
- International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) to find out more about AAC <https://www.isaac-online.org/english/home/>
- Makaton Charity: To find out more about Makaton <https://www.makaton.org/>
- Royal National Institution for the Blind (RNIB) to find out more information about Braille <https://www.rnib.org.uk/>
- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) for more information about AAC <https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/clinical-information/augmentative-and-alternative-communication>
- Skills for Care for advice on communication skills for social care <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/Learning-and-development/Core-skills/Communication-skills-in-social-care.pdf>
- The British Deaf Association website to find out more about BSL. <https://bda.org.uk/help-resources/>
- The Sequal Trust: Funds communication Aids and provides help and advice to people with communication, movement or learning difficulties <https://www.thesequaltrust.org.uk/>

*People with Learning Disabilities in England (2011)

**Skills for Care