INFORMATION SHEET

Communication and Challenging Behaviour

Why is communication important?

Many people with learning disabilities find some parts of communicating hard. They might find it hard to:

- Understand what other people say
- Tell other people what they want or how they feel

If you can't tell other people what you want (or don't want!) challenging behaviour can be more likely. Making communication better can reduce challenging behaviours.

Common communication difficulties

Knowing how much someone understands

It can be difficult to know how much someone understands. We get lots of clues from the context and what is happening around us. This is a good thing but sometimes it can make people think someone understands more words than they do. Using short sentences and giving people one bit of information at a time can help.

Some words are easier to understand than others

Concrete concepts refer to things we can see and touch. These include people, places and objects (e.g. mum, shops, table).

Abstract concepts referring to things that cannot be seen or touched. These include negatives (e.g., “not” “don’t”), and time concepts (e.g., “yesterday”, “this afternoon”).

Abstract words are particularly difficult to understand. Sentences with abstract concepts in them can be easily misunderstood.

Teacher’s message - “Sam, you’re not going in the car”.
Message understood by Sam - “I’m going out in the car”.

Sam does not understand “not” so thinks that he is going by car and becomes distressed when he realises he will have to walk. The message would have been
clearer to Sam if the teacher had told him what he was going to do e.g., “Sam, we are going to walk”.

**Longer and complex sentences are difficult**

Some people might understand one or two key words in a sentence. Some people might need simple sentences.

*Mother's message* - "Hannah, you can have a drink after you've tidied your room".  
*Message understood by Hannah* - “I'm having a drink and then tidying my room".  
In English, what we say first is usually what we want the person to do first. Hannah becomes upset when she is expected to tidy her room and has not yet had her drink.

**Taking things literally**

If someone has done something that we find irritating we might say "Oh, that's great!", when we actually mean the opposite. People might take things literally and so misunderstand. In English we use lots of phrases that must sound very strange if you take it literally, e.g. “I laughed my head off”.

**Hearing loss**

Lots of people with learning disabilities have a hearing loss. This can make communication even more difficult.

**Difficulties in sending messages**

People with learning disabilities might have lots of difficulty communicating their needs and wishes. This might include:

- Not being able to speak or only having a few words, signs or gestures
- Having speech, signs or gestures that are very unclear
- Struggling with the social rules e.g. making eye contact, knowing when to speak and how much to say
- Not being able to say ‘no’
- Not being able to say ‘I don’t understand’
- Not being able to express feelings

For example, John is asked to go shopping. He is unable to tell people that he isn’t in the mood to do this as he has had a busy morning. He would probably be happy to go after he has had a rest. He is unable to communicate these things and becomes upset and starts to scream when he is given his coat.

**Other ways of communicating**
Finding additional or alternative ways to communicate can be really helpful. This is called Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC). This means using different types of communication including:

**Objects of reference:** These are objects that have particular meanings associated with them. For example, using a cup to let the person know that it is time for a drink.

**Signed communication:** This is where shapes (signs) made by people’s hands represent words in the same way that sounds coming out of people’s mouths represent words.

**Symbols or photos:** Symbols (e.g. line drawings) and photographs can also be used to represent words. For example, an outline of a house can be used to represent ‘home’.

**Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA):** These ‘speak’ messages when pressed. There are lots of different types of VOCAs. Some devices are for recording one message (e.g. drink) on a ‘switch’ or large button. Others are capable of producing many different sentences, on a special computer or an app.

**Total communication approaches:** (where all means of communication are supported) are useful. Families sometimes worry that giving someone another way to communicate might mean they won’t learn to talk but the research shows that giving people other ways of communicating can help people to talk.

**How to support communication**

- Make sure you gain the person’s attention before you communicate
- Use short and simple sentences
- Give people plenty of time to process what you have said
- Use additional communication where you can. This might be using symbols, signs, photographs or gestures (e.g. pointing to someone’s shoes when asking them to put them on).
- Give people lots of opportunities to communicate and give them lots of time to respond
- Make sure everyone knows how to communicate with the person (using a communication passport)
- Try to respond consistently to any attempts to communicate

**Intensive Interaction**

Some children, young people and adults with a severe learning disability may find communication and being social very difficult. An approach called Intensive Interaction is a practical way of supporting someone to interact with others. It is a person-centred approach where encouragement to engage in social interactions is done at the pace of the individual and ‘on their terms’. Many family carers use this kind of interaction naturally with their family member, to connect and enjoy their company.
Where to go next

To access speech and language therapy, you can ask your GP, district nurse, health visitor, your child's nursery staff or teacher for a referral. You may also be able to refer yourself to your local speech and language therapy service, see: www.rcslt.org/Finding_an_SLT

Speech and language therapy is more commonly available to children than adults, but there is no age limit and adults with learning disabilities can continue to learn new ways to communicate.

Useful organisations

- Afasic: A UK charity that aims to help children and young people affected by speech, language and communication impairments, their families and the professionals working with them. Their website also features lots of information sheets about speech and language impairments. For more information visit: www.afasic.org.uk, tel: 0300 666 9410 or contact via website.

- Communication Matters: A UK charity that supports people who find communication difficult because they have little or no clear speech. For more information visit: www.communicationmatters.org.uk, tel: 0845 456 8211 or email: admin@communicationmatters.org.uk.

- Find a Voice: A UK based charity that provide advice and support to people with speech and communication difficulties, including information on obtaining funding. For more information visit: www.findavoice.org.uk, tel: 01233 634625 or contact via website.

- 1 Voice: A network and support for children and families caring for someone with communication needs. For more information visit: www.1voice.info, tel: 07943 618525 or email: info@1voice.info.

- Talking Point: A charity that provide advice and information for parents and carers of children with speech and language difficulties. For more information visit: www.talkingpoint.org.uk, tel: 020 7843 2544 or email: info@talkingpoint.org.uk.

Objects of Reference

- CALL Scotland have produced a useful leaflet about introducing objects of reference www.callscotland.org.uk/common-assets/cm-files/files/quick-guides/QG-1408113957.pdf
**Signing**

- **Makaton**: Makaton is a language programme that uses signs and symbols to help people communicate. The Makaton charity aims to provide training, resources, advice and support to families and professionals. For more information visit: [www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org), tel: 01276 606778 or email: family@makaton.org.

- **Signalong**: The Signalong Group is a registered charity that is dedicated to helping people with speech and language problems overcome difficulties by teaching a sign support system. For more information visit: [www.signalong.org.uk](http://www.signalong.org.uk), tel: 01634 727087 or email: info@signalong.org.uk.

**Symbols**

- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)**: PECS is an approach that uses pictures to develop communication skills. The following website provides basic information about PECS and gives details of PECS training workshops. For more information visit: [www.pecs.org.uk](http://www.pecs.org.uk), tel: 01273 609555 or email: pyramid@pecs.org.uk.

- **Widgit Literacy Symbols**: This website offers information about Widgit literacy symbols, which aid understanding and communication for people who find reading difficult. For more information visit: [www.widgit.co.uk](http://www.widgit.co.uk), tel: 01926 333680 or email: info@widgit.com.

**Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA)**

- **Ace centre**: An organisation specialising in communication. They offer services in assessments, equipment loans, training and resources. For more information visit: [www.acecentre.org.uk](http://www.acecentre.org.uk) email: enquiries@acecentre.org.uk Freephone Advice Line: 0800 080 3115

**Using visual communication**

- **ASD Visual Aids**: A company that supply visual products, which aim to support children, young people and adults with communication and social difficulties. For example, Mood bands, stories for social situations and many other products that can be used either at school or home. For more information visit [www.asdvisualaids.com](http://www.asdvisualaids.com), tel: 0800 622 6015 or email: info@visualaids.com.

- **Talking Mats**: This is a communication tool, which uses a mat with symbols as a basis for communication. It is designed to help people with communication
difficulties think about issues discussed with them and to express themselves in a visual way. www.talkingmats.com

Communication apps for iPad, iPhone, Windows and Android

- **Communication Apps:** This 'wheel' of AAC Apps by Sally Millar and Gillian McNeill of CALL Scotland, provides a categorised guide to iPad Apps for people with complex communication support needs, who may need to use some form(s) of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). www.callscotland.org.uk/downloads/posters-and-leaflets/ipad-apps-for-complex-communication-support-needs/

Communication Passports

- **Personal Communication Passports:** A way of recording information about an individual and how they communicate in an accessible and person-centred way. For more information visit: www.communicationpassports.org.uk, tel: 0131 651 6235 or contact via website.

- **Hospital passports:** Hospital passports are designed to help people and their families communicate their needs to doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. ‘My Hospital Passport’ is a resource for people with autism who might need hospital treatment: www.autism.org.uk/about/health/hospital-passport.aspx

- **Multimedia Profiling:** A 21st century communication tool, an alternative language that enables people, through the use of video and computers, to gather and share information about their lives and the problems they face. For more information visit: www.acting-up.org.uk, tel: 020 8533 3344 or email info@acting-up.org.uk.

Resource Packs

- **I Want to Choose Too:** A guide that includes ideas, resources and tips for involving children with little or no speech in the community, at school, in the classroom and in relationships. Created by the University of Bristol. To view this document visit: www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/migrated/documents/iwanttochoosetoo.pdf

Intensive Interaction

- **Intensive Interaction** – a website with information about intensive interaction and links to further resources: www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk
• The British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD): an information sheet about intensive interaction can be found here: www.bild.org.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?alId=4090

• Phoebe Caldwell – expert practitioner in intensive interaction: www.phoebecaldwell.com

• Us in a Bus: a registered charity working with people who are often isolated and can find communicating with the world (and the people in it) a challenge: www.usinabus.org.uk/what-we-do/intensive-interaction

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