

# INFORMATION SHEET



making a difference  
to the lives of people with  
severe learning disabilities

## Teaching new skills

New experiences, trying different things and learning new skills are important to us all. Teaching and learning new skills is a key issue in improving the lives of children, young people and adults with learning disabilities. However, a child with learning disabilities may have delayed development, and may need extra support to learn new skills. Similarly, adults who are labelled as having behaviour that challenges may have had limited opportunities to learn and may also find learning difficult.

***All our information sheets are available to download free of charge because we believe that money should not be a barrier to getting the information you need, when you need it.***

***The CBF relies on the support of our friends and colleagues to continue to provide free resources to families.***

***Please see below for details of how to support us.***

Supporting a person to learn a new skill can give them greater independence, choice and control and provide them with further opportunities to try new things and be active within their community. It can also help them to get their needs met using appropriate behaviours.

This information sheet will look at how different teaching methods are used to help with:

- Learning a new activity (see page 2)
- Communication skills (see page 4)
- Coping skills (see page 6)

### **Why is teaching new skills important?**

Many challenging behaviours are linked to social learning and communication. The person may not know those unwritten rules that people have about politeness, ways of talking to each other and so on. Most people learn them automatically by watching people, sometimes getting it a bit wrong, but people with learning disabilities and/or autism might not have picked up these rules. For example, we have learned not to look at someone for too long and not to stand too close to people unless we know them well. We use different communication styles in different settings and to different people. The people you support may need help to learn these important social skills for communication.

Most challenging behaviour/s may be used to achieve one of the following outcomes:

- To gain positive or negative **attention**
- To get an object, item or activity they want (**tangible**)
- To **avoid or escape** something/someone
- To get some **sensory feedback** or stimulation

Most of the above outcomes are totally reasonable but the young person may not know an appropriate way of getting their needs or requests met.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is the evidenced based method of reducing challenging behaviour for people with severe learning disabilities. Teaching new skills is a core component of PBS because it provides another way for individuals to get their needs met. For example:

- I want to talk to someone in class: I look at them and say their name
- I want a drink (there are no drinks visible): I use a symbol, photo or I sign drink to my care staff or family carer
- I want to leave the room: I hold up a card to ask for a break
- I need some kind of 'sensory fix'; I get my heavy coat or bag or a symbol.

All of the above would need to be taught to the person and understood by all of the people supporting them.

### **How do we teach new skills?**

We all learn in different ways and before supporting a person to learn a new skill, it is important to think about:

- How the young person learns
- Their level of understanding
- How to make the learning interesting and relevant to them.

We also need to check to see if they can transfer what they've learnt in one situation to another, for example from school to home. This is not always the case, so we may have to teach the skill in different settings.

#### **Active Support**

Active Support works alongside PBS to help people with learning disabilities achieve a number of goals. It is about providing people with learning disabilities with enough support to engage in meaningful activities and relationships and lead active lives in the community. This support may include setting out daily activity plans (with each day focusing on a particular set of activities). Through increasing people's involvement in a variety of activities and relationships, people will have the opportunity to develop more skills. Ultimately active support aims to give individuals:

- Greater choice and control over their lives
- More independence, and
- Increased participation in activities within the community.

### **1) Learning a new activity**

As previously mentioned many children, young people and adults with learning disabilities will find learning how to do things hard and their behaviour may have restricted their learning opportunities further. They may find it hard to learn without someone taking time to teach them or set up learning experiences.

Giving the child, young person or adult the opportunity to learn new skills directly increases their abilities, confidence and improves relationships with people.

### The story of the cup of tea

Lenny was 12 and living away from home in a residential setting. He has severe learning disabilities, a little speech and used signing/symbol to help communicate. He had low self-esteem and did not like to try new things in case he 'failed.' If pushed too hard to do something he would get angry and lash out, sometimes causing injury to staff and his parents. He was always genuinely sorry afterwards. He did like to help out and be useful.



His learning programme included communication, learning to remain calm and life skills alongside the usual school subjects. By chance his link worker showed a guest into the school and did the usual greeting and tea making. Lenny showed an interest in helping with this. He showed that he wanted to do the whole thing from social greeting to actually making the tea. There was discussion about tea making - there was the risk of the boiling water. And Lenny didn't even like tea!

The tea making was task analysed - that is, the task was broken down into small chunks or steps. The teacher and link worker decided to use backward chaining to support Lenny, where an individual is supported with all the steps except the last which they do for themselves. They also used some prompt and fade where an individual is given a cue to perform a skill. There is a variety of cue types such as verbal or physical (hand-over-hand assistance). The use of this cue gradually reduces over time as the person becomes more skilled.

#### **Task analysis**

As the name suggests this all about analysing the task, by breaking it down into smaller chunks and thinking about which steps someone might need support with. There may be only one or two key steps which are stopping the person completing the task, so by teaching these steps or providing support for these steps a person can maximise their achievement and independence. The steps can be made larger or smaller depending on who the task is being analysed for.

#### **Backwards chaining**

For a person who finds learning difficult, rather than teaching them to go through each step at a time, it can be more useful to support the person through all of the steps until the last one which they do for themselves. For example if putting on a jumper: physically support all of the steps but ensure that the person pulls down the jumper to waist level (the last step in the chain) and therefore complete the last step independently. When they can do this, teach the person to do the last 2 steps of the sequence, i.e. pull jumper over face and then pull down. Thank or praise them for putting on their jumper. This is a good method as the person is completing the task for themselves each time and is gradually gaining independence.

#### **Prompt and fade**

This is a combination of two important teaching techniques that help to teach skills. A prompt is a cue to help a young person to perform a desired behaviour or skill. For example you may hold a young person's hand to guide them when learning to cut their sandwich. Over time as the young person becomes more skilled you gradually reduce (fade) the amount of physical support offered to the young person until they are cutting the sandwich alone and you just speak to them or verbally prompt them. At a later stage they can do the whole task with no physical or verbal help.

Initially Lenny completed the last two steps - pouring and serving the tea - on his own after the staff member had done the rest. Over time he worked back through the sequence doing more steps with no help. The handling of the kettle section was completed under strict supervision with the staff member doing it hand over hand at first. When teaching a person a new skill, you can use your hand to guide theirs – this can help teach them the action and level of force required to perform the skill. Over time the level of support was reduced to a light physical guide down to speaking to then looking at what Lenny needed to do with the kettle. Finally Lenny was able to complete the entire sequence with no visible support. This is a good example of Active Support as Lenny was actively engaged in the activity and the amount of support offered changed over time as Lenny developed his skills.

Lenny still doesn't like tea! He does however meet and greet, serve tea and sometimes biscuits. The skill did not look like the most relevant to helping Lenny with his behaviour and living his life. However, Lenny has developed a positive focus, made a contribution and helped others through the tea-making. His self-esteem and sense of self-worth has improved. His reputation is now more positive. The best thing is.....his mum likes tea!

For further examples of task analysis and a template, please see Appendix A.

## **2) Communication**

We all need to communicate a wide range of things. For example, when a person has difficulty in explaining what they are feeling to those around them, it can lead to behaviour that challenges as the person's only way to express themselves. Communication problems often directly cause behaviour that challenges or make difficult situations harder to cope with. Communication skills are not always 'picked up' by people who have learning disabilities; they often need tailored and specific support to learn these skills.

I want		I see		thank you	
					
drink	biscuit	apple	cake	crisps	banana
					
book	sand	bricks	pens	farm	puzzle
					
shoe	jumper	trousers	coat	sock	hat

One way to improve communication skills is to adopt an approach called Intensive Interaction, to teach new skills or support the person in social interactions. It works by the 'teacher' adopting a behavioural style where they allow the learner to lead the interaction, and respond to the learner's actions in a natural way. It is a very personalised and practical approach to supporting someone to learn communication skills. You can read more about Intensive Interaction here: [www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk](http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk)

There are also a range of other communication methods which people with learning disabilities can be taught. Some of the following methods can be used:

- PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)
- Signs and symbols e.g. Signalong, Makaton

- Communication apps for computer and smart phones
- Objects of reference – using an object to communicate e.g. using a cup to signal wanting a drink

It may take time to find the best method to suit the individual. A speech and language therapist may be able to help families think about suitable options to try.

**Speech and Language Therapists** assess communication difficulties and support people to use different methods to help develop their communication skills. These include verbal or non-verbal methods e.g. signing. To contact your local speech and language therapist, you will need to ask your GP (or another health professional) for a referral.

Some children, young people and adults may never use speech or may not be able to use it to make their needs known for many years. Signing, symbols and photo systems are useful for many people. Whatever system is used it needs to work and be valued at all times by all involved; school, support staff and family carers. It is important that everyone responds to the new communication skill as quickly as they would have responded to the behaviour.

### **Max – using signing to communicate**

Max used no speech but made sounds and gestures. He had been assessed as understanding up to two information carrying words.

#### **Information carrying words**

When we use language we use lots of words, some of which are not needed to help us understand what is being said. When we speak to someone we give clues in our intonation, facial expression and body language and the context in which we are speaking adds information.

For example, the teacher might say “OK children it is time for assembly now go and line up.” Out of those 12 words, the child may only need to understand ‘assembly’ or they may know it is time for assembly as it is the same time every day. The child may not need to understand any words here!

Children, young people and adults can process varying numbers of information carrying words. Avoid overloading or overestimating a person’s ability to comprehend, as they may not fully understand what is happening or what is required of them.

The Speech and Language Therapist decided with his parents and the class teacher that signing would be a good way forward. Signs were chosen around food and drink as they were *tangible* and could be offered easily and regularly both at home and at school.

Max could make vague approximations of the sign, which were encouraged. Over time the idea was to use 'shaping' to develop the signs.

### **Shaping**

When teaching a young person to speak or sign a word, you initially accept a rough approximation to the word. Over time you gradually expect the sign or word to look or sound more like the correct version. Eventually the person is doing it perfectly or as good as they ever can.

The school and parents met to discuss what to do. Observations were completed at home and school by the early years worker. Everyone was surprised by the results which were all too familiar. Some staff at school and Dad felt self-conscious about signing and as Max was making progress they signed to him less. He was not getting as many opportunities to use his signs and sometimes staff (who were busy) ignored or missed the attempts to sign. Some staff and Mum would not accept his sign unless it was good enough. Having identified the inconsistencies, the Speech and Language Therapist explained that this is a lifelong journey and helped people to understand their long term roles in supporting Max with his communication skills.

Max signs to this day and has added a symbol book to his communication aids, which forms part of his communication passport. As his communication skills have improved, there has been a reduction in behaviour described as challenging.

**Communication passports** can be a helpful tool for people with learning disabilities and those who support them (e.g. health professionals/school staff). These passports are unique to each individual and contain details of how they communicate with others, their medical needs, their likes and dislikes. They should be completed by the person themselves, their families and support staff. For an example of a communication passport, please see the resources list.

### **3) Coping skills**

If we know the triggers for behaviours that challenge us then we can simply remove them can't we? If only it were that simple! Some triggers may be about things that happen generally in life: changes, waiting for something or not being able to do what you want when you want to. Some triggers cannot be made to vanish magically, so the person will need to learn ways to help cope with them.

#### **Coping with Change**

Many people with learning disabilities find change very difficult. These changes could be small (for example, ending an activity to go on a walk) or big (for example, moving house). Changes may make a person feel anxious because they are unsure of what will happen, and they make people feel unsafe and insecure. The following scenarios are about anxiety specifically related to changes in the environment.

## Change – Life events

Planned changes such as going on holiday or moving house can make a person feel very anxious as they may not understand what is happening. With changes such as going on holiday, it is important to prepare the person in advance about what they can expect to happen.



Sarah's family have recently booked a holiday to Florida for 2 weeks. Sarah is non-verbal and has learning disabilities. In the past Sarah has become very anxious about trips abroad. This time the family wanted to prepare her to try and reduce her anxiety. With help from a clinical psychologist, the family decided to use a visual story (also known as a social story) to explain to Sarah that they were going on holiday and what to expect. They used images to describe the whole process including pictures of Florida (so Sarah would know where she was going) and pictures of an aeroplane and the airport (so Sarah knew how she was getting there).

They also gave Sarah a calendar so she could mark each day as a countdown so she knew when they would be starting their holiday. When the day came for their Florida trip, Sarah was ready because she knew it was going to happen and what it would involve (including the journey to the airport). Preparing Sarah before the event helped to reduce her anxiety.

## Change – Day-to-day

Smaller changes can be just as anxiety-inducing as bigger changes. For example, if a person is playing music on a computer and is told they are going outside for a walk, they may be unprepared for this change. They might have been quite happy playing on the computer before being told it was time to go for a walk.

The use of visual timetables to provide structure to a person's routine can help a person cope with change. Visual timetables include the activities that will happen during the day and when they will begin and finish. This helps the person with that to expect during each day and aims to help them manage changes throughout the day (e.g. change in activity).

Of course, we cannot prepare for all changes, some are unexpected. One way to help support your family member in unexpected situations is to carry a 'surprise card'. This is a card that may have an image on it (such as exclamation mark) and can be used in situations such as an unexpected fire alarm, or if there's a sudden change in plans.

## **Coping with waiting or taking turns**

Another coping skill which is important for people is learning to wait. Sometimes, it can be difficult to understand why we have to wait for an activity to begin, to wait in a queue, or for someone else to stop speaking before we can talk.

Imran is a young person with learning disabilities. He uses some speech but his understanding is limited, he may self-injure and get upset.

Helping Imran to cope with waiting is difficult as you can't see time! Some approaches help people to 'see' time with sand or water timers or digital clocks with timers, alarms and beeps. The use of simple countdowns before something starts or



finishes is often useful especially when the activity does not have an obvious end to it. Imran is given a one minute timer, to start small and then when he is happy to wait for something for a minute, he is gradually given a two minute timer, then three and five minutes. This slow approach is helping Imran to get used to waiting for longer periods.

Kate had difficulty in class and group settings when it was not her turn to talk or to do an activity. Following on from an idea from her parents, the class developed a game where people only spoke when they held a particular item, such as a Teddy Bear. Kate learned this in small groups at first. It helped to show her whose turn it was to do their activity or speak.

For further resources relating to change, please take a look at our resources list.

*With thanks to Martin Bertulis, (Macintyre) for contributions to this information sheet.*

## Resources

### Active Support:

- Active Support handbook: [arcuk.org.uk/activesupport/files/2012/03/Active-Support-Handbook1.pdf](http://arcuk.org.uk/activesupport/files/2012/03/Active-Support-Handbook1.pdf)
- Examples of Active Support can be found on Youtube by searching for the 'Person-Centred Support' channel
- Active Support guide: [www.unitedresponse.org.uk/active-support-guide](http://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/active-support-guide)

### Communication:

- For more information about communication including Makaton, Communication apps, PECS and objects of reference please see the Challenging Behaviour Foundation's 'Communication and Challenging Behaviour' information sheet: [www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/about-behaviour/communication-sheet.html](http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/about-behaviour/communication-sheet.html)
- Communication passport example: [www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/publications/an-ordinary-life-booklet/](http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/publications/an-ordinary-life-booklet/)
- Information about Intensive Interaction can be found at [www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk](http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk)
- For more information about Makaton and opportunities to learn Makaton please see [www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org)

- For more information about objects of reference please see [www.totalcommunication.org.uk/objects-of-reference.html](http://www.totalcommunication.org.uk/objects-of-reference.html)

Coping with life changes and new situations:

- Books Beyond Words: [www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk/](http://www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk/)
- Susie books: [www.suziebooks.co.uk/](http://www.suziebooks.co.uk/)
- For information about Social Stories™ and comic strip conversations and examples: [www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx) or [carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/](http://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/)

Coping with waiting:

- Timers or other tools – ‘Specialist Equipment’ information sheet: [www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/about-behaviour/specialist-equipment-sheet.html](http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/about-behaviour/specialist-equipment-sheet.html)

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## Appendix A – Example of Task Analysis

Task: Putting on a t-shirt

1. Open drawer
2. Choose a t-shirt
3. Take t-shirt out of drawer
4. Shut drawer
5. Un-fold top
6. Hold t-shirt by the bottom
7. Place t-shirt over your head
8. Put your head through the hole
9. Find the sleeves
10. Put left arm through sleeve
11. Put right arm through sleeve
12. Pull bottom of t-shirt down over stomach

## Template for Task Analysis

Task: .....

Step 1: .....

Step 2: .....

Step 3.....

Step 4.....

Step 5.....

Step 6.....

Step 7.....

Step 8.....

Step 9.....

Step 10.....

You may wish to break each of the steps down even further. Be creative in breaking the task down into the smallest possible steps.