Communication and Challenging Behaviour

This information sheet may be useful for families who are:

- Learning about various communication difficulties.
- Looking for ways support communication with someone who is non-verbal.

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.

Please see the end of this information sheet for details of how to support us.

We want to make sure our resources are helpful. Please spend a few minutes giving us some feedback: Feedback form

Why is communication important?

Many people with learning disabilities find some parts of communicating hard. Some people may have little or no language. 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 what is happening around us and what normally happens. 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 refer 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.

Hannah's mum'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 on a mobile or tablet. There are more apps available all the time.

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
- Repeating what the person says back to them may help let them know that they have been heard and understood
- Make sure everyone knows how to communicate with the person, for example using a communication passport, (see page 6 for more details).
- Try to respond consistently to any attempts to communicate.
- Ensure that everyone involved in a person's care are communicating in the same way, to ensure consistency.

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. Please see page 7 for details of organisations who can offer further information about Intensive Interaction.

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: https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy

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. Speech and Language therapy uses a targeted approach to improve the communication and interaction skills of those with delayed or disordered speech.

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.

- **I CAN:** A UK charity that supports people with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) to develop their communication skills. For more information visit: https://www.icancharity.org.uk , tel: 020 7843 2510 or email: info@speechandlanguage.org.uk. They have a *Talking Point* project that provides advice and information for parents and carers of children with speech and language difficulties. For more information about that, visit: www.talkingpoint.org.uk, tel: 020 7843 2544 or email: enquiries@ican.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 640 443 or contact via website.

- **1 Voice:** A charity providing a network and support for children and families caring for someone with communication needs, which hosts events nationally. For more information visit: www.1voice.info, tel: 07943 618525 or contact via website.

Objects of Reference
- **CALL Scotland** have produced a useful leaflet about introducing objects of reference, which can be found here: https://www.callscotland.org.uk/downloads/posters-and-leaflets/ . For more information visit http://www.callscotland.org.uk, tel: 0131 651 6236 or email: call.scotland@ed.ac.uk

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, tel: 01276 606 760 or email: help@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, tel: 0330 120 0770 or email: admin@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: **https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com** tel: 01273 609555 or emailpyramiduk@pecs.com
- **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, tel: 01926 333680 or email: support@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, email: enquiries@acecentre.org.uk or tel: 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, tel: 0345 257 0849 or email: sales@sensetoys.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. For more information tel: 01786 479 511, visit www.talkingmats.com or email info@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/

NOTE: This AAC apps wheel was last updated in June 2020.

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: https://www.communicationpassports.org.uk/Home/ tel: 0131 651 6236 or email info@callscotland.org.uk

- **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/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/my-health-passport

- **My Communication Passport:** This website shows a communication passport developed by a family and gives information on how to create your own passport, offering draft templates and examples to download. For more information visit: www.mycommpass.com

Resources
- **Valuing the views of children with a learning disability:** This resource was created by CBF, with the support of Mencap, to give information on how to engage with children and young people who are not able to express themselves clearly, in order to effectively gain their thoughts, feelings and opinions and ensure they are not left out of decisions that affect them. To view this resource please go to: http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/learning-disability-assets/valuingtheviewsofchildrenwithalearningdisability.pdf

- **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: **https://www.bild.org.uk/product/practical-guide-to-intensive-interaction-a/**

- **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: https://usinabus.org.uk/what-we-do/#intensive

Please note that we are making you aware of these products and services for your information only; this does not mean they, their websites or their products are endorsed or recommended by the CBF.

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The Challenging Behaviour Foundation

We are the charity for people with severe learning disabilities who display challenging behaviour. We make a difference to the lives of children and adults across the UK by:

- Providing information about challenging behaviour
- Organising peer support for family carers and professionals
- Giving information and support by phone or email
- Running workshops which reduce challenging behaviour

To access our information and support, call 01634 838739, email **info@thecbf.org.uk**, or visit our website: **www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk**

If you have found this information useful, please consider making a donation. You can show your support at **www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/support-us**. Make a £5 donation by texting CBFDN05 to 70085 Or email us to get involved at **support_us@thecbf.org.uk**