



## Communication and Challenging Behaviour

**This information sheet may be useful for families who are:**

- Learning about various communication difficulties.
- Looking for ways to 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](#)

### Introduction

Communication is key to how we interact with other people and one of the most important ways in which we exert control. Many people with learning disabilities have difficulties with communication and these may contribute to challenging behaviours. All behaviour, challenging or not, is communication. It may be the person's best attempt at telling you something and getting their needs met. Communication is important for everyone. If someone cannot talk they still communicate in different ways and it does not mean they do not understand verbal communication, although this understanding may be limited.

### What is communication?

Communication is the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information. It is a two-way process- sharing information and receiving it.

## Why is communication important?

We all communicate in multiple ways every day and it is part of our social interactions and relationships. Many people with learning disabilities find some parts of communicating hard.

Some people may have little or no verbal communication' and might find it hard to:

- Understand what other people say
- Tell other people what they want or how they feel
- Share social connections with people

If you can't tell other people what you want (or don't want!) challenging behaviour can be more likely. Supporting and enabling better communication can improve quality of life and reduce challenging behaviours.



## Legislation around communication

Ensuring your relative's communication needs are met is a fundamental human right. It is included in the UK legislation via Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998.

Article 21 of the 2006 UN Convention of the Rights of Person with Disabilities confirms your relative should have "the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others through all forms of communication of their choice".

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has identified five recommended 'Good Communication Standards' for providers of specialist hospital and residential services. These standards provide a framework which family carers, other family members, friends, professionals, and commissioners can use to judge whether a service is providing the right communication environment for your relative.

**Standard 1:** There is good information that tells people how best to communicate with me.

**Standard 2:** Staff help me to be involved in making decisions about my care and support.

**Standard 3:** Staff are good at supporting me with my communication.

**Standard 4:** I have lots of chances to communicate.

**Standard 5:** Staff help me to understand and communicate about my health.

## Common communication difficulties

**Knowing how much someone understands:** People with learning disabilities might have 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 unclear or personal/ specific to the individual
- Hearing loss or being profoundly deaf
- Struggling with social rules
- Not being able to share key messages such as 'no' or 'I don't understand' or 'I need help'
- Not being able to express feelings such as fear, feeling tired or sadness



**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 shorter and simpler 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.*

### **Total communication:**

A total communication approach uses additional ways as an alternative or to support spoken and written communication. This approach brings together all means of communication an individual uses, equally. Some examples of nonverbal communication include body language, visual supports, objects of reference and facial expressions. **Good VS Poor communication**

### **Poor Communication:**

- Assuming the person has no communication.
- Failed attempts at communication. Not responding to the communication of the person.
- Only communicating in your preferred way and to meet your communication needs rather than the persons.
- Not exploring alternative methods of communication or teaching new ways to communicate.
- A lack of consistency in communication.
- Not working collaboratively with the individual's family, advocates and support system.

- **Good Communication:**

- A good understanding of the ways in which a person communicates and needs to be communicated with.
- Working with other people to communicate in ways that the person understands.
- Responding consistently to what we think the person might be trying to communicate or need.
- Good communication between professionals and family members.
- Updating and reviewing communication methods and expanding vocabulary and communication opportunities.
- Working closely with communication partners. A good communication partner should work in way that suits the person best.
- Working to gain the person's attention before you communicate with them
- 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
- 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.



## Communication Passports

Communication passports enable people with severe learning disabilities to be supported in positive and active ways, enabling peoples' voices to be heard. They are also good teaching tools for staff. A communication passport is individualised to the person and includes the following:

- Describing the individuals chosen method of communication. This supports better communication partners.
- Putting together information from the person's life, using people involved in their care.
- Presenting the person positively as an individual.

To see examples of communication passports please click [here](#).

To create your own communication passport please click [here](#).

## Ways of communicating

Finding additional or alternative ways to communicate is essential for people with learning disabilities. This is called Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC). Speech is only one way of communicating. A person may use many of these different ways of communicating- whatever works well for them - so it is important to try a range of methods according to the persons individual needs. 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.

**Intensive Interaction:** Some people 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.

**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. This may include sign systems such as, Makaton or Signalong. [Makaton](#) and [Signalong](#) are simplified versions of British Sign Language for people with learning disabilities or the person may have their own set of signs they use so it is important you are familiar with what signs the person uses and what they mean.

**Now and Next Board:** This is a simple visual aid with the words Now and Next and a space for a picture. This is used to show the activity that is taking place now and the activity that is happening later. This ensures that communication is clear and simple, not overwhelming the person, and can be personalised by using photos.

**Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS):** This is a well-known visual system which helps the person to understand that they need to interact with others to make a request: they pass (or exchange) a picture card. This can later turn into a communication book which is a collection of pictures which enables the person to point their request alongside verbal output (if in place).

The six phases of PECS. Starting with single pictures to communicate wants and needs. As the person goes through the phases, they are taught



different skills to aid their communication. Any pictures and phrases are stored in a communication book. Phase I: *communicate*



*How to*

Phase II: *Distance and Persistence*

Phase II: *Picture Discrimination*

Phase IV: *Sentence Structure*

Phase V: *Responsive Requesting*

Phase VI: *Commenting*

For more information on PECS please click [here](#)

**Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA):** Voice Output Communication Aids is an umbrella term for high tech devices that provide a verbal output. A person must be able to navigate and move between different sections to be able to use a device functionally.

### **Remember!**

It is important to note that communication is lifelong. Therefore, any communication tools used should be regularly reviewed and updated when needed.

### **Who can help?**

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 an individual's communication and interaction skills.

### **CBF Communication Workshop**

A practical 4.5-hour workshop is an introduction to the links between communication and behaviour. Aimed at anyone who wants to understand how to improve communication with individuals with severe learning disabilities.

The workshop covers:

- What is communication and why it is important
- What makes communication difficult
- The relationships between communication and challenging behaviour
- Alternative approaches to communication (inc. pictures, signing, intensive interaction, digital communication aids)
- Communication passports

To book onto the workshop or find out further information please click [here](#).

### Remember!

- Communication is important for everyone and is a human right.
- Communication can be verbal or nonverbal.
- Some examples of alternative communication include objects of reference, signed communication, PECS and voice output communication aids.
- Communication means following the persons lead.
- Communication partners or passports can be helpful to support communication.
- Improving communication can improve a person's quality of life, choice and behaviour.

### Useful organisations

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.



- **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](http://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](mailto:info@speechandlanguage.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](http://www.findavoice.org.uk), tel: 01233 640 443 or contact via website.

## Intensive Interaction

- **Intensive Interaction:** a website with information about intensive interaction and links to further resources: [www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk](http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk)
- **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>

## 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: [info@callscotland.org.uk](mailto:info@callscotland.org.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](http://www.makaton.org), tel: 01276 606 760 or email: [help@makaton.org](mailto: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](http://www.signalong.org.uk), tel: 0330 120 0770 or email: [admin@signalong.org.uk](mailto:admin@signalong.org.uk)

## Symbols and visual aids

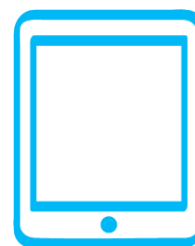
- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS):** PECS is an approach that uses pictures to develop communication skills. The following website provides basic information about PECS and gives details of PECS training workshops. For more information visit: <https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com> tel: 01273 609555 or email [pyramiduk@pecs.com](mailto:pyramiduk@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](http://www.widgit.co.uk), tel: 01926 333680 or email: [info@widgit.com](mailto:info@widgit.com)
- **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: 0345 257 0849 or email: [sales@sensetoys.com](mailto: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](http://www.talkingmats.com) or email [info@talkingmats.com](mailto:info@talkingmats.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](mailto:enquiries@acecentre.org.uk) or tel: 0800 080 3115

## 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/](http://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-centered way. For more information visit: <https://www.communicationpassports.org.uk/Home/> tel: 0131 651 6236 or email [info@callscotland.org.uk](mailto: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](http://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](http://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](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/migrated/documents/iwanttochoosetoo.pdf)
- **Family Carer Advocacy Resource:** This resource was created by the CBF. The information guide covers your relative's right to communicate, different types of communication, and the importance of ensuring your relative's communication needs are successfully met. To view this resource please go to: [Communication.pdf](http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/Communication.pdf) ([challengingbehaviour.org.uk](http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk))

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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](mailto:info@theCBF.org.uk), or visit our website: [www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk](http://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](http://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](mailto:support_us@theCBF.org.uk)