Communication

Communication is important for all of us. It is the means through which we control our environment and experience, express our feelings, thoughts and emotions and the way we make sense of the world around us.

Communication is the second step in The **Foundations of Good Support** as it is builds on the first step **Structure:** the deliberate arrangement of events, activities, routines, rituals, interactions and opportunities so that they happen in ways people can understand.

When we find it difficult to recognise and respond to people's communication skills and needs, good structure enables the people we support to anticipate what is happening, provides a shape to the day and a framework which in turn helps us recognise people's communications skills and develop our support for their communication needs.

Structure and Communication together improve our Support for Engagement in meaningful activities interactions and relationships, the third step in the foundations of good support.

Good support provides:

1. **Structure:**
   creating predictability and consistency

2. **Communication:**
   understanding and responding to a person's communication skills and needs

3. **Support for engagement:**
   supporting engagement in meaningful activities, interactions and relationships

4. **Positive approaches to behaviour that challenges:**
   understanding behaviour that challenges as an expression of legitimate distress to which we must listen and respond

5. **Support for relationships:**
   improving a person's quality of life through relationships with others

6. **Aspirations:**
   working together to avoid complacency and contribute towards the person's rich and fulfilling life

Aspirations

Support for relationships

Positive approaches to behaviour that challenges

Support for engagement

Communication

Structure

United Response
support that changes with you

This booklet is part of the "Foundations of Good Support".
It should be used in conjunction with the "Foundations of Good Support" guide at www.unitedresponse.org.uk/foundations-of-good-support

What is communication?

Communication happens between two or more people. It might involve spoken words or signed communication. It might involve body language, facial expression or eye gaze. It will always involve at least a degree of interpretation: we have to think about the possible meanings of any message and decide which meaning is the most likely.

Sometimes, if people are able to communicate using complex sentences, the meaning might be fairly clear (but will still involve at least some interpretation). When people have very limited communication skills, we might have to work much harder at trying to interpret signals. We might have to make a best guess about what they want or what they are feeling. We need to check our interpretations (with either the person themselves if possible, or with other people who know the individual well).

Communication skills

We can think about people as having a 'set of communication skills'. It is useful to have some general information on how people communicate and how they like to be communicated with.

We often talk about what information people understand and therefore how we might need to adapt our communication. We also talk about the different ways people communicate. Sometimes this information is written in the form of a communication passport or profile, where key information is presented. This usually includes some information about the person and some information about how the person is able to make their needs known.

We use communication for a wide variety of purposes. We use it to:

- express our wants and needs
- tell people how we feel
- ask and answer questions
- make requests
- express an opinion
- make a comment
- refuse to do something
- greet people
- join in, etc.

Working out people's communication needs

You can't always predict how people will be able to communicate. Sometimes people might be very able in terms of their physical abilities but need lots of communication support. People might be much less able in terms of their physical abilities but need much less support in terms of their communication.

How much verbal communication people are able to use is sometimes a good guide. If people are able to communicate using a few single words, then they are probably able to understand at least a few single words. If people are able to communicate using complex sentences which include lots of abstract concepts, then they are probably able to understand conversational speech. There are clear exceptions to this. People with autism spectrum conditions are often able to say more than they can understand. They may be repeating (or echoing) communication and it is possible to do this without understanding what is being said. People with severe physical difficulties might be able to understand more than the words that they are physically able to say.

When communication is less effective

We often overestimate people's communication skills, thinking that people understand more language than they are able to. This over-estimation can lead to communication being too complex.

Overestimating verbal comprehension

https://youtu.be/pv6_ImNrUZU

1 **The words used are too complex** (e.g. time concepts, negatives – not, don't, won't, can't, emotions). These are what we call abstract concepts (things that you can't see, touch, easily take photos of, draw, describe). For example, if we say:

"You are not swimming today"

even though that looks like quite a short sentence, it is likely that many people with learning disabilities will misunderstand that sentence. Many people will have difficulties in processing the negative in this sentence (the word 'not') and will understand the sentence as:

"You are swimming today"

2 **Too many words are used at once** (e.g. expecting people to follow a string of instructions). For example saying:

"Can you get the pillow and take off the pillow case and put the dirty one in the laundry basket on the landing and go and get a clean one out of the cupboard and put that one on"

3 **We talk about things which have happened in the past or in the future** (e.g. talking about what is going to happen in three weeks, or tomorrow) **or which are not physically present** (e.g. talking about something that is happening at home when you are out in the café and saying:

"What would you like to eat for your tea?"

For many people, this would be confusing. The situation is that you are in the café, which is also somewhere where people eat. Some people will misunderstand and think you are talking about what they would like to eat NOW in THE CAFÉ.

4 **Using a complicated sentence structure** e.g. in English sentence construction we usually process information using what is known as an order of mention strategy. This means that we usually say first what is going to happen first. For example, if we say:

"We are going to the pub after we go to the shops"

this is a complex sentence structure. Lots of people with learning disabilities will process this information as follows:

"Pub first, then shops"

as this is the order in which the events have been mentioned in the sentence.

As these examples show, less effective communication will lead to confusion, anxiety, frustration and distress. This connects to "Positive Approaches to Behaviour that Challenges" higher up the foundations model. Unhelpful approaches to behaviour that challenges often stem from not recognising the impact our ineffective communication is having.

It is important to remember that people with learning disabilities are very unlikely to be able to let you know: "I haven't understood' or 'I don't know what you mean'.

People are also unlikely to be able to correct you if you have misunderstood something which they were trying to communicate. They are unlikely to say 'No, that wasn't what I meant'.

How can we find out more about the skills people have in understanding communication?

One of the best ways of finding out about the communication skills of the people you are supporting is to spend time together doing the things that the person enjoys doing. Whilst you are spending this time together, try to think about the following in terms of **how you need to adapt your communication.**

Who communicates best with the person?

Sometimes it is about a very good relationship between the communication partners but it is often more to do with the skills staff use. Think about how they pace the communication. How do they position themselves? Do they use lots of words or a few? What do they talk about? How do they start and end the interaction? This information will also underpin "Support for Relationships". When we understand how best to communicate with the person, more of us will be able to do the same and develop the quality of our relationship with them.

What is the most effective way of getting this person's attention?

Some people might need you to say their name at the start of the interaction. They might find it difficult to know that you are talking to them unless you do this. Other people might need you to attract their attention in different ways e.g. by moving closer to them, by gesturing, by touching them on their shoulder.

How much support does the person get from the context and situation?

Think about an activity you do with the person very regularly. You probably have a routine of words and phrases that you use within the activity. It might look like the person is responding to the words and phrases that you are using but are they getting the information they need from the context and situation? It is a good idea to talk about what is happening, when it is happening. Using familiar words within the context of a familiar routine can be very helpful, but sometimes we forget just how much information the person is getting from knowing what is expected.

Think about the following situation: You are making drinks in the kitchen. It is something that you do every day. You ask the person you are supporting:

"Please can you go and get the milk out of the fridge so that we can add it to the cups of tea".

How much of that sentence does the person need to understand in order to be able to follow your instruction? They probably don't need to understand and process any of the words that you have used, since getting the milk is the next stage in making tea. At the very most they might need to understand the word 'milk' (since where else is the milk most likely to be other than in the fridge).

This sort of example tells us both that predictable and consistent "Structure" is helpful for people (and so underpins communication) and that it can be easy to assume people understand the words we're using when in fact they have become skilled at working out what is expected from following routines.

How many 'ideas' in a sentence can the person usually process?

We talk about understanding in terms of the number of ideas someone needs to process to make sense of the request. You need to think about what is most likely given the context and situation.

See if you can find naturally occurring opportunities for the following situations.

a. Ask _____ to do something that you would usually ask them to do, in the place that you would usually ask them to do it. Write down what you say and their response/s. Try to be very aware of any additional signals that you used. Did you include any gestures to help the person? Did you use eye gaze to indicate what they were expected to do? Over time, this should give you a good picture of how the person is able to use context and situation.

b. Ask _____ to go and get a familiar item that is kept in a familiar place. Check that it is not obvious from the context and situation. What does the person do? Do you need to add in a sign? Or a gesture? Does it make a difference whether the item you are requesting is in view or out of view? Does it need to be in the same room for the person to be able to achieve success?

c. Ask____ to do something that involves him or her having to think about more than one item. For example, can they get 2 different objects when they are asked? (Again, try to find things that are not obvious from the context and situation).

Over time, this should mean you can start to build up a picture of how the person is using the information and therefore of the type of support that the person needs.

- Do they need the context to help them to understand? If so, what are you going to do when you are asking people to do things out of that familiar context?

- Do they need additional signs and gestures to help them to understand what is expected?

- Do they need other visual forms of communication to help, such as objects of reference, photographs, symbols etc.?

What about the skills of the person in communicating to others?

You need to have really good information about the person's vision and hearing. Think about all of the different ways the person might be communicating. How are they using their sounds and vocalisations, words, gestures, signs, photographs, symbols? What can you learn from their facial expressions and eye contact? What can you learn from their body language or actions? What are people's likes and dislikes? What do the important people around that person think about how they communicate? Where people have limited ability to communicate using words, it is a really good idea to provide written information about people – sometimes referred to as a communication passport or profile.
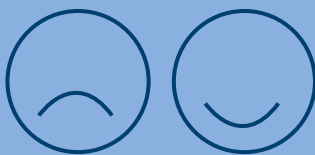
We use communication for a variety of different reasons. Think about how the person you are supporting is able to use their skills to:

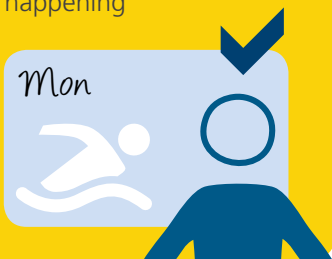1. Communicate basic needs – e.g. request a drink or something to eat
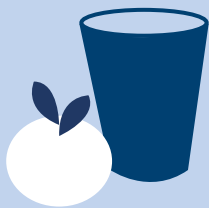
2. Express their feelings – e.g. let you know they are enjoying or not enjoying something

3. Control what other people do or don't do – e.g. communicate that they want someone to do something

4. Find out information – e.g. understand where they are going or what is happening

   Mon

5. Give information – e.g. say what they would like to wear

5. Take part in social interactions – e.g. greet people, develop relationships, end conversations

   Hello!

   Hi!

Does the person have all the skills and vocabulary they need? What else could you do to provide additional support?

How do we integrate good communication throughout people's daily lives?

Build on shared experiences

You need to spend time doing things with people so that you have shared experiences to communicate about. Communication helps us provide "Support for Engagement" (as the next step in the Foundations model) – but doing something together also gives us something to communicate about. For some people that might be sharing the experience through facial expression and eye contact. For some people it might be that they are not able to understand what you are saying but they feel included in the 'conversation' because you are making eye contact and smiling, or perhaps because you are in physical contact with them. Making the most of opportunities to communicate means:

- sharing the communicative point with people

- noticing their communication

- being responsive to their Communicative signals etc.

https://youtu.be/lUT-eUwE4CA

https://youtu.be/cZAIaYCgMH4

Communicate information at the time it's needed

Lots of people with learning disabilities find it easier to cope with smaller bits of information, given at the right point in the activity – the point when the instruction is needed in order for the task to progress. Therefore it is usually more helpful to 'give' an instruction at the point in the activity where it is needed. You can do that in a number of ways as discussed in the previous section on 'Build on shared experiences".

You will have heard the phrase 'less is often more' and it also applies to communication. Giving short and clear instructions is often much more effective than going into lots of detail about something.

Bridge the communication gap

Being a good communication support is no different from providing good support to take part in any activities – you have to use all the same skills – watch and listen, work out what bits of communication the person you are supporting is able to take part in on their own and where you need to provide additional support. Your task is to 'bridge the communication gap' between what the person is able to communicate and when they might need some additional support.

Minimising distractions

It is much harder for people to focus on communication if there are lots of distractions in the environment. Try to keep other distractions to a minimum. Is a radio or television often on in the background? You might be able to tune it out, but people with communication difficulties might find it too distracting.

Making use of the environment

This is another example of how "Structure" supports communication. You can "make the situation speak for itself" by preparing and presenting activities in consistent and predictable ways: in the same place, in the same order, at the same time of day.

If you can talk about things, highlighting the important features that make the activity familiar, as they are happening, it also makes it easier for people to be able to process and understand what you are saying: eg "we've finished having a drink, so now we're going to water the plants, before tea"; "OK let's chop the carrots: we've got carrots, chopping board, knife, pan of water"

Making our speech easier to understand

Reducing the amount of information you are giving - from most difficult to easiest

- Conversational speech.

- Requests which include more abstract language (e.g. the blue cloth).

- Requests which involve understanding more than 2 key words, but which still follow a simple sentence structure: what you say first is what you are expecting the person to do first.

- Requests which require the person to link 2 key words together. For example, you might ask the person to pick up an item and put it somewhere. (For this to be an example of 2 key words together, there have to be a choice of possible items and a choice of possible places to put the item).

- Requests which involve an understanding of a single word. You can use this level where people have good understanding of familiar words. For example, you might ask the person to give pick up an item, where there are a choice of items in front of them.

- The simplest information to understand is that which is routinely used in a familiar activity. We often don't really need to process the words being used as it is very obvious what is expected from our knowledge of the situation.

Simplifying language

Concrete language (relating to things you can see, touch, take a photograph of and easily describe) is easier for people to understand than abstract language (see earlier). There are some key types of abstract language that can cause difficulties for people with a learning disability.

Time concepts, e.g. yesterday, tomorrow, later.

You can simplify by using visual timetables eg. now and next. You can represent past events using a diary system. You can link future events to any specific points in time. For example if there are activities that happen on set days, you can talk about a set event first and then say that they will do a linked event after that. So you could say: "You will phone your mum on Saturday. Then you will go bowling."

Depending on the level of understanding that someone has, it is not always possible to let people know the exact timing of future events but it is often possible to give people a sense of "in the future" or "in the past".
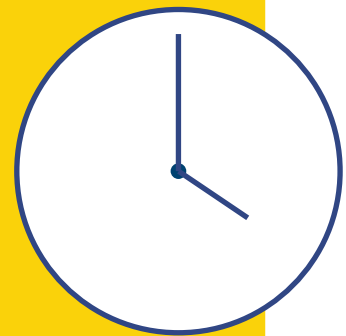
Negatives, e.g. not, don't, won't, can't.

Try to tell people what you want them to do, or what is going to happen, or what they can do instead. Again visual timetables can be very useful here.

Questions, e.g. who, where, what, when, why.

Questions are often difficult. If you need to ask questions, you can sometimes help by simplifying each question so that you always start with 'what?' e.g. using What person (to replace who). What place (to replace where). What time (to replace when). What reason (to replace why).

Emotions, e.g. happy, sad, upset, angry.

Note that we are not suggesting the people don't have these emotions. We are saying that people find it hard to understand the words used to label these emotions. Signs and symbols can be really helpful here as a way of making these more concrete (since they can show what people look like when they are happy, or sad or upset or angry etc.). You can sometimes make it easier for people by using 'generic' terms for positive and negative emotions e.g. good vs bad.
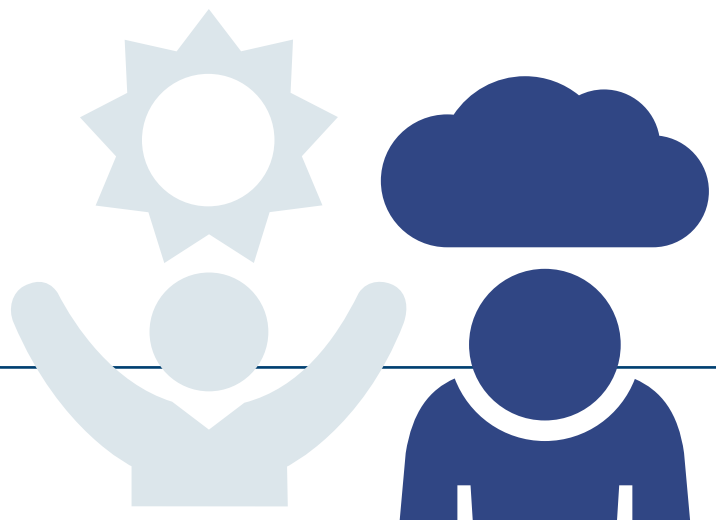
Simplifying sentence structure

Take care that you use the simplest structure possible. This includes:

- Keeping the sentence order simple. Make sure that the thing you are saying first, is the thing that is happening first.

  "We will get a drink and then go to the bank"
  "We will have a drink before we go to the bank"

  And NOT

  "We will go to the bank after we have had a drink"
  or "We will get a drink but first we will go to the bank"

- Giving people one bit of information at a time.

- Using the person's name at the start of the sentence so that you can make sure that they know that you are talking to them. Use additional touch cues or gestures where appropriate.

Providing additional forms of communication

Using extra forms of communication to back up your speech can help people understand what you are talking about. Spoken communication places the most demands on people's understanding skills. The spoken word is a sequence of sounds which represents the word. Once you have spoken the word, it has gone – there is nothing left to remind the person what the word was. Words rely on auditory processing and this is not always a strength (particular for some people with autism spectrum conditions).

Additional forms of communication have a number of advantages over spoken communication.

- They are often used with spoken communication and can mean that the person speaking has to slow down (so that they can use the other forms of communication).

- They rely on visual processing (often a strength, particularly for people with autism spectrum conditions).

- They often make communication partners simplify their communication (as people have to think about the signs or photos etc. they will use).

- They provide emphasis for the key words that the staff member will be using additional forms of communication for.

Objects of Reference

These are objects that are used to represent something. They need to have a quality (for example, their look or feel) that the person concerned can associate with what they are representing, so should be chosen because they are as easy to understand as possible. An object of reference could be:

- An item you will use during an activity (eg, fork = dinner)

- A part of the actual object (eg. car keys = going for a drive)

- Similar to the actual object (eg a small piece of towelling = having a bath)

- Something that represents an activity (eg a twig = going for a walk)

- Objects of reference are most frequently used to tell a person what is happening next, or in a sequence, but they also provide opportunities for offering choices

Pictures, photos and symbols

Visual pictures are often used as an extra form of communication. They can be drawings or photos that show objects, people, emotions, activities or places – or drawn symbols that represent them. They can be used to support choices, share experiences, introduce ideas or express emotions, and – because they are concrete and permanent - they can help people focus on, process and understand what's being communicated to them by others.

Not everyone can understand a photograph, line drawing or a symbol, but people who can are likely to be helped by formal systems like PECs and Talking Mats.

- PECs uses drawn pictures as symbols of objects or activities – the person is taught to use them to ask for and then choose between available options. PECs can progress to the point where people learn to converse about and comment on the world about them.

- Talking Mats use visual support for communication to help establish a person's views. A Talking Mat involves a space (like a mat) with a scale to indicate a person's response (eg from "like" to "don't like"). Then a variety of pictures can be placed on the scale to represent how the person feels about them (eg "cinema" at the like end, "pub" at don't like, as below).
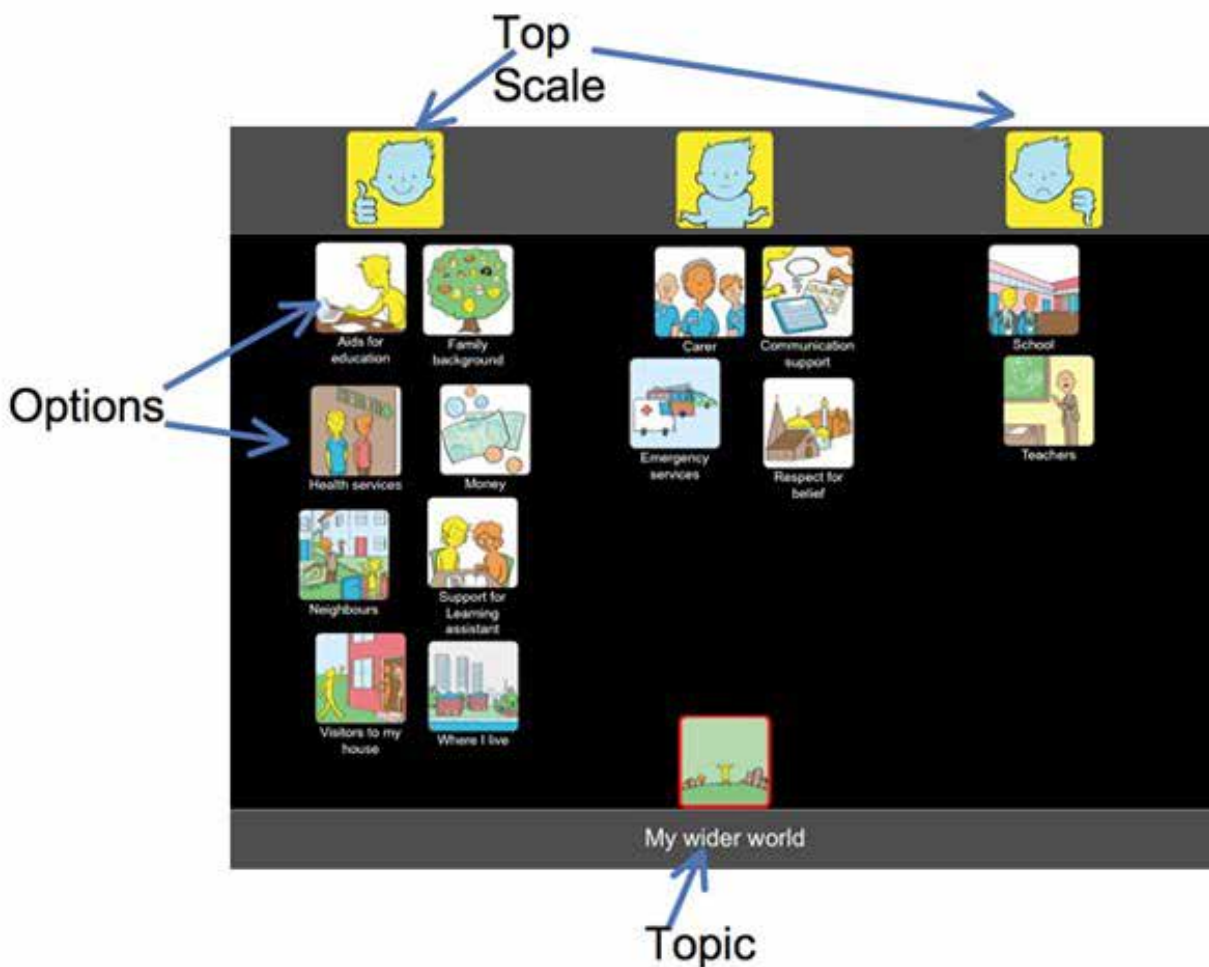
Visual Timetables

As the "Structure" element of the Foundations of Good Support makes clear, it's important to provide people with understandable information about what's going to happen. A visual timetable is a sequence of photos, pictures, symbols, descriptions or objects showing the order of daily activities or events. It is one way of providing the person concerned with increased predictability and can give them more opportunities to make choices, take some control and communicate about what is going on.

A visual timetable is a way of showing the order in which things are going to happen, for example:

- First it is breakfast, then clearing up, then shopping

- Bill likes going for a walk – the visual timetable shows him what will he do **before** he goes for the walk

- Adnan finds it hard to wait for lunch. A visual timetable shows him what needs to happen **before** lunch will be ready, making it easier for him to tolerate the fact it's not happening immediately

A visual timetable can also explain that things are **not** happening. Removing or covering over an activity that is not now happening is a good way of communicating its cancellation.

Similarly a visual timetable can show that things **have already** happened - turn over or remove the event or activity as it moves into the past. Visual timetables can use photos, pictures or symbols, or objects of reference – whatever works best for people who need to understand and use it.

Visual timetables - why and how should we use them

https://youtu.be/ts8H7Y0b-S0

Signed Communication

You can of course use informal gestures such as pointing or miming actions and these can be really helpful, but more formal systems are important as these provide people with a model of communication from which they can learn.

The most common signed communication taught to people with learning disabilities is Makaton. In fact many adults supported in social care settings (including people with considerable verbal skills) know a lot of Makaton signs, but can't use them because their staff don't. Makaton is a language programme designed to support and increase understanding of speech and whenever possible to develop expressive language.

Most Makaton signs used in the UK are from British Sign Language (BSL), the cultural language of the British Deaf Community. Unlike BSL though, with Makaton we always use signs with speech and in the spoken English word order, signing only main information carrying words (key words) to simplify the message and highlight the main concepts we're trying to get across.

Promote choice and control

People are able to control other people and the environment using their communication skills – as long as other people are observant and responsive. Where people are expressing opinions, likes and dislikes, feelings, choices, preferences, not wanting to do something using their communication skills, we should acknowledge and respect this. If we don't, there is little prospect of people expressing or achieving the "Aspirations" that the Foundations of Good Support expects.

People need experiences of different options before they can make meaningful choices. You can offer choices using any of the visual means of communication described previously. The easiest way of offering choices is using real objects, through to more representational means such as symbols, pictures or signs. Offering choices between two items in this way is usually better than offering choices verbally. Take care that people are not always accepting the last (or the first choice) offered.

Where possible, it is better to avoid asking people to say 'yes or no' to something you are offering. We know from research that people are much more likely to say YES, regardless of the choice being offered. Where people are not able to meaningfully indicate a choice, you have to offer experiences and to rely on your good observation skills. What do people do when they enjoy something? Do they have any particular body movements, vocalisations, or facial expressions etc. which seem to indicate enjoyment? What do other people who know the person well think?

Variability in Communication Skills

Don't forget that communication skills will be influenced by other things too. We all find it more difficult to use our communication skills when we are tired or upset or in pain, or when we are distracted or in noisy environments. It is also much more difficult for us to listen to what other people are saying when we are finding something difficult (remember when you were learning to drive and you couldn't cope with driving and talking at the same time?). Generally, if people are being supported to do a new task, it is always better to cut down on any other demands (of which communication can become one). If people are becoming distressed, you may find that they are not able to understand quite as well as you would expect them to, or that they don't seem to be able to use the communication skills that they have.

KEY THINGS TO REMEMBER:

- Remember to make communication as easy as possible for people you support to understand, particularly if you are carrying out a new task, or if people are distracted or upset.

- If people don't do something which you have asked them to do, you should always think about whether or not they have understood what you are asking them to get involved in.

- Make it clear from the environment what you are expecting people to do.

- Use additional visual means of communication where possible.

About the Author

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Jill trained as a speech and language therapist. She worked in a community team supporting adults with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour in London, before joining the Tizard Centre in 1995. She was appointed as an honorary lecturer in 2003, and returned as a sessional teacher in 2010, after a career break. She now convenes the Undergraduate Autism Studies Programme and teaches on the Postgraduate Programmes in Intellectual Disabilities.

Jill's research interests include communication and challenging behaviour, staff culture, person centred active support, staff attributions, communication environments and total communication approaches.

Other Resources & Links

Foundations of Good Support booklet
https://bit.ly/2RNLcIw

Foundations of Good Support - Structure
www.unitedresponse.org.uk/structure

Videos

Visit our Practice Development YouTube channel for even more helpful resources

▶ YouTube

Foundations of Good Support
https://youtu.be/1BzdnL8y89w

Tips for effective communication
https://youtu.be/s9RmSDXC7Z8

Visual Timetable – the need to keep using over time
https://youtu.be/hG78vtXAm34

Visual Timetable - What about when things change
https://youtu.be/_ZDB3Z3ywfc

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