



A guide to communicating with a person with intellectual disability

Many people with intellectual disability have difficulty understanding complex language and expressing all of their thoughts and feelings verbally. For those who demonstrate the ability to understand and express themselves using language, the following tips will help to optimise communication:

- Every person with intellectual disability will have different language skills and communication modes depending on his or her abilities, experiences and situation. People will communicate in different ways depending on where they are, who they are with and how they are feeling at the time.
- It takes two to communicate, and it is your responsibility to do everything you can to make sure you are understood and have heard and understood the other person correctly.
- Check if the person has had a recent speech pathology or psychology assessment to gain a better understanding of his or her communication skills, modes and needs. If none is available, ask someone who knows the person well about how best to communicate with the person.
- Talk to the person in a place where he or she feels comfortable, e.g. a familiar, and preferably quiet, location.
- Reduce the number of significant others present, as they may interject with their own opinions. Follow the lead of the person

being interviewed as to who he or she would like to be present, if anyone.

- Reduce any visual or auditory distractions in the room e.g. turn off the television, turn off the radio, meet in a place away from others coming and going.
- Make explicit statements to reassure the person that information will not be shared with caregivers or service providers e.g. “What you tell me is private”, “I won’t tell (name caregivers) what you say”.
- Use everyday words that are easy to understand e.g. “things you like”, “what you like doing”. If using abstract words that are hard to visualise e.g. “hopes”, “dreams”, “goals”, provide some concrete examples to help people understand what these words mean.
- Concepts of past and future, and remembering dates, may be difficult to understand, so use life markers or events in the person’s life. You might want to use a calendar, diary, time line or other visual representation of the passing of time.
- Who, what and where questions are easier than when, why and how questions.
- Use short sentences and introduce one idea at a time.
- People may be more likely to agree, or say yes, to statements or questions if:
 - they don’t know the answer
 - the question is too long
 - they think you want them to say yes
- When giving choices, use pictures to help the person remember the options and limit the options to 2 or 3 choices.

- Don't ask yes/no or forced choice questions directly. Embed the question in the story or narrative i.e. On Tuesdays you usually go swimming. Tell me about going swimming?
- Be observant and try asking questions in different ways to check that you have been understood and that you understand the person.
- Allow the person extra time to respond. Pause, and wait for a response. It might take as long as 15 – 20 seconds. If the person does not respond, try asking the question in a different way and using gesture, objects or pictures to add visual information to what you are saying.
- Try to match the person's speech. If he or she speaks in very short sentences, make sure you do too. Try to make sure the person you are interviewing talks as much as you do.
- Use repetition and recap the key points at the end of the conversation.