

Module 2: Communicating with a person with disability

Learning outcomes:

At the end of this module, you should have an understanding of the following:

1. The complex nature of communicating with people with disability
2. The benefits and issues associated with involving others who know the person well in meetings and how to manage these
3. The available resources that will assist with communication
4. The key strategies for communicating with people with disability

Understanding the complex nature of communication with people with disability

Many people with disability have difficulty understanding complex language and expressing all of their thoughts and feelings verbally.

They may also be more likely to agree, or say yes, to statements or questions if:

- they don't know the answer;
- the question is too long; or
- they think you want them to say yes. (Finlay & Lyons, 2002; Shaw & Budd, 1982).

People with disability experience difficulties with understanding complex grammatical structure or concepts, and the production of symbols and producing appropriate responses (Finlay & Lyons, 2001).

Many people with disability have difficulty remembering information; especially when they are away from the place where something happened, or where they are asked to remember several things at once.

They may also have difficulty organising their thoughts and ideas, and putting information together in a logical way.

Using images, pictures and objects can help people to remember important information, and to organise their thoughts and ideas (Wadsworth & Harper, 1991; Sigelman & Budd, 1986).

Every person with disability will have different language skills depending on their abilities, experiences and the communicative context. Therefore every person will have different communication support needs (Tuffrey-Wijne, 2012).

When communicating with a person with disability, it is your responsibility to do everything you can to make sure that you are understood and that you understand the person fully.

The benefits and issues associated with involving people who know the person well

Determining who are the right people to be at a meeting is an essential part of the planning process. Ask the person being interviewed who, if anyone, he or she would like to be present.

Family and friends can sometimes help the conversation and assist in interpreting what the person has to say. However, sometimes family and friends can also interject or contradict what the person has said (Biklen & Mosely, 1988).

Sometimes the person might defer to their family and friends, and not speak up for himself.

Sometimes the person might be scared to speak up with other people in the room.

You need to consider all these points to achieve a good balance between knowing as much about the person as possible and making sure the person's thoughts and perspectives are heard.

It is useful to have meetings with the person on their own as well as meetings which include those who know the person well to see if there are any differences in what is being said. If there are differences, it is important to work with the person to make sure you know what his or her perspective is.

When meeting with people alone it is useful to reassure them that information will not be shared with caregivers or service providers unless requested e.g. "What you tell me is private", "I won't tell (name caregivers) what you say". "This is your private information. You choose who you want to tell"

Resources that will assist communication

Check if the person has had a recent speech pathology or psychology assessment to gain a better understanding of his or her communication skills and needs.

If no reports are available, ask people who know the person well what communication strategies work best with that person.

If possible request a speech pathology assessment to better understand the individual's communication abilities and needs.

Check if the person has a communication aid or device.

Higher proportions of people with disability have vision and hearing impairments (Meuwese-Jongejeugd et al. 2008). Check if the person uses hearing aids or glasses and make sure he or she uses them during the meeting.

If the person is deaf and uses sign language (not key word signs), book an interpreter.

Strategies for optimal communication

Talk to the person where she feels comfortable, i.e. a familiar, quiet location of her choice (Biklen & Mosley, 1988).

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. You will be more likely to find a quiet meeting place at a day service or work place than in a person's home.

To get started it is useful to share some information about yourself. Talk about the weather and whether you like it or not. Talk about how you got to the meeting. Show the person pictures on your phone of what you did on the weekend. Show the person through gesture and facial expression as well as words some of the things which you yourself really enjoy doing.

Use concrete words that are easy to visualise e.g. "things you like", "what you like doing"; "your perfect day". Avoid abstract words that are hard to visualise e.g. "hopes", "dreams", "goals". Some people will be able to understand these abstract concepts, but start the conversation with more concrete concepts.

Concepts of past and future, and remembering dates, can be difficult to understand, so use life markers or events in the person's life (Finlay & Lyons, 2001; Booth & Booth, 1994).

There are no clear guidelines for question formats when communicating with someone with an intellectual disability. However a few studies that have compared question formats indicate that 'either/or' questions followed by 'yes/no' questions and then by multiple choice questions can be useful (Malik, Ashton-Schaeffer & Kleiber, 1991, Sigelman et.al 1983).

Try to use who, what and where questions as these are easier than when, why and how questions (Rowland, Pine, Lieven & Theakston, 2003).

When giving choices, use pictures to help the person remember the options and limit the options to around 2 or 3. In addition it is useful to:

- Be observant. Body language and tone of voice can give you a lot of information (Martin et al. 2012). These non-verbal signals can help you to know when the person feels strongly about a topic or when he doesn't really care either way.
- Try asking questions in different ways to check that you have been understood. For example 'You're smiling a lot when you look at that picture of mini golf? Tell me about mini golf? So you really like mini golf? Would you like to play real golf on a big golf course? Would you prefer real golf or mini golf?'

Remember to pause and give the person time to think and respond. Take equal turns in the conversation.

Be comfortable with long periods of silence in the conversation while the person thinks.

Let the person tell their story without interruption, and bring them back to bits of story later if you need more information.

Don't negate goals and aspirations, because they sound complex, costly, or potentially unachievable for the person in their current situation.

Explore goals, possibilities and the sub-goals that could help the person move towards their ultimate goal.

Spend time clarifying what the person really wants, not just what he says he wants. For example, a person may say they want to go bowling, but that might be the only time during the week that she sees Jane. Her goal may actually be to see Jane more often, rather than to go bowling.

Remember that each person you meet will have different abilities and support needs. Try out different strategies and see what works best for that person.

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