



Centre for
Applied Disability
Research

An Initiative of National Disability Services

COMMUNICATION: FIRST PRINCIPLES

Introduction

Communication is a human right.

Communication allows us to:

- Express our thoughts and feelings
- Convey our wishes and preferences
- Share information about ourselves and our interests
- Understand what is happening to us and around us
- Get to know other people.

Effective communication partners can make a huge difference to a person's participation, well-being, and quality of life.

Some of the most successful communication support strategies can be non-intuitive or challenging for partners to use at first. They may also require some practice.

Did you know?

44% of disability service users receive some degree of communication assistance from paid staff.¹

ABOUT THIS PRACTITIONER GUIDE

This resource series is based on the findings of international research, conducted by and with people who have severe communication disability. It is designed to help practitioners (e.g. support workers, support planners, and other personnel) to refine their communication partner abilities. The set contains eight cards, covering key principles for being an effective communication partner.

You can use these resource cards to:

- Learn new communication partner skills
- Refresh or check your existing skills
- Train or support other communication partners
- Talk to a person with communication disability about the supports or strategies that they prefer.

- “If you relate to him as well and relate sincerely, that builds a relationship and he connects with you.”
- **Support Worker for a client with severe intellectual disability²**

Not every technique on these cards will be appropriate for everyone you support. Different people prefer different strategies. It's important to talk to each person, their family/support network, and any relevant professionals (e.g. a speech pathologist) to work out the right type and level of support for them.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2015.

² H. Johnson, J. Douglas, C. Bigby and T. Iacono, Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 2012, 37, 324–336.



For more information on being a good communication partner and other topics, go to www.cadr.org.au/about-cadr/research-to-action-guides



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Respectful, Responsive, and Reciprocal Interactions

These three “R’s” of communication are extremely important when interacting with someone who has a communication disability.

Respect means recognising that someone with communication disability has valuable contributions to make. Being **responsive** means recognising someone’s communication attempts, interpreting and responding to these appropriately.

You can create respectful and responsive interactions by:

- **Addressing the person with communication disability directly**, instead of via their carer or support person.
- **Learning about a person’s unique communication methods** and how to interpret these. People with severe disability may use very subtle communication; for instance changes in breathing, eye-gaze, or facial expressions can say a lot about the way a person is feeling.
- **Providing opportunities to talk about a full and age-appropriate range of subjects**, including topics such as work, leisure, culture, and sexuality, all of which can be important to people with disability.
- **Taking time** to realise and acknowledge a person’s uniqueness – , for instance, their quirky or admirable character traits.

- “...they see my husband as being my carer and they always talk to him ... they think I can’t understand, but I can.” **Person with Intellectual Disability**¹

Reciprocity means sharing an interaction. In reciprocal interactions, a person with communication disability has ample opportunities to contribute and to be heard. Reciprocity is the foundation of success in most social relationships.

Partners can promote reciprocity by:

- **Sharing** moments of banter, laughter, and smiles, or collaborating in activities.
- **Recognising and respecting a person’s topic interests**. For people with severe disability this might be activities they seem to enjoy, or something they’re looking at.
- **Pausing for at least 10 seconds**, to allow the person to initiate or respond.
- **Taking the time to persevere with an interaction or topic**, even when communication breakdown has occurred.

- “It feels really nice that someone . . . someone that just wants to speak with you! One feels like a human being. It feels ‘Wow!’” **Person with communication disability**²

Recognising people with communication disability as unique and capable individuals, and being mindful of these three R’s in your interactions, is crucial for the meaningful social inclusion of people with communication disability.

1 C. Bigby, H. Johnson, R. O’Halloran, D. West, J. Douglas, E. Bould and M. O’Hare, eds. LaTrobe University and Scope, Melbourne, 2014

2 M. Blom Johansson, M. Carlsson and K. Sonnander, International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 2012, 47, 144–155.



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Comprehension Supports

Some people with communication disability have difficulty understanding written and spoken language. This can affect their ability to:

- Follow instructions and conversation
- Understand and learn new information
- Make informed decisions

As a communication partner, you can make your spoken language easier to understand by:

- **Speaking clearly and at a moderate pace** – Yelling and making your speech very slow or exaggerated actually makes you harder to understand! Adopting plain language by using shorter sentences and choosing words the person is likely to be familiar with. Plain language should be respectful and age-appropriate. It is not the same as “baby talk”.

- “With Sandra you always speak a bit slower because there’s no point racing through something. Even if she understands, it takes a little while to process it”
Family Member¹

You can also **supplement your speech with other communication modes**, for example:

- **Writing**
- Pointing at letters, words or pictures on a person’s **communication book, board, or device**
- Using **meaningful photographs** as a conversation prop (e.g. photos, a past event, or a place they visit)

- Highlighting key words in sentences with **gesture or sign language** (a technique known as Key Word Sign)
- Using **‘Easy English’ written resources**. These combine simple text with meaningful pictures or photos, and can help to structure complex discussions.

- “Then she wrote! Keywords like this. She wrote for me, you see. That was damn good, and then I understood at once!” **Person with communication disability²**

People with profound intellectual disability are unlikely to understand words, pictures, or text. The following cues may help them make sense of what is happening:

- **Using touch and tone of voice** (e.g. a bright tone of voice and a gentle shoulder rub might help someone to wake up and become more alert)
- **Using familiar objects, smells and sounds** (e.g. the feeling of a washcloth, the smell of shampoo, and the sound of running water might alert the person to bath time)
- Providing **hand-over-hand guidance** to help the person complete tasks (e.g. participate in cooking or washing themselves) and to explore objects around them
- Where possible, engage a person in **regular and consistent routines**

1 H. Johnson, J. Douglas, C. Bigby and T. Iacono, Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 2012, 37, 324–336.

2 M. Blom Johansson, M. Carlsson and K. Sonnander, International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 2012, 47, 144–155.



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Managing Communication Breakdown

It is important to recognise that all people with communication disability have something to communicate. It is also important to prevent misinterpretations. This can be achieved with **patience, clarification, and supportive environments**.

PATIENCE

Even though communication might feel awkward or laboured, **avoid finishing a person's words or sentences** unless they have indicated that this is helpful to them.

Pausing is a highly effective communication strategy. **Pause for at least 10 seconds** after making a statement or asking a question. This allows a person with communication disability extra time to understand what you have said and generate their response. It can feel uncomfortable to pause for this long at first – practicing with a friend and counting in your head can help.

- “If I am going to say something, everyone is gone, you know. Yes, that's a problem!”
- **Person with communication disability¹.**

CLARIFICATION

Some communication disabilities make comprehension difficult. In these cases (or when you are unsure), you can **check the extent of a person's comprehension** by asking them questions, asking them to recount something back to you, or repeating the interaction. If someone's speech or communication is unclear, you should also **check whether you have understood their message correctly**.

Consulting other familiar communication partners can help to resolve misunderstandings, especially for people with very complex or severe disabilities.

- “Diane said something that was interpreted as chocolate. She was then shown a choice of objects, the chocolate sauce or the strawberry sauce and she reached out for the strawberry” **Support Worker²**

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Environmental factors can impact on communication success for people with disability and their partners. Where possible, partners should **prioritise the person's preferred communication modes and settings**. This may involve:

- Providing options for **face-to-face communication**. Telephone communication may be difficult or impossible for some people. Others may prefer email or social media interactions due to the slower pace required.
- **Minimising background noise and unnecessary distractions** which can make communication difficult for everyone.
- Being sensitive to **other factors** that often impact on communication, such as positioning (e.g. seated versus in bed), or being tired, cold, in pain, unwell, or under stress.

1 M. Blom Johansson, M. Carlsson and K. Sonnander, International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 2012, 47, 144–155.

2 H. Johnson, J. Douglas, C. Bigby and T. Iacono, Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 2012, 37, 324–336.



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Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

People with communication disability sometimes use **augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)** resources to support their comprehension or expression. Some examples of AAC resources include:

- Picture cards
- Communication books and boards
- Visual timetables or schedules
- Electronic devices that produce spoken messages
- Key Word Signs and gestures

• “I don’t think I could live without AAC. I certainly would not be able to study or have employment in the future ... It is an essential part of my life.”
• **Person who uses AAC¹**

AAC systems are usually set up with the help of a speech pathologist, following a detailed assessment. Well-chosen AAC systems can improve communication success, support independence, and reduce anxiety for everyone involved.

Here are some key points to remember if you are working with someone who uses AAC:

- **Be patient** – AAC can be slower than speech.
- **Ensure the person has access to their AAC** whenever possible. Make sure the person also has a way to request their AAC system when it is not in reach.
- Keep AAC devices **clean and charged**.
- **Repair systems promptly** when required.

- AAC systems should be **regularly updated** as the person’s communication needs change.
- **Check if the person needs help** to access, mount, or manage their device.
- Some people may need **prompting or encouragement** to use their AAC device, and to bring it with them.

• “Using a communication aid is dependent upon another person offering you the aid and being made aware when you might need it.”
• **Person who uses AAC²**

Setting up, maintaining, and using an AAC system takes time and effort. People who use AAC value partners who are patient and support their use of AAC. A person’s communication needs are likely to change over time. This means that their AAC system will need to be updated. The person’s speech pathologist can help with this. You can also **ask for training and support** if you are not sure how to use or maintain a person’s AAC system.

1 Y. Chung, M. Behrmann, B. Bannan and E. Thorp, Perspectives on Augmentative & Alternative Communication, 2012, 21, 43–55.

2 M. M. Smith and I. Connolly, Disability and rehabilitation. Assistive technology, 2008, 3, 260–273.



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Enabling a Lifelong Communication Support Framework

Communication can be influenced by:

- A person's **hearing and vision**. It is important that any prescribed equipment (e.g. hearing aids, glasses) is available to the person at all times. Any unexpected changes in someone's communication warrants a vision and hearing check.
- A person's **physical abilities**. Limited or dependent mobility can severely affect a person's participation in interactions.
- **Cultural and linguistic background**. People with communication disability have the same right to an interpreter as anyone else if English is not their first language. Cultural beliefs might influence a person's preferences regarding who they interact with and in which contexts.
- **Limited literacy**. Many adults with intellectual disability have limited literacy skills, impacting on their communication.
- **Personal values about communication**, including grief or embarrassment about a new or worsening communication disability.
- **Discrimination** based on a person's cultural, ethnic or religious background, sexual orientation, or gender.

- “My Mom could deal with the loss of the ability to walk and use her hands, but she was not able to deal with the loss of communication – it would simply make her cry; this represented her biggest loss in life.”
- **Carer of a person with ALS¹**

MANAGING CHANGING NEEDS

A person's communication needs are likely to evolve across their lifespan. Changes to their home and family context, communication partners, and daily routines should be anticipated and addressed. For example:

- People with a **deteriorating health condition** and those who are **ageing** may require additional supports as their abilities change. For instance, someone who previously spoke may eventually benefit from some alternative communication strategies.
- People who are **acutely unwell** may require specialist supports or communication equipment – for instance, if they are in bed, intubated, or on sedating medication.
- Someone who has **learned new communication skills** (e.g. reading, requesting, sign language, AAC) may require fewer or different supports.

Clearly and continuously documenting a person's communication needs helps to observe these changes when they occur. They also support smoother transitions in care (e.g. from home to hospital setting, or from one staff member to another).

1 A. Brownlee and L. M. Bruening, Topics in Language Disorders, 2012, 32, 168–185.



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Sharing and Documenting Knowledge

If you have been supporting someone for a long time, you have likely established some strategies for communicating with them. **Sharing and documenting these patterns and preferences** helps other partners (e.g. new staff, visitors, volunteers, and community members) to meet the person's needs more effectively.

- “She does talk, she may not verbalise but she definitely talks.” **Long-standing support worker for a person with profound disability**¹

Information about someone's communication support needs is often shared informally by word-of-mouth. Support workers tend to prefer this method as it allows them to teach/learn about a person on the job, under a supportive mentor-style relationship. However, this can be harder when staff are working alone, off-site (e.g. for home visits), or when an experienced staff member is unavailable to assist.

Communication support needs can be formally documented in a number of ways. A **personal communication dictionary (PCD)** can help partners to accurately interpret the person's behaviour. For instance, an entry for Samantha, an adult with intellectual disability, might be:

Behaviour

Samantha slaps the table with her palms and squeals.

What this might mean

Samantha is excited about something/someone that she can see.

How best to respond

Follow Samantha's eyes to what she is looking at, or help her make a request on her choice board.

An **'About Me' book** or **communication passport** provides information about a person's background, interests, preferences, health, and life that they might be unable to express to new partners on their own. Samantha's About Me book might include information about her family, her dietary requirements, and how she likes to be dressed. This same information can be presented digitally in the form of a multimedia profile. A **multimedia profile** contains digital files such as photos and video that communicate important areas of a person's life.

People with disability can carry a wallet-sized card to support their communication when out in the community. This might include a brief introduction (e.g. “Hi, my name is Samantha. I use my eyes and hands to communicate”), followed by some strategies that new communication partners might find helpful (e.g. “Please speak to me in short sentences. You can use my communication board to ask me questions.”).

A person with communication disability might work with their family or support staff to construct these sorts of resources. This can be a positive experience for all involved!

More information about PCDs, communication passports, and checklist tools, go to our Research to Action Guide: [website link](#).

1 S. Forster and T. Iacono, Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 2008, 33, 137-147.



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Good Communication Partners ...

are respectful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise that people with communication disability have contributions to make
are responsive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise a person's communication attempts • Respond to these appropriately
are reciprocal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ample opportunities for a person with CCSN to contribute • Take the time to get to know the person through shared moments
are persistent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Troubleshoot communication breakdown
support understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use plain language and familiar words • Speak clearly and at a moderate volume
are multimodal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement their speech with writing, pictures and sign • Communicate with tone of voice, touch, smells, and sounds
support expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaffold conversations, provide prompts • Offer alternative modes such as writing, pictures, and gesture
are patient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow time for people to generate and understand messages
manage misinterpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check they have understood someone's message correctly • Clarify the other person's understanding
support alternative communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the use of communication books, boards, devices, signs • Operate, update, and maintain these systems
anticipate and respond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate and respond to changes in a person's communication or communication contexts
document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document their knowledge about a person's communication support needs and preferences
share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share information with other partners such as new staff, visitors, and communication partners in the community
are discerning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check which of these supports will be most helpful for someone
are consultative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult with the person with communication disability, other partners, and specialist services



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