

Communicating with Someone who has a Learning Disability

Good communication is key to ensuring that a person can express themselves and make sense of the world around them. This is equally important when a person has a learning disability and may not be able to interpret their environment as easily as others. Remember everybody is unique. Ask the person what works best for them. Many people with a learning disability prefer face to face and one to one communication. When communicating with someone who has a learning disability, try to use accessible language and avoid longer words that might be hard to understand. Shorter, more precise wording can help. Take time to explain yourself to the person or when listening to them. Repeat yourself and repeat their words back to them to determine if they understood. Allow the person to go at their own pace and follow their lead. Further advice includes using facial expressions and hand gestures, communicating through writing or drawing and considering body language and tone of voice.

Further Information

Practitioners can find related guidance throughout this briefing. In addition, further information is also available via [Mencap](#), [Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities](#), [The Seashell Trust](#), [Learning Disability Matters](#), the [NHS](#), [HFT](#), [Makaton](#), [British Institute of Learning Disabilities \(BILD\)](#), and [Beyond Words](#). OSAB provides related guidance via the [OSAB Learning Disabilities and Learning Difficulties 7-Minute Briefing](#). The Oldham [Adult Speech and Language Therapy team](#) provide assessment, diagnosis and treatment for adults who have developed communication problems.

Communication Aids and Techniques

[Liaise](#) suggest consideration of the following communication aids and techniques when communicating with a person with Learning Disabilities.

Makaton is a language programme which allows people to communicate through sounds, symbols and speech. By providing a visual cue, it makes it easier to understand information being presented. Makaton can be personalised to a person's needs and used at a level that is suitable for them. It is a way of communicating that helps people grow and develop their communication skills.

Widgit is a symbol based-language that uses small pictures either alone or with text to help people express themselves more effectively. Widgit symbols are clear, precise and suitable for all ages.

Talking mats are mats on which a variety of small pictures can be arranged and rearranged as required. They are a simple and effective tool for communicating with someone with a communication difficulty. Each picture provides a visual cue for different needs, thoughts and emotions so that people can communicate what matters to them.

A **Social Story** is a story about everyday activities or events told through visual aids. They detail specific information relating to a situation and what to expect. They were created to assist people with complex needs to understand and develop social skills.

What are 'Behaviours that Challenge'?

People with developmental and health problems that affect communication such as a learning disability, often display 'behaviours that challenge', sometimes referred to as 'challenging behaviour' or 'behaviours of concern'. These behaviours develop as an understandable, though not intentional, response to these circumstances as a means of communication. A person's behaviour can be defined as 'challenging' if it puts them or those around them at risk, leads to a poorer quality of life, or has a negative impact on their wellbeing. These behaviours can also have an impact on their ability to join in everyday activities. Behaviours that challenge can include aggression, self-harm, destructiveness, and disruptiveness. Use of 'challenging behaviour', 'behaviours of concern' or similar phrases immediately leads to a negative focus on the person and what they are doing, distracting practitioners from exploring the underlying reasons for the behaviours. As a result, practitioners are often managing the behaviour, rather than identifying the need, and supporting the person with that need. The terminology 'behaviours that challenge' should therefore be used.

Needs & Emotions

Behaviours that challenge can be viewed as the person communicating that they want something, is feeling overwhelmed or there is a need which requires attention. The person may be unable to express this in a more appropriate and effective manner. Behaviours that challenge may communicate a wide range of emotions and needs, including fear; grief; desire; pain; frustration; anxiety; confusion; anger; distress; sadness; tiredness; embarrassment; boredom; loneliness; being too hot, too cold, or uncomfortable; feeling unwell, hungry or thirsty; or missing home, family or a normal life.

Positive Behaviour Support Plans

A Positive Behaviour Support Plan (PBS) plan is a document created to help understand and manage behaviours that challenge with the aim of reducing the likelihood of behaviours happening and teaching the person new skills and ways of communicating their needs. Whilst the emphasis is on preventing the need for behaviours that challenge, a PBS plan also helps staff by providing a step by step guide to identify when they need to intervene to prevent an episode of behaviour happening or escalating. PBS Plans provide consistency through everyone supporting the person by using the same techniques and approaches, which in turn leads to development of more socially acceptable ways of communicating needs. The person (if possible), their family and/or representative and those involved in their care should be fully involved in the assessment process and co-produce and implement any approaches agreed on the plan. The PBS plan should help inform other risk assessments and care plans for the person. Find more information via the [OSAB Positive Behaviour Support Guidance](#).

Learning Disabilities: Communication and Behaviours that Challenge

Expressive and Receptive Communication Skills

Expressive communication skills are the ability to use language to effectively put thoughts and feelings into words. Receptive communication skills are the ability to understand spoken or written language. Behaviours that challenge may occur when someone has good receptive communication skills but poor expressive communication skills which makes them unable to communicate effectively with others and express their needs, and frustrated at not being able to explain themselves. It is important to ensure that people have an effective form of communication. In order for communication to be effective it needs to be something that can be understood by everybody. There are various communication aids and techniques available ranging from practical spoken and written languages to devices designed to help a person express their thoughts and feelings.

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