Communication and IDD

Communication is the way information is shared and interpreted. It seems uncomplicated, but communication is complex, with many features. Communication is involved in:

- The way people form relationships with each other
- Sharing information and knowledge
- Helping people express ideas and feelings
- Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others
- Helping people meet their needs
- Helping people navigate and manage in society.

The list of life tasks and situations that involve communication is endless. Effective communication skills are important for mental wellness. This is true for all people, including people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Communication involves expressive and receptive communication skills:

- Expressive skills give us the ability to put thoughts into messages using words, symbols, pictures, sign language, body language, facial expressions, etc.
- Receptive skills give us the ability to understand and interpret the words, symbols, signs, etc., that other people are using to communicate.

Communication skills start developing in infancy and continue to develop throughout a person’s life. The most intense period of development is generally within the first three years.

There are four main ways people communicate:

- Oral (spoken or verbal) communication directly between people or by telephone, radio or television, other media, etc.
- Nonverbal communication through eye contact, body language, gestures, movements, rate of movement, etc.
- Written communication: texts, emails, notes, books, Internet, letters, bills, prescriptions, schedules, magazines, recipes, street signs, instructions, food labels, etc.
• Visual communication through pictures, symbols, maps, logos, signs, etc.

Communication involves understanding and processing the main message. It also involves noticing different details and features and interpreting those, too. For example, oral communication seems straightforward; spoken communication between two people. Think about the phrase, “It’s not what you say, but how you say it.” Oral communication is clearly about more than the words we say. It includes:
  • Understanding the words and meanings
  • Tone and pitch — the way we say what we say
  • Facial expressions
  • Volume
  • Body language
  • Context
  • Eye contact

Changes of any of these components can lead to significant changes in the message. For example, think about the sentence, “Good luck.” The words give a positive message wishing someone luck. Now visualize a person saying it and rolling their eyes at the same time. The message means something slightly different simply because of the body language, i.e., the eye roll.

Because communication is complex, it’s not surprising that people have problems with communication. This is also true for people who have an IDD. Problems with communication can lead to:
  • Difficulty getting needs met
  • Misunderstanding
  • Breakdown in relationships
  • Isolation and loneliness
  • Difficulty at work
  • Lack of confidence
  • Poor self-esteem

Language and communication — intellectual and developmental disability

People who have IDD may have a range of difficulties with communication. These difficulties include:
  • Comprehension — understanding what others are saying and/or understanding more abstract language
  • Expression — expressing thoughts and feelings, or not having oral communication skills
  • Social skills — understanding social norms and how to respond appropriately in social situations.

These difficulties may involve a sensory issue such as hearing or visual impairment or a global communication delay. When a person struggles to express themselves, understand other people, or make their needs and wants known, it can lead to frustration. Frustration can lead to challenging or maladaptive behavior.

Speech and language professionals can help identify the nature of the communication issues and recommend supports and treatment.
Diagnosis of speech and language problems

Speech and language pathologists (SLPs) can act as a resource for people with IDD and care providers. They provide information and education about the person’s speech and language challenges. Effective communication can help people with overall wellness and support their ability to engage in all aspects of life in the way they want.iii

Assessment for people who have IDD may be wide-ranging or focused on a specific challenge depending on the goal. Goals for treatment may include forms of verbal or written communication or interactions with others.iv An effective assessment will include the person and their care provider in the process. Treatment should focus on building on a person’s strengths.

Communication tools that may be developed as part of the treatment plan include:

• Environmental cues — can include pictures, logos, colors, noise and texture as cues in the person’s environment
• Facial expression, gesture and body language — nonverbal communication can be used effectively to support a person with understanding oral communication
• Signing systems — there is a wide variety and range of signing systems that can enhance visual communication
• Pictures/visual strategies — visuals and pictures can work for many people with communication difficulties
• Print and symbol systems — using printed words or recognizable symbols
• Assistive technology/assistive communication - includes assistive and adaptive devices
• Speech, voice and language — if a person is able to use their voice and have ability for speech
• Eye-gaze and partner assisted scanning — the person can use their eyes to control a device, or using eye-gaze to communicate with a partner.

Communication supports and strategies

Care providers can help develop communication tools and aides that are recommended through the assessment process. They can also evaluate how their own communication may be used to assist the person. Effective support and treatment strategies will involve supporting care providers to adapt their own communication to help people who have IDD.

It is helpful for care providers to consider the following in their own communication:

• Allow extra time for the person to process information and respond.
• Use concrete language.
• Use everyday words and common language. Slang and jargon can be difficult to understand.
• Confirm understanding by questions and restatement.
• Limit distractions and noise when possible.
• Stick to one conversation topic at a time.
• Avoid quick shifts in conversation topics.
• Keep sentences and questions short.
• Be an active listener.
• Pay attention to eye contact and gestures (body language).
• Speak slowly and clearly.
• Do not speak louder to get your message across unless the person has a hearing loss.
• Pay attention to tone. Make sure it is giving the same message as the words being used.
• Stay focused on strengths.
• When giving directions or instruction, focus on the positive outcome or desired goal.

Positive Behavior Support (PBS) involves changing situations and events that people with problem behaviors experience. The goal is to reduce reducing the occurrence. It supports people to increase social, personal and professional quality in their lives.\textsuperscript{vi} Research-based strategies and tools are used to increase the quality of life.

A focus on PBS-based communication strategies can be very effective when supporting a person who has IDD. Strategies focus on planning and support based on a person’s strengths. Support is also provided based on focusing on the person’s strengths. Positive Behavior Supports also promote wellness approaches.

**Including communication supports in a Functional Behavior Assessment**

Communication skills should be considered in a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). Challenges with expressing wants and needs or interpreting communication from others could be considered as a “setting event,” which increases the likelihood of a behavior. Difficulty communicating can directly impact the function or purpose of a behavior. Any known challenges should be included in a hypothesis statement if they help explain why the behavior occurs.

**For more information about effective communication**

- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Health Care for Adults and Intellectual Disabilities – Toolkit for Primary Care Providers
- Surrey Place Centre Communicating Effectively with People with Developmental Disabilities- Section I: Tools for General Issues in Primary Care (PDF)
- iCommunicate Speech and Communication Therapy – Adults with Special Needs and Learning Disabilities
- Picture my Future – A guide to communicating with a person with intellectual disability (PDF)
- Do2Learn Intellectual Disability Strategies


\textsuperscript{iii} Retrieved from https://www.icommunicatetherapy.com/adult-communication-difficulties-2/adult-learning-dificulties-intellectual-disability/ February 2018


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