

Communicating with someone with a language difficulty

Speech and Language Therapy

Information for families and carers

Communicating with someone with a language difficulty can be challenging and frustrating for everyone involved. The advice below suggests ways to reduce this and help to improve the quality of these interactions.

Consider other factors which could be affecting the person

Remember that apart from issues with language, conversation with the person you are talking to can be affected by how they are feeling and could include being:

- tired
- unwell (for example, having a urinary tract infection or chest infection)
- rushed
- on certain medications
- distracted by background noise
- having too many people talking to them at once.

Try these strategies

Bearing these issues in mind, the advice and strategies below can help you to have a more successful interaction:

- take your time
- make conversations as calm & relaxed as possible
- avoid having too many people involved in a conversation
- try new ways of communicating:
 - point or gesture
 - draw on a small whiteboard or pen and paper
 - write down key words and phrases
 - try using alternative words that mean roughly the same thing.
- make sure you are both paying attention to the conversation
- minimise distractions – turn off the radio or TV and close the door
- speak in a tone of voice appropriate for an adult

- communicate one idea at a time
- give the person time to process information
- provide 'lead-in' phrases, cues and ask relevant questions, to help clarify your message, and get your point across
- avoid changing the subject quickly
- repeat or rephrase if necessary
- accept any means of communication that the person uses e.g., facial expression, pointing, tone of voice
- avoid criticising incomplete or incorrect words or sentences
- watch out for tiredness or frustration - you can stop and try again later.

Try supported conversation techniques

People with communication difficulties sometimes find unsupported conversations challenging. You may therefore also like to try to use one or more of the activities/strategies below to make it easier for them. They may also help to prompt engagement and participation:

- ask specific questions that can be answered with either yes/no or a very short sentence
- try keeping your side of the conversation as normal as possible – share the local gossip or talk about something you read in the newspaper
- where possible, do what you would normally do together – watch TV, listen to music, visit the café, do a jigsaw, write a letter/postcard, and ask if they agree with what you are saying
- use favourite or familiar songs, sing the first bit of each line and let them finish it off
- sharing a puzzle or game can be a useful way of taking the pressure off face-to-face conversation e.g., playing dominoes, knots and crosses, word searches etc.
- provide small acts of care such as applying hand cream or combing hair
- look through photo albums and talk about family, friends, places visited.