

## Communication

We find out about a person's needs and dreams through communication with that person. Good Communication is the basis of good person-centred planning. You should will need to think about the following important things.

- Think about the ways information is presented and shared.
- Think about the effects of the environment in which you meet.
- Think about the ongoing process of making choices.

People with learning disabilities can learn new skills and adapt their behaviour to different situations, especially if they are provided with the right opportunities and challenges and the right support. Often, though, the greatest change will come from the people supporting the person with a learning disability from changes to the environment, and by making information more accessible. Even small changes here may help the person at the centre to develop their skills and understanding.

People may need to change their style of communication. The environment may need changing to make communication effective. Information may need to be adapted and presented in different ways

## THINKING ABOUT

### The person at the centre of the plan

Good communication depends on

- How well you can hear
- How well you can see
- How comfortable you are feeling
- How alert and attentive you are
- How well you can understand what is happening
- How well you can express yourself to someone else
- How interested and motivate you are to communicate

## People with learning disabilities often:-

- Have un-identified health needs that affect communication  
eg. hearing, vision, epilepsy; pain; physical difficulties that make communication effortful; medication affecting attention.
- Do not understand everything that is said to them.  
They may appear to understand, but actually be responding to your tone of voice, or familiar cues in the situation. They may misunderstand, forget or not catch some of what you say. They may often say "yes" in answering questions, even if they do not fully understand – partly because they do not want to make difficulties. They may not be able to contradict you if you have misunderstood what they mean or want. They may be bilingual, and have greater skills in one language than another.
- Use many different ways of communicating –  
Facial expressions, eye gaze, "body language", gestures, signs, communication books and charts with pictures or symbols, objects, electronic aids.
- Need time to understand and respond to you.  
Some people take longer to process what you are saying. Others may find physical movement or speech effortful, so that it will take longer to respond.

- People often overestimate the understanding of people with learning disabilities, and make their language too complicated. This puts too many demands on the person, who may withdraw, show challenging behaviour, or fail to do what is asked. **Challenging behaviour is often caused by a person's failure to understand what is going on, or inappropriate demands from others.**
- People often do not use all the ways of communicating that are appropriate to the person with a learning disability. This means that a person's own communication system is not valued, and may deter them from using all their skills effectively.

**For Example:**

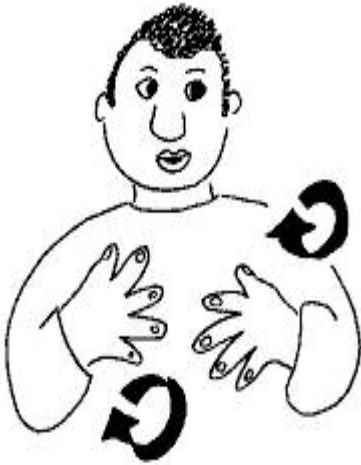
The manager of a day centre may not approve of using signs as he feels it makes people with learning disabilities stand out and look funny. Service users are not encouraged to use signing, and staff are not taught or supported in learning it. A person came to the centre from school with poor speech and good signing skills, and if is not allowed to use her signs in the centre she may become increasingly withdrawn and difficult to understand.

**Remember**



- People with learning disabilities are **individuals**. You need to try to look at things from **their** perspective. Remember, it is their agenda that is most important, not yours.
- People with learning disabilities have feelings, and are sensitive to situations, experiences and the attitudes of others. If they never experience successful communication, and fulfilling relationships that make them feel good about themselves, they may give up. They may be happy some days, and want to chat, or down some days, and prefer to be quiet – just like everyone else!
- People communicate in many ways. We all communicate through our behaviour as well as our language. People with learning disabilities are no different. All behaviour has a message. Individuals who do not have good communication skills have to express themselves and get their message across by any means available to them. For this reason any challenging behaviour may simply be an attempt to tell those present about feelings or wishes.

## THINKING ABOUT PEOPLE



### What you need to do

- Make sure the person can hear, see and is comfortable
- Check when the last hearing or vision test happened; get on up to date assessment
- Make sure hearing aids or glasses are used if necessary, and that they work properly
- Make sure you talk clearly and allow the person to read your lips if necessary
- Use sign/gesture and pictures to back up your speech
- Make sure you present information clearly for people to see
- Make sure people are positioned for good communication – seating is key
- Make sure the environment is quiet and there are not too many distractions
- Check out general health and comfort pain, physical difficulties, effects of medication.



### What you need to do

- Make sure you keep your language simple and clear.
- Gain a person's attention before starting to talk.
- Show that you respect a person's way of communicating by using it to them.
- Make sure communication books/aids are available to the person when they need them – not stuck in a cupboard!
- Be a good observer, and respond to all communicative signals.
- Make sure the person can see your hands and face if you are signing and talking.
- Give enough time for the person to listen to you and respond.
- Check that you have understood – by talking to others, helping the person to tell you when you have got it wrong. Don't pretend you can understand if you really can't!

- Speech and language therapists can help you to decide the best way of communicating with people with learning difficulties – have you got contact details?
- You can talk to families, friends and advocates to find out more about someone's communication

## THINKING ABOUT YOUR OWN RESPONSE

- You too will have your own attitudes, feelings and beliefs, and these will inevitably influence the way you see and interpret the person's needs, choices and interests.
- You will be influenced by the communication of the person at the centre – if you find the person does not seem to respond to you, you may give up, and stop trying to adapt your behaviour. If the person responds to you and seems to enjoy your company, you will be motivated to develop your own skills and spend time with that person.
- You will also be affected by the culture of the organisation where you work – if you feel valued and supported, you will feel more positive about communication opportunities.
- Some days you will be more energetic and enthusiastic than others.
- Be aware of how your own feelings and beliefs are affected by the people you work with, and the culture of the service, which employs you.
- Be aware that people's interpretations of the communication of the person at the center may differ, because we all see things in slightly different ways. Take time to check out what you all think someone means before you come to any decision.

### For Example:

A person with profound learning difficulties who communicates only through sounds and movements is helped to eat by staff, whose rota changes on different days. In discussion with the speech and language therapist, it emerged that half the staff thought that when the person vocalised towards the end of the meal, they wanted more food, while the rest of the staff thought they were signaling that they had had enough. Because staff had different beliefs about the meaning of the communication, the person was getting very inconsistent responses, which did not help to develop their skills.

### What you need to do

- Look for the evidence to support a guess about someone's meaning.
- Be a good observer. Keep a record of someone's responses over time to different situations. Look for patterns of behaviour.
- Talk to others who know the person. Put all your ideas together.
- If you are not sure what someone means, make a guess and stick with it. Keep a record of how the person responds to your interpretation of their behaviour. Review the situation later on with other people – if your guess seems wrong, try another one!
- Talk to speech and language therapists and psychologists who may be able to help with observations.

## THINKING ABOUT ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

If people are to be able to make choices about their lives, they need information about the options available to them that they can understand.

There are many ways of making information accessible to people with learning disabilities. These include the different ways of communicating that we have mentioned above, but also ways of presenting information so that people can become more engaged in the planning process.

At the moment there are many barriers, which prevent the person at the centre of the planning process from being in control.

You will find details about resources and information to support your use of different media and communication methods in appendix A.

### Action for Person Centred Planning

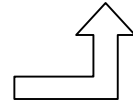
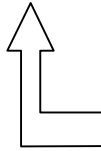
You need to consider:-

- What method or combination of methods will be most useful to the person.
- How to give the person ownership and control over information about themselves.
- Allowing enough time to produce information and resources.
- Linking with other services to make sure that everyone is consistent in what they are doing.
- How to store and catalogue resources, so that they do not get mislaid.
- Your own training needs – do you need to go on a course?

**THINKING ABOUT WAYS OF SHARING INFORMATION**

A communication passport can be created with pictures, photographs, words and symbols to share important information about a person's needs, interests and ways of communicating. The person can take this into different settings so that everyone is well informed

- Reports
- Records
- Recipes
- Lists
- Information
- Leaflets
- Procedures
- Timetables
- Letters

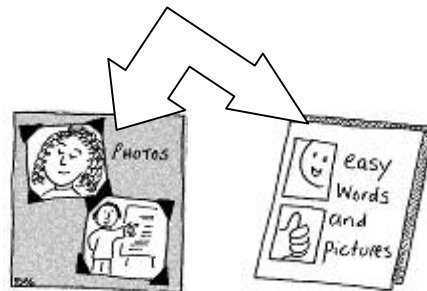


Information can be written and presented in symbol or pictorial form. Pictures and photographs can be used to illustrate written material.

You need to learn the signs that are important to individuals, and everyone must use them. People with learning difficulties can act as peer tutors to help reach both staff and service users.



**Signs & gestures  
Communication Aids**



You cannot expect people to automatically understand information in symbol or picture form. It's important to be consistent in your choice of symbols, and to actively explain to people what they mean

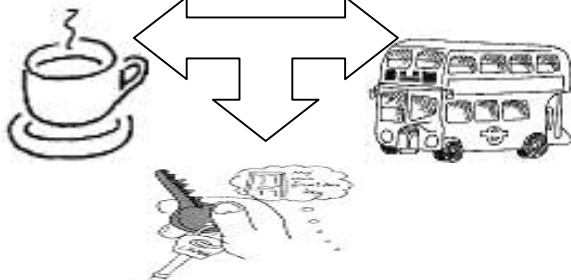


People can join in group discussion by pressing a switch operated aid with voice output to say, yes I agree/no, I don't

**Objects**

People can make videos of activities and people that are important to them

**Video**



**"Memory Boxes"**

Collections of meaningful artifacts & photos associated with events can be used as a basis for conversation, help recall

**"Objects of reference"**

can be used to cue people about what is going to happen. Calendar boxes can be used to make object timetables of activities happening in the week

**"Multimedia**

Profiling" is a process, which creates a personal catalogue of video clips on the computer, which build up a profile of an individual. The person can be in control of their own information through switch or touch screen, and can choose when and how to share it with others.

## THINKING ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH YOU MEET

There are lots of ways in which the physical space affects communication

- Noise makes it hard to hear, and makes us tense and jumpy.
- Furniture arranged in a formal way, in lines or round a table, can make us feel inhibited.
- Big spaces make it hard to hear and see people.
- People coming in and out make us feel our communication is not private.
- Uncomfortable chairs mean we don't feel at ease.
- Bare rooms mean there are fewer topics of conversation.
- Unpainted dirty rooms make us feel devalued and worthless

### Action for Person Centred Planning

Think about changing the physical environment:-

- Quiet spaces that are not interrupted by others make us feel relaxed.
- Comfortable furniture in small groups helps us to see and hear others, and give attention to what is happening.
- Flowers, pictures, personal possessions and nice things to look at and touch give us things to talk about.
- Making the room familiar by including things we can relate to, helps us feel at home.
- The environment can be labeled and signposted to help people become more independent – putting pictures or symbols on cupboards to show what's inside; using tactile and visual lines to help people find their way.
- Well-maintained spaces make us feel we are worth talking to.

## THINKING ABOUT MAKING CHOICES

The ability to make good choices depends on experience, opportunities and the chance to learn from our mistakes.

### Small steps

Big decisions are the outcome of small decisions. Seeing things from the perspective of the person at the center means being aware of the importance of small changes. Choosing what to wear or where to sit, or what music to listen to may not seem very significant from our point of view – but these small changes can make someone feel effective and in control of a manageable part of their lives.

### Choice making cycle

We need a range of experiences that offer us contrasts.

We need ways of representing the experiences to others and ourselves.

We need to reflect on those experiences by thinking and talking about them.

We need opportunities to make choices of different experiences.

The best time to look at choice making is when people are in the actual situation real choices, rather than talking about choices in the abstract.

#### For Example:

A service user with profound learning disabilities and his advocate have tried out two different activities – shopping in a supermarket and shopping at the local grocery store. The person seems more comfortable in the store, which is smaller, and where the shopkeeper says hello and helps him choose fruit. His advocate has taken photos of the supermarket and the store, and after each visit they sit down together and talked about the experience. Now when the person leaves the centre to go shopping, the person turns in the direction of the store, indicating this is where he would prefer to go.

We can learn about people's preference through observing their daily routines and rituals. By checking out with them what importance they attach to each one. Essential lifestyle planning will help you with this

Learning how to make choices as part of a person centred plan also involves learning how to make those choices clear within the process. This means that we need to make the procedures of planning clear and accessible. Having predictable routines that are used consistently will help the person to participate actively. The more consistent experiences we have of making effective choices, the better we get at it.

#### For Example:

A self advocate who now attends meetings and plans their own activities and life styles with her key workers and friends. Two years ago, she had no experience of the process, and found it hard to participate. Through their self advocacy group she has learned about the procedures involved in having a meeting. They now know how to make an agenda, arrange furniture so that everyone feels comfortable, and make notes on action plans. This means that they feel in control and can now participate actively in decision making.

## Action for Person Centred Planning

You need to consider:

- What choices will matter to the person
- How the person communicates a choice
- Starting with small choices before expecting big choices
- Making choices in the actual situation, rather than outside it

- Providing an appropriate range of experiences, so that a person has some sense that it is possible to do something in a different way – and therefore make a choice
- How to make sure that a choice results in a meaningful outcome
- How to help a person understand that sometimes they cannot have what they want
- The resource implications of choice making: for example, increased budgets for food and leisure
- How to give a person experience of the procedures and conventions involved in making choices and decisions

### THINKING ABOUT MAKING CHOICES

**Making decisions involves lots of skills and experiences.**

**I need a range of experiences before I can know what a choice involves.**

You need to help me have a rich life with lots going on

I need to understand what the choice involves.  
You need to present choices in ways that I can manage.



I need to be confident that my choices will be respected.

You need to be ready to listen to me and act on what I want if it is possible.

You need to be realistic about the resource implications.

I need successful experiences of small choice before I am faced with big ones.

You need to provide good choice making opportunities in everyday situations

I need to know how to choose.  
You need to help me develop the skills to look at alternatives and pick one of them – even simple things like what clothes to wear

I need ways to express my choices.  
You need to find out good ways of helping me communicate

I may need help to understand that sometimes I can't have everything that I want.  
You need to develop some strategies for explaining why things can't happen.

People may disagree about what they think I want – Especially if I have high support needs.

My Choices may change over time.

You need to work with me to review them.

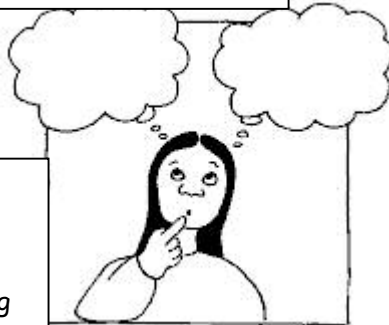
I need to make choices that are real – and to face the challenge of making the wrong choice sometimes.

You need to provide me with choices that have consequences – if it never matters which I have, I will never be motivated to make choice.

## THINKING ABOUT PLANNING MEETINGS



I feel anxious. I don't feel in control.  
These people all talk a different language.  
There's so much jargon!! What's all this  
paperwork to do with me?



I choose where to have  
this meeting and who  
should come. This feels  
comfortable, like talking  
to friends. I feel in  
control. I can understand  
what is being said



What you need to do  
Help the person to choose

- Where to have the meeting - somewhere comfortable and familiar.
- Who will come.
- Ways of presenting and sharing information
- Ways of recording what happens

**And**

- Make the social situation comfortable.
- Always introduce people.
- Don't use jargon.
- Keep the person at the centre.

## THINKING ABOUT THE PROCESS

- Person-centred planning is designed to be a process that evolves over time, and time change.
- The choices and decisions we make about our lives are outcomes of a gradual development of self-awareness – involving small steps and changes.
- Person-centred planning involves a cycle of opportunity, experience, reflection and decision-making.

The process of person-centred planning takes place over time. Over time, health changes, likes and dislikes change, and skills and abilities change as we lose some and gain others. In the process of planning we must be careful not to make assumptions:-

- Hearing may have been fine a year ago – but colds and ear infections since then may mean that now there is a hearing loss.
- Vision may have been fine a year ago – but ageing may mean that the person now needs glasses.
- A particular medication may have suited the person a year ago – but now they have developed resistance to it.
- A year ago, the person may have really liked a particular food or music – but now they are bored of it and would like to try something new.
- A year ago, the person had a close friendship with another individual – but now they have drifted apart.

### Action for Person Centred Planning

- There should be a balance in someone's life between familiar and new experiences, so that change is possible.
- A profile should be an ongoing process, which is responsive to changes in a person's circumstances.
- Hold regular reviews which allow for new perspectives and ideas.

# COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST FOR PCP

## Thinking about people

1. What is special about this individual?  
Eg. likes and dislikes; personality; friends and family; cultural roots;
2. Does the person need:-  
Hearing test                      Vision test                      Health check  
Date of last tests:
3. What aspects of health and physical status affect communication?  
Eg. medication, pain, physical positioning; fatigue
4. What do you think the person can understand?  
Eg. Voice patterns, intonation and gesture; familiar situations and language mostly single words; short sentences; a whole conversation.
5. Are there any clues to suggest comprehension problems?  
Eg. saying yes all the time; inconsistent response; failure to respond; challenging behaviour.
6. How does the person express themselves best?  
Eg. signs and gestures; using pictures or symbols; using speech; pointing to objects and people; using their faces and bodies to communicate; using communication aid or chart.
7. What do you need to do to support communication?  
Eg. talk simply and clearly; gain attention; talk slowly; leave time to respond; use signs and gestures; use pictures/symbols; point to objects and people; use your face and body expressively.
8. What helps you to understand the person?  
Eg. do you need more time to interact; what activities are enjoyable; what is it about the person which makes you feel you want to respond?
9. Are there different views about the person's interests, needs and communication, that might lead to disagreements? Give some examples of these views.
10. Do you need advice from a speech and language therapist? Note the contact details here.

## Thinking about information

11. What methods should you use to make information accessible to the person?  
Signs and gestures; pictures and photos; symbols; written words; objects; video; communication aids; multimedia.
12. What teaching will you provide so that these methods can be used effectively?  
For the person? For staff? Across the service?
13. How will you give the person control over personal information?
14. What are the resource implications?

## Thinking about the environment

15. Do you need to make changes to the environment to support communication?  
Eg. smaller spaces, reducing noise, changing the furniture, access to personal space.

## RESOURCES TO HELP WITH CHOICE MAKING

### **The Choice Initiative**

This is an ongoing project by the Foundation for people with Learning Disabilities. There is a regular newsletter, a video that can be used for training, and information gained from surveys and interviews with staff. Details on their website: [www.learningdisabilities.org.uk](http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk)

**Choice Discovered.** Training resource pack. Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2000. Video of participants in three Choice Initiative projects. ISBN 0901944 93 9.

**Everyday Lives, Everyday Choices: for people with high support needs.** Foundation for People with Learning disabilities, 2000. ISBN 0901944904. Report from the project. Add local contacts

**Demonstrating control of decisions by adults with learning difficulties who have high support needs .** James Edge, Values into Action, for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, October 2001. Online summary at [www.irf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/021.asp](http://www.irf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/021.asp) + communication equipment info.

**Let's be Clear.** Communication training video from Home Farm Trust. Contact Suzi Walton, Marketing Department on 0117 927 3746 email [suziw@hft.org.uk](mailto:suziw@hft.org.uk)

**It's my Decision.** Video based training pack to teach decision making skills to people with learning disabilities. Oswestry Special Arts Group for the Joseph Rountree Foundation, 1992.

**Deciding Together: working with people with learning disabilities to plan services and support.** Jill Aitchison et.al. IAHPSP 2001 ISBN 1 898 152 23 3.

**See What I Mean.** guidelines to help staff question and check out or validate the meanings they attribute to communication by people with severe and profound learning disabilities. The guidelines are designed for staff in day care and residential settings, advocates, hospital staff and managers. Nicola Grove for BILD Publications, 2000. ISBN 1 902519 41 8  
Details on the BILD website. [www.bild.org.uk](http://www.bild.org.uk)

**Making Decisions:** Helping people who have difficulty making decisions for themselves.

A series of consultation papers produced by the Lord Chancellor's Department to help with issues of consent. Guidance for families, health professionals, social care professionals, and people with learning disabilities themselves.

<http://www.lcd.gov.uk/consult/family> Hard copy obtainable from 0207 2100751. Appendix A

## RESOURCES FOR COMMUNICATION

**Communication Matters.** Organisation representing people who use augmentative and alternative communication, professionals and manufacturers. <http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk>  
Look here for events, links and suppliers of equipment.

**Note:** Augmentative and Alternative Communication is the term used for all types of communication which are used in addition to speech and vocalization— eye gaze, facial expressions, signs and gestures, and books, charts and communication aids and computers.

**Acting Up** is a charity which works with people marginalized by severe communication difficulties and institutionalized practice. They have developed multimedia profiling to support inclusion. Acting Up, 203-213 Mare St., London E8 3QE. Tel: 0208 533 3344 <http://www.acting-up.org.uk>

**Somerset Inclusion Project** has developed a total communication approach using signs, symbols, pictures and communication aids to support participation in the community. 34 Wellington Road, Tanton, Somerset, TA1 5AW. 01823-257917.

**Widgit software** produce resources for using graphic symbols and communication to support reading, writing and communication. Widgit Software, 124 Cambridge Science Park, Milton Rd., Cambridge. 01223 425 558 [www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com)

**CHANGE picture bank** is a set of pictures to help make information easier to understand. Available from CHANGE, Block D, Hatcham Park Mews, London SE14 5EA. Tel: 0207 639 4312. Email [Londonoffice@changepeople.co.uk](mailto:Londonoffice@changepeople.co.uk)  
[www.changepeople.co.uk](http://www.changepeople.co.uk)

**Makaton Vocabulary Development Project** offers training and resources in the use of signs and symbols with people with severe communication difficulties. [www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org)  
31 Firwood Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 3QD Tel: 01276 61390

**Signalong** is a group which provide training and resources for the use of signs with people with speech and language difficulties. Communication Language Centre, North Pondsides, Historic Dockyard, Chatham, Kent ME4 4TY.  
01634 819915. [www.signalong.org.uk](http://www.signalong.org.uk)

**Note:** although these two organizations have different names they are both using signs from British Sign Language, used by Deaf people, paired with speech. Signalong and Makaton are not different sign systems, though their teaching methods vary slightly.

**Simple communication aids** can be obtained from many of the manufacturers and suppliers listed on the Communication Matters website (CASC pages). One of the major suppliers is Liberator- [www.liberator.co.uk](http://www.liberator.co.uk)  
Whitegates, Swinstead, Lincolnshire, NG33 4PA. Tel: 0800 452288  
Look for the Ablenet range.

**Communication Passports** collect important information about people in a visual and accessible format. Information leaflet about how to construct these from the CALL Centre, University of Edinburgh, Paterson's Land, Holyrood Rd, Edinburgh, EH\*8AQ. Tel: 0131 6516235, email [call\\_centre@ed.ac.uk](mailto:call_centre@ed.ac.uk)  
[www.callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk](http://www.callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk)

**Talking Mats** can be used to help people who can understand pictures and symbols to talk about issues that are important to them. Video and training package available from the AAC Research Unit, University of Stirling, Scotland, FK9 4LA. Tel 01786 467645 email [joan.murphy@stir.ac.uk](mailto:joan.murphy@stir.ac.uk)  
[www.aacscotland.com](http://www.aacscotland.com)

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