

How You Can Support Communication

What Others Can Do to Enhance the Communication Process

Communication is a complex process. Communication involves being able to express needs, wants, and feelings, as well as the ability to understand messages and information from the communicating partner. Youth with developmental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, behavioral health needs, and other challenges will often struggle with some aspect of communication. This is true for youth who are verbal and seem to be able to easily express and understand communication. Communicating partners can use the following strategies to support effective communication.

Monitor Conversations and Auditory Environment.

When there are multiple conversations, multiple voices, and auditory distractions, it can cause confusion and make it difficult for the youth to focus and process their communication.

- Reduce the sounds in the environment.
- Monitor the volume of conversations surrounding the youth.
- Develop a cue/gesture that reminds others (adults and youth) to reduce unnecessary talking.
- Assess the auditory environment by audio recording the environment being sensitive to what and who is being recorded. Playback the recording to assess how the auditory environment may be a barrier to effective communication.

Less Is More.

Sometimes too many words can be a barrier to effective communication. Over-explaining or adding too many unnecessary words can become confusing. Repeating the information while the person is attempting to process the message may also be disruptive.

- Give one instruction, direction, request, question, choice, or comment at a time.
- Use clear, concise words. Use concrete words.
- Emphasize words that offer information. Explain what to do instead of what not to do or asking multiple questions.
- Pair words with visual support (pictures or objects).

Example:

Too Much

"John, it would be really nice... if you wouldn't mind ...can you help Chase and me get ready for dinner by setting the dining room table tonight?"

Less Is More

1. "John, please set the table for dinner."
2. "John, please set the table."
3. "John, will you set the table?"

Note: Be prepared to honor a 'no' response if you ask a question.

4. "John, set table."
5. "John, table." *While holding out forks, spoons, napkins, and pointing to table.*

Use Wait Time.

One of the most effective strategies that is always available and requires no planning can be the most difficult to remember! This strategy is simply to wait quietly while the youth is processing the question, comment, direction, or other information in order to respond. Instead, we often repeat, over-explain, or re-phrase before the youth has time to process.

- Assess how long an individual requires to process information. Some people need 10 or 15 seconds (or more) to process information.
- Communicate to all those working with the youth the length of waiting time that should be given before repeating or adding more information.
- Develop a sign/gesture to be used among the team members as a reminder to 'wait quietly'.
- Develop a "Wait Time" Protocol:
 - Give one instruction, direction, choice, or comment at a time.
 - Stop. WAIT QUIETLY for 10 seconds for a response.
 - If no response, repeat and WAIT another 10 seconds.
 - If the person does not seem to understand or does not respond after repeating 2 times, add a gesture, picture, or other cue to help them process the information and repeat the wait process.

Be Consistent.

It is not unusual to use many different words or terms to refer to the same concept, object, action, or request. For people that may have difficulty with communication or understanding abstract language, this can be confusing and often leads to misunderstanding. They may not understand the intent or the purpose of what is said or may assume something different.

- Monitor your own language for consistency.
- Work as a team to be consistent with frequently used words, directions, or prompts.
- Teach the youth words that may mean the same thing.
- Use a visual support to clarify the meaning (pictures, calendars, schedule, object, etc.).