Ensuring there is effective two-way communication with each person

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Article 10 in the series Facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. All the articles are available to download from my website at

http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A list of all the articles in the series is provided on the website.

This article is based closely on a document used to support the Communication Policy adopted at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning. As Lead Speech and Language Therapist there, I took the lead in writing the original document in 2010.

For further information about RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, go to www.rnib.org.uk/pearscentre

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**Mutual understanding**

Parents do not strive to facilitate communication skills in their babies and infants. Babies and infants do not strive to learn communication skills. What does happen, however, is that parents and their typically developing children strive for what Bruner (1975) calls *mutual understanding*.

If people with visual impairment and additional needs are to communicate successfully, facilitators should strive to establish mutual understanding with them. As Bruner indicates, typically developing children play a part in this process. However, many communicatively disabled people are unlikely to have the skills to do so. This is particularly likely to be true of those in the early stages, and those who do not readily take the initiative.\(^1\) Thus, facilitators, have to take most of the responsibility for establishing mutual understanding, especially in the early stages.

In order to establish mutual understanding, facilitators need to have a thorough and detailed knowledge of each person. In turn, this requires the person to be assessed in a meaningful way.\(^2\) But understanding a communicatively disabled person also depends on facilitators imagining how that person experiences the world: it means that facilitators should understand each person’s disabilities. In respect of people with visual impairment and additional needs, facilitators need to have a good understanding of visual impairment in the broadest sense. In addition, they need to understand the particular nature of that person’s visual impairment and how it impacts on all aspects of the person’s daily life. They also need to understand the person’s other disabilities, and how they impact on daily life. Finally, it is important for facilitators to understand that the person’s disabilities interact. The likelihood is that it is not a matter of simply adding the impact of the various disabilities together. The total impact is likely to be greater than the sum of the individual parts.

If facilitators fail to establish mutual understanding, people with visual impairment and additional needs may become very frustrated, anxious and stressed. Many people in this group are already passive, and if other people repeatedly fail to understand them, they are likely to become even more passive, and, therefore, very isolated. Others will find other means of communication, using what are commonly regarded as challenging behaviours. In turn, these behaviours will add further to isolation.

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1. See article 7.
2. See article 4.
The importance of the process of communication

There is currently a great deal of emphasis on the need for practitioners to show that they are bringing about progress in the people with whom they work. This certainly applies to teachers and speech and language therapists. This means that facilitators are under pressure to set targets for each session they arrange with a person who has visual impairment and additional needs. Any progress made is, in effect, seen as a product of the session.

But this disregards two key issues:

- many people with visual impairment and additional needs make progress very slowly, such that it cannot be measured over the course of any one session
- in any case, the process of communication itself is vitally important, and for many people it should take precedence over producing measurable progress; this stance is in agreement with Latham and Miles (1993), Prevezer (2000) and Nind and Hewett (2006).

It is therefore entirely appropriate for a facilitator to communicate with someone who has visual impairment and additional needs for its own sake, to enjoy doing so, and to promote enjoyment in the other person. In other words, it is the process of effective two-way communication that is important; it does not matter if no measurable product results from the session. In fact, if the facilitator demonstrates to the person that communicating is enjoyable, it is likely that the person will make progress as far as acquiring new skills is concerned.

References


