Working on the speech sounds of people who have learning disabilities: the difficulties this presents

Ian Bell
Specialist Independent Speech and Language Therapist

This document is available to download from my website at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A range of other articles is also available on the website. They focus particularly on addressing the communication needs of people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities, but they are also likely to be of interest to those concerned with children and adults who have learning disabilities.

Please refer to this document by acknowledging the author, providing the web address and noting the date that you accessed the article.

Ian Bell
January 2013
A role often undertaken by speech and language therapists is developing speech intelligibility. Many children and adults who have learning disabilities have speech which is not easily understood by others. It is tempting to believe that they should receive 1:1 therapy to support their production of more intelligible speech. However, such therapy is not appropriate for many people who have learning disabilities. There are several reasons for this.

A significant factor is that people who have learning disabilities are unlikely to have the skills to participate in and benefit from therapy to reduce their difficulties with speech intelligibility. Young, typically developing children who have some difficulties with their speech intelligibility do not usually benefit from speech and language therapy until they are about 3½ years of age. Until about that age, children do not have the cognitive skills to understand the concepts used in therapy, the ability to fully recognise that their own behaviour differs from that of other people, and the skills to change their own behaviour. Many people who have learning disabilities do not have these skills.

In addition, the reasons that some people with learning disabilities have reduced speech intelligibility are complex. A key factor in this group is the differences in their neurological and or physiological make-up. These differences present additional barriers to effective individual therapy for speech intelligibility.

Another significant difficulty with therapy which focuses on speech sounds is this: it is repetitive and of no intrinsic interest to the person receiving it. It is often impossible to make it interesting and motivating to the person.

Perhaps of most importance is that many people who have learning disabilities have difficulties with generalising their learning. In other words, although they may be able to learn to produce a particular speech sound during individual sessions with a skilled speech and language therapist, they are unlikely to be able to use that sound when saying words in everyday situations. If this is the case, therapy for speech sounds is of no value.