Assessing communication in a meaningful way

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Article 4 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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January 2013
This is a revised and expanded version of the article which was posted in October 2011.
Introduction

Assessment is a vital process in facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. It is essential to build up a detailed body of knowledge about each person. We need to understand each person’s abilities and the difficulties he/she experiences. This requires that we obtain comprehensive information and get to know as much about each person’s communication skills as possible.

Difficulties with formal assessment

For some people with a communication disability, it is possible to carry out formal assessment. That usually means a speech and language therapist testing the person in a 1:1 situation. But formal assessment is of little or no value with a person who has visual impairment and additional needs.

This is for several reasons:

• it can be difficult to gain, focus and sustain the person’s attention, especially on an activity he/she has not chosen

• the person may move in and out of alertness frequently and rapidly

• formal assessments place the person in a respondent role and generally focus on receptive communication; we also need to learn about the person as an active, expressive communicator

• the person is likely to interact and communicate in idiosyncratic ways; formal assessment does not help us to understand this

• we need to know how each person communicates functionally in everyday situations, not during formal assessment

• formal assessments disregard the fact that people do not communicate alone; we need to take account of how facilitators communicate with the person

• the person is likely to vary markedly over time, according to the people he/she is with, and according to the situations he/she is in; formal assessment does not help us to understand this.
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The Communication Profile

Because the formal assessment of communication is of little value with people who have visual impairment and additional needs, several years ago I developed the Communication Profile (Bell, 2008). I have now revised and extended this.¹

The process of compiling a Communication Profile usually involves several people, one of whom needs to take the lead. Ideally, the lead compiler should be someone who has a good understanding of communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. In many situations, the leader will be a speech and language therapist, but it could also be an experienced and knowledgeable practitioner with another role.

The lead compiler needs to get to know the person by observing him or her in many situations and with many other people. The lead compiler must then consult other facilitators who know the person well, particularly in those situations to which he / she does not have access. Whenever possible, members of the person’s family should also be involved.

It may be possible to use more formal assessment methods alongside the Communication Profile with some people. These are people who have symbolic language skills and who can attend for at least several minutes to tasks set by another person. If formal assessment is carried out, the results can be incorporated into the Communication Profile.

The Communication Profile describes the person’s communication skills in positive terms, and as if the person had written it. The lead compiler uses a computer menu to compile the profile; menu items which do not apply are omitted. This avoids referring to skills the person does not have. Items which do apply are individualised so they describe the person in detail.

¹ Profiling the communication of people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities is available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/profiling-the-communication-of-people-who-have-visual-impairment-and-additional-disabilities/
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The Communication Profile specifies

- the person’s current communication targets and plan
- the communication environment the person requires
- the means of communication the person requires to understand other people and uses expressively.

The Communication Profile provides valuable information when compiling a Communication Passport (Millar, 2003) for the person. Like the Profile, a Communication Passport should be written from the person’s point of view. It provides the most important information about the person in a concise and accessible format.

The Communication Profile should be constantly monitored, and any changes required are noted. It should be formally reviewed and up-dated at least once every year. Again, this task should be carried out by a lead compiler who consults as many other facilitators as possible. Regularly up-dating the Profile means that progress can be recorded.

Concluding remarks

Although compiling a Communication Profile is very time-consuming, the initial investment in time is repaid. This is because the profile provides such a comprehensive and meaningful description of the person’s communication skills. The Communication Profile is a valuable component of facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs.

Experience has shown that using the Communication Profile has important additional benefits. Involving facilitators in compiling and reviewing Communication Profiles encourages staff development in several ways, by:

- enabling facilitators to develop a better understanding of each person’s skills and difficulties
- helping facilitators to understand more fully what communication is and how it typically develops
- raising facilitators’ self-esteem: facilitators realise that they have considerable knowledge of the person concerned, and that they are already using many appropriate strategies
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- enabling facilitators to identify how they can develop their own skills
- helping facilitators to anticipate what skills the person might acquire next, enabling them to contribute more effectively to the target setting process.

Perhaps the most important additional benefit is that it helps to build a team approach, with everyone contributing to the assessment process. It helps to ensure that everyone sees that communication is a matter for all staff and that communication is important at all times, in all situations.

References


This has now (2012) been revised, extended and renamed: Profiling the communication of people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities. It is available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/profiling-the-communication-of-people-who-have-visual-impairment-and-additional-disabilities/


Information on Communication Passports is available on-line at www.communicationpassports.org.uk/Home/
Website accessed 2nd January 2013.