Communicating effectively within the team

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Article 5 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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The communication team

It is suggested here that all teams of practitioners supporting people who have visual impairment and additional needs should include a speech and language therapist (SLT). This is because SLTs have expert knowledge and skills with regard to communication. They are best placed to take the lead in assessing communication,\(^1\) setting targets, and devising strategies and the Total Communication environment.\(^2\)

The amount of input provided by the SLT should depend on several factors. These include the number of people being supported, the nature of their needs and the level of expertise other members of the team have.

Unfortunately, there are teams with no regular access to an SLT. In such teams it is helpful for a practitioner with another background and role to take responsibility for communication. If this is the case, it is advisable for this person to undertake as much appropriate reading as possible and to attend courses and conferences.

As noted in article 3 of this series, everyone who comes into contact with a person who has visual impairment and additional needs communicates with him / her, and is therefore a facilitator.

Thus, as far as communication is concerned, all members of staff are facilitators, and so are members of the communication team.

The need for communication within the team

The practitioner who takes the lead in respect of communication (whether or not this is an SLT) relies on other members of the communication team to

- contribute to the assessment process by providing information about each person in their care
- support each person’s communication by using the recommended strategies and ensuring that the appropriate Total Communication environment is provided.

\(^1\) See article 4. A list of all the articles in the series is provided on the website: [http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-visual-children/](http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-visual-children/)

\(^2\) See article 2.
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If these are to be achieved, there must be effective communication amongst all members of the team. All stages of facilitation depend on the smooth flow of information. It is essential that information is freely shared.

Comprehensive, detailed and accurate assessment relies on the sharing of information, and the most effective way to undertake this is through face-to-face discussions. There is no escape from the fact that these are time-consuming. All practitioners are always busy, with a wide range of important tasks to perform. Therefore, it can be difficult to find the time for worthwhile discussions. But it is crucial: there can be effective communication only when all members of the team take the time to discuss in detail the people they support.

Effective support as far as communication is concerned relies on facilitators adopting the strategies and providing the Total Communication environment recommended by the communication lead. These are typically specified in a formal document such as a Communication Profile. Such documents are compiled not to be filed away, but for a practical reason: to set out the support required by the person. All practitioners involved with the person have a duty to read and become familiar with such documents, and to put them into practice. Documents setting out the recommended strategies and Total Communication environment are forms of communication. They can only be effective if facilitators read and act on them.

Another important means of communication these days is the email. Emails are used for many purposes, for example, for arranging meetings, and sharing information and ideas. All staff need to read their emails and respond in timely fashion. A difficulty with emails is the sheer quantity that many people receive. An effective team is one which provides training in managing emails, and ensures that practitioners are not overwhelmed.

Concluding remarks
It is essential for all facilitators to communicate effectively within the team: communication teams should not expect the people in their care to communicate effectively unless they do themselves.

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3 See article 4.