The importance of forming trusting relationships and limiting the number of facilitators

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Article 6 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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Typical babies and infants in the first two years of life acquire their communication skills in the context of close relationships with a very limited number of adults. These relationships rely on those adults being emotionally in-tune with the child and providing a truly responsive environment. Research reported by Trevarthen (1979) indicates that it is important that the infant and adult know each other well, certainly in the first few months. In fact, this probably remains important beyond this very early stage: a child communicates most successfully when the communicative partner is able to infer the child’s meaning; to do so, the partner uses:

- information from the context
- shared experiences
- knowledge of the child's idiosyncratic word meanings (Dunlea, 1989).

In other words, the communicative partner needs to know the child really well.

People who have visual impairment and additional needs have significant communication difficulties. It is particularly difficult for them to communicate with another person who does not know them well. Many of them remain at very early stages of communicative development and communicate in idiosyncratic ways. They need communicative partners who know them well. If a person with visual impairment and additional needs is unable to communicate clearly, a communicative partner who knows him / her well can often work out what the person means using:

- shared experiences of similar situations from the past
- knowledge of what the person’s demeanour and behaviours mean.

Some developmentally more advanced people who have visual impairment and additional needs acquire some symbolic expressive language skills; some are able to use spoken words; others use signing. Nevertheless, even these people require communicative partners who know them well. This is because, early on in language development, poor intelligibility is to be expected. It is a feature of most typically developing young children when they first start to say words; they do not pronounce them as adults do. The only people who can understand a child at this stage are those who spend a great deal of time with the child. The mother is usually better able than anyone else to understand the child’s immature versions of spoken words. Poor intelligibility is likely in people who use signing as well as in those who use speech. We
The importance of forming trusting relationships and limiting the number of facilitators should not expect people to be able to understand someone with visual impairment and additional needs in the early stages of using words or signs, unless they know the person really well.

Developmentally very young children learn best from someone with whom they have a motivating social relationship, based on equality and trust. Therefore, to be truly effective, each facilitator must have a close and sound social relationship with the person who has visual impairment and additional needs.

Close relationships with a small number of facilitators are particularly important for people who have visual impairment and autism. This is because autistic people find it difficult to predict the behaviour of other people. Thus, it is essential that people with visual impairment and autism know their facilitators really well in order to trust them and thus find them predictable. (See Visual Impairment and Autism Project, 2011.)

Van Dijk (1989, citing Bowlby) states that young infants should receive appropriate care and stimulation from a limited number of people. Several writers (eg Clark, 2000; Hodges, 2000; Ware, 2003) argue that it is important to limit the number of facilitators involved with young people who have significant disabilities. This strategy is adopted in the unit at Victoria School in Birmingham for children who have multi-sensory impairments (Murdoch, 2009).

If a person who has visual impairment and additional needs is supported by people who do not know him / her well, the likely outcomes are

- the person’s attempts to communicate will often be misinterpreted and misunderstood
- the person’s moods and behaviour will often be misinterpreted and misunderstood
- communicative breakdowns will be common
- the person is likely to become very frustrated, and may give up trying to communicate, so becoming withdrawn
- alternatively, the person may look for other ways to communicate, and this could result in what may be regarded as challenging behaviour.

As Aitken (2000) notes, relationships take time to develop and they depend on the facilitator making a conscious effort to establish trust. Close, trusting relationships cannot be formed quickly and are only likely
The importance of forming trusting relationships and limiting the number of facilitators to be achieved with people who have visual impairments and additional needs if each facilitator is expected to support only a very few people, and if each person is supported by very few facilitators. Facilitators cannot form close and sound social relationships with more than a few of the people they work with. And people who have visual impairment and additional needs should not be expected to form close and sound social relationships with more than a few facilitators.

Once the person with visual impairment and additional needs has close, sound and trusting relationships with a small number of facilitators, it may be feasible to expand the range of facilitators. But this must be done gradually (Hagood, 2008).

**Concluding remarks**

It is essential that all facilitators strive to provide close relationships with each of the people they support. Facilitators must aim to know each person really well, to be emotionally in-tune with him or her, and to provide him or her with a truly responsive environment. It is important that the person is able to trust the facilitator and to find the facilitator predictable. Trust and predictability are especially important for people who have visual impairment and autism.

Effective communication and close relationships both help to prevent the development of challenging behaviours and stereotypic / self-stimulatory behaviours. They also play a key role in reducing those which are already established.

The following quotation, adapted from Newson (1979; p210) seems particularly apt here:

*Communicating with [a person who has visual impairment and additional needs] is obviously possible long before the magic day [which may never come] when [he or she first utters a] spoken word. What is not so obvious is that [communicating with such a person] is a learned skill available to anyone who is concerned to master it with any particular [person] i.e. by anyone who is motivated to make the necessary effort and to give up the necessary time to establish a working dialogue with one particular human.*
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References


