The Key Principles of facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs

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Article B 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 on 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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Introduction

In the last few years an increasing emphasis has been placed on the need for evidence-based practice. A difficulty for practitioners involved in facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs is that it is difficult to identify evidence which can provide such a base.

This article outlines the Key Principles which should provide the foundations for facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. To avoid producing an over-long and unwieldy introductory article, there are no references here to the evidence on which each Key Principle is based. Instead, each Key Principle has its own article in which the evidence – such as it is – is presented and referenced.

The series is based on

- research evidence
- the author’s considerable practical experience
- the experience and practice of other, widely-respected, practitioners
- “Communicating Quality 3”, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists guidance on best practice in service organisation and provision.

Visual impairment affects the acquisition of early communication skills in many ways. These are described in the article “The impact of visual impairment on early communication” which provides a background to the series.

Communication – the aims of facilitation

The overall aim of facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs should be to ensure there is effective communication at all times. This is because of the importance of

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communication, both in itself and because it is fundamental to many aspects of everyday life.

Communication should be facilitated at all times for several reasons:

• communication is one of the most important aspects of human life, and a fundamental human right

• communication is an activity from which most competent communicators derive considerable enjoyment; people who have visual impairment and additional needs should be able to enjoy communicating too

• communication plays a key role in establishing and maintaining relationships with other people

• communication enables the individual to have some control over his / her life

• communication enables the individual to be an active participant in personal care routines

• communication enables the individual to access education and supports the learning of all new skills

• communication enables the individual to access leisure activities and supports the development of new interests.

Therefore, if people who have visual impairment and additional needs are to enjoy and participate fully in life, and to have the same rights as the majority of people, practitioners need to facilitate communication. This task has two main components. The first requires practitioners to do all they can to understand and support each person’s expressive communication. The second requires them to do all they can to support each person’s receptive communication, if necessary by augmenting their own spoken language.

Of course, children who have visual impairment and additional needs are provided with education, and many young adults continue to receive education in colleges when they leave school. Education is concerned with the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Therefore, an additional aim for practitioners working with children and with those adults in education is to facilitate the acquisition of further communication skills.
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The Key Principles

In order to achieve the aims set out above, the following Key Principles are required. Practitioners should

1. understand the nature of communication
2. provide a Total Communication approach
3. facilitate, not teach, communication
4. assess communication in a meaningful way
5. communicate effectively within the team
6. understand the importance of forming trusting social relationships and limiting the number of facilitators
7. encourage people to take the initiative
8. allow people to have control
9. encourage people to be active communicators
10. ensure there is effective two-way communication with each person
11. ensure that communication takes place in natural, everyday situations
12. share experiences with each person
13. have conversations with each person
14. create a responsive environment
15. facilitate increasingly mature communication skills in those who are in education
16. use strategies to enhance the communicative environment and increase opportunities for communication
17. adjust the way they speak when they communicate with people who have visual impairment and additional needs.
Concluding remarks

Facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs is a complex task. By adopting the Key Principles set out above and examined in detail in other articles in this series, practitioners can approach the task in a rational and structured manner, basing their work on the available evidence.

3 See the list of articles on the website.