

Your guide to communicating with people with a learning disability

Working with someone with a learning disability may challenge your idea of what communication is, and how you make yourself understood.

“Communication is really important because that’s the way of expressing yourself. If we don’t communicate clearly with each other, there’s no point in communicating at all.”



What is communication?

“The best way for somebody to communicate with me is face-to-face, because you never know how the other person is feeling.”

Everyone can communicate and everyone is an individual in the way they communicate.

There are hundreds of definitions of what communication is and how it is done.

Perhaps the simplest way of thinking about communication is that it is the passing on of information from one person to another using any means possible.

You may be surprised to know that we get most of our information across through our body language. The way people communicate is made up of:

- Body language = 55%
- Tone of voice = 38%
- Words = 7%

Having a communication difficulty



“Sometimes I’ve got the words in my mind, and I’m trying to explain it in the best possible way, but it doesn’t always come out.”

Try to imagine:

- not being able to read this
- not being able to tell someone else about it
- not being able to find the words you wanted to say
- opening your mouth and no sound coming out
- words coming out jumbled up
- not getting the sounds right
- words getting stuck, someone jumping in, saying words for you
- people assuming what you want, without checking with you
- not hearing the questions
- not being able to see, or not being able to understand, the signs and symbols around you
- not understanding the words, phrases or expressions
- not being able to write down your ideas
- being unable to join a conversation
- people ignoring what you are trying to say, feeling embarrassed and moving away
- people not waiting long enough for you to respond in some way, assuming you have nothing to say and moving away.

(Adapted from material on the Communication Forum website at <https://www.communicationsforum.org.uk>)



“It makes me feel as if I’m not worthy of being able to communicate. I can communicate, but in a different way to other people, and it makes me feel quite upset when people don’t understand.”

Being a good communication partner

- To be a successful communicator with people with a learning disability you need to be prepared to use all your communication tools.
- You need to follow the lead of the person you are communicating with.
- You need to go at their pace.

Making communication work



“As long as they have the right support to learn, people with a learning disability can achieve anything. As long as you communicate that support to somebody in an understanding way.”

Whatever way you are trying to communicate with someone with a learning disability, there are some simple rules you can follow for good communication. It is important to always use accessible language, and to avoid jargon or long words that might be hard to understand. You should also take into account any physical disabilities the person may have that could make communication difficult for them.

- **In person:** many people with a learning disability have told Mencap that the best way to communicate with them is face-to-face and one-to-one.
- **In writing:** it is a good idea to use bigger text and bullet points, and to keep writing at a minimum of 16 point. It is also important to remember that too much colour can make reading harder for some people.
- **On the phone:** the best way to talk to someone with a learning disability on the phone is slowly and clearly, using

easily understandable words.



“When I had to go to the hospital the doctors would usually speak to my mum rather than speak to me. So I didn’t bring her to the hospital anymore. Finally they started to recognise I’m the one, I need to understand, not my mum.”

Top tips for communication

1. **Find a good place to communicate in Somewhere quiet without distractions.** If you are talking to a large group be aware that some people may find this difficult.
2. **Ask open questions.** Questions that don’t have a simple yes or no answer.
3. **Check with the person that you understand what they are saying.** “The TV isn’t working? Is that right?”
4. **If the person wants to take you to show you something, go with them.**
5. **Watch the person.** They may tell you things by their body language and facial expressions.
6. **Learn from experience .** You will need to be more observant and don’t feel awkward about asking parents or carers for their help.
7. **Try drawing.** Even if your drawing is not great it might still be helpful.
8. **Take your time, don’t rush your communication.** “I’m quite good on the phone as long as people tell me what they want and speak clearly and slowly. Then I can understand.”
9. **Use gestures and facial expressions.** If you are asking if someone is unhappy make your facial expression unhappy to reinforce what you are saying.
10. **Be aware that some people find it easier to use real objects to communicate but photos and pictures can really help too.** Remember, all communication is meaningful, but you may need to work harder to understand.

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“I showed my manager my idea on a piece of paper, then I spoke to him about it. It showed really well what I meant, and that I’d made the effort to communicate.”



“I’m quite good on the phone as long as people tell me what they want and speak clearly and slowly. Then I can understand.”

Further help

The following websites and organisations contain information on developing your communication skills and knowledge .

- Many people with a learning disability can use or recognise some signs. Signalong and Makaton are both Sign Supported English systems. They are based on British Sign Language (BSL) but are used to support the spoken word. To find out more you can visit the Signalong website at <https://www.signalong.org.uk/> or visit the Makaton website at <https://makaton.org/>
- To find out more about BSL, you can visit the British Deaf Association at <https://bda.org.uk/>
- Talking Mats are a communication system that uses symbols and other images. For more information, please visit the Talking Mats website at <https://www.talkingmats.com/>
- Widgit produce software and symbols to help with communication and accessibility . For more information, please visit the Widgit website at <https://www.widgit.com/>
- Symbol World is a website run by Widgit for symbol users that includes nursery rhymes, stories and a monthly magazine. For more information, please visit the Symbol World website at <https://symbolworld.org/>
- Clear Consultants is an organisation providing training and information on communication and accessibility. For more information please visit the Clear Consultants website at <http://www.clearforall.co.uk/>

Further information and resources

- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Website: <https://www.rcslt.org/>
- Communication Matters Website: <https://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/>

Contacts

England

If you live in England and would like more information on learning disability, you can contact:

- The Learning Disability Helpline Telephone: **0808 800 1111**
- Typetalk: **18001 0808 808 1111**
- Email: helpline@mencap.org.uk

Northern Ireland

If you live in Northern Ireland and would like more information on learning disability, please contact: Mencap's Information Service

- Telephone: 0808 800 1111
- Email: mencapni@mencap.org.uk

Wales

If you live in Wales and would like more information on learning disability, please contact:

- Wales Learning Disability Helpline Telephone: **0808 800 1111**
- Email: information.wales@mencap.org.uk

Scotland

If you live in Scotland, and would like more information on learning disability, please contact:

ENABLE Scotland

- Telephone: **0141 226 4541**
- Email: info@enable.org.uk
- Website: <https://www.enable.org.uk>