

# British Institute of Learning Disabilities

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## Factsheet – communication

### Summary

- Communication is a basic human right, through which we control our existence, make friends and build relationships. Estimates suggest that 50% to 90% of people with learning disabilities have communication difficulties.
- Assessment is vital to ensure the most effective means of communication for each individual across all environments, with Speech and Language Therapists being key professionals, although there is a national shortage of specialists in learning disability.
- People with learning disabilities do not have one recognised tool for communication, and are often dependent on professional intervention to develop an individually tailored communication plan.

### General Introduction

Communication is a basic human right. Communication is the means through which we control our existence. It is the way we make friends and build relationships. It is the way we become independent and make choices. It is the way we learn. It is the way we express our feelings, thoughts and emotions. It is the way we make sense of the world around us. Communication works through a two-way process by which messages are sent and understood between individuals or groups of people.

People in societies have developed common languages so that they can live together with a shared means of communication. Shared communication is fundamental to being included in a society. Spoken and written language is the most highly valued means of communication in our society.

People who cannot speak, understand words, read or write very well, or at all, are undervalued in their societies. They are automatically excluded unless the people around them are prepared to change.

Everyone has the right to control their existence through the recognition and meeting of their communication needs. Different ways of communicating should be equally valued and accepted.

## Numbers

Fundamental Facts (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2001) points out that there are no reliable statistics concerning the number of people with learning disabilities in the UK. Estimates suggest that between 230,000 and 350,000 people have severe learning disabilities, and a further 580,000 to 1,750,000 have mild learning disabilities.

Of these: between 50% and 90% have communication difficulties depending on the definitions used and the sample surveyed. 80% of people with severe learning disabilities fail to acquire effective speech.

About 60% of people with learning disabilities overall have some skills in symbolic communication using pictures, signs or symbols. About 20% have no verbal communication skills but do demonstrate a will to communicate, expecting a response.

## Key Points

The Government White Paper 'Valuing People' says that people with learning disabilities should have: Independence, Choice, Rights and Inclusion.

Effective communication is fundamental in achieving these principles. The white paper also states that 'The Government expects organisations working with people who have learning disabilities to develop communication policies and produce and disseminate information in accessible formats. For those with severe disabilities this may require individual communication techniques and effective use of new technology.' To meet individual communication needs whilst at the same time recognising the need for 'common language' requires an unprecedented level of co-operation between agencies, professionals, families, carers and the community at large. (see The Communication Gap on Foundation for Learning Disabilities website, policy forum paper)

Our society currently expects everyone to speak, understand, read and write as their main form of communication. Schools are judged on their success or failure through language based criteria. Children who cannot adequately use spoken and written language are not able to access the curriculum or participate fully in school activities unless significant changes are made in the skills, knowledge and attitudes of everyone with

whom they come into contact. This applies equally at all ages and stages in life.

Living in a community, people expect those around them to speak and write the same language- at home, at school, at college, at work and in all community activities. Lack of a common language leads to misunderstanding, mistrust and segregation. This applies not only to people with learning disabilities, but to anyone who is not able to speak the language of their community. David Blunkett's recent suggestion that immigrants should learn to speak English supports the idea that a common language helps people to be included in their community. However, if the suggestion was that, in order to 'include' in school one child from another country, the whole class and teacher had to learn and use that child's first language, there would be considerable opposition and difficulty in carrying it out. People with learning disabilities are often in this situation since they may need different ways of communicating which do require all the people around them to learn their language. e.g. sign language.

A lack of effective communication leads to frustration. Frustration leads to withdrawal or anger and aggression expressed against self or others. This is seen as 'challenging behaviour'. Challenging behaviour results in exclusion from school, from college, from employment, from all social activities.

There is no quick fix for dealing with communication difficulties. Each individual has a unique set of abilities, experience and opportunities. Assessment is vital in ensuring that the most effective means of communication is developed with each individual across all environments. Speech and Language Therapists ( SLTs) are key professionals providing communication assessment and recommendations for intervention.

## **Speech and Language Therapy**

Working with people who have learning disabilities has developed as a speciality in the SLT profession over the last 25 years. There has been particular development in the last 10 years as people have moved from segregated to more community-based services where the consequent demands on their ability to communicate have increased dramatically. However, this is still a relatively 'young' branch of the profession and, although there is a great deal of creative work going on all over the UK, there is a lack of hard evidence through research about the most effective ways of working. The Professional body for SLTs is the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT). The RCSLT is currently collecting all available research and evidence of good practice (by consensus) to inform professional guidelines for this speciality due to be

published shortly. This should result in more consistent SLT approaches across the UK.(RCSLT Website)

SLTs specialising in learning disabilities are employed by the NHS although they work in Education and Social Services settings. They are very unevenly distributed across the UK and in any one county they may be employed by several Trusts. There is also a national shortage of SLTs with many vacant posts unfilled. SLTs working in mainstream schools where children with learning disabilities are now being admitted under the policy of inclusion may not be specialists in this field and may not be trained in the use of alternative/augmentative communication (e.g. the use of Total Communication approaches or communication aids). This can cause difficulties in ensuring a consistent and coherent approach across transitions from one service to another. Communication policies should seek to overcome these difficulties.

## **Training**

People make assumptions about communication based on their own experience e.g. If someone speaks they must understand. If someone carries out an instruction, they must have understood the words. If someone can say 2 words s/he must be able to say all words. If someone does not speak, s/he cannot understand.

Training in the understanding of how communication works and what happens when it doesn't, is essential for everyone who lives, works or comes into contact with people who have learning and communication disabilities. Communication training is often delivered locally by SLTs. Training is a high priority but, without assessment and ongoing individual and environmental support is less effective in creating necessary changes in attitudes and practice. The role of Management at all levels is vital in supporting consistent and coherent approaches to communication difficulties and developing shared training policies as a priority.

## **Tools for Communication**

There are many ways by which human beings pass messages to and fro. A high percentage of communication is non-verbal. Our society's high valuing of and dependency on spoken and written language has led to an undervaluing and lack of recognition of other ways of communicating. Objects, pictures, signs and symbols are all powerful ways of conveying meaning. BSL (British sign language) is long established as a language used by deaf people. Braille enables blind people to read. Technology provides ever more effective and subtle ways of accessing graphics of all kinds and providing communication aids. We all use pictures to help us understand when words fail e.g. The international common language of Road Signs enables us to drive safely in foreign countries.

People with learning disabilities do not have one recognised set of language tools' and are dependent on the professionals (usually SLTs) to provide them with an individually 'tailored' communication plan. The 'tools' chosen by the professional may, in turn, depend on the particular training s/he has received. e.g. from organisations such as Makaton, Signalong, (signing and symbols use) and Widgit Software (symbols for writing).

People with more severe and complex needs may not be able to use any of the recognised means of communicating and will be dependent on others to interpret their needs and choices through observing and responding to their communicative behaviour. In recent years approaches such as Phoebe Caldwell's learning through play, Individualised Sensory Environments, Intensive Interaction (Nind and Hewett), as well as the technological development of Multi-sensory rooms have increased our knowledge and awareness of non verbal behaviour so that we can respond to and encourage individuals with respect at whatever stage they have reached in their communication development.

#### Key Government Papers

Department of Health 2001 Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century

#### References

The Mental Health Foundation (2001) Learning Disabilities: The Fundamental Facts (research report bringing together key facts and figures on prevalence, needs & service provision, including costs.

Bunning K (1997) 'The importance of communication partnerships: A study to investigate the communicative exchanges between staff' British Journal of Learning Disabilities

There is more information and links to relevant websites on [www.bild.org.uk](http://www.bild.org.uk)

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