

PBS Helpline Resources

Effective Communication

There is a really strong link between communication difficulties and behaviours that might be risky or cause problems. In fact, the greater the communication difficulty, the greater the likelihood that the person will show behaviours of concern. There are a couple of main reasons for this.

Understanding – the ability to understand what they hear and see

- If people don't understand what we're asking them to do, we may think they've understood, so when they don't do what they're asked we assume they're being difficult.
- If the person doesn't understand what's happening they may be frightened, anxious or confused, which can lead to behaviours of concern.
- Some people can find it hard to make transitions, and this can be even harder if they don't know what's happening.

Communication and visual aids have to be at the right level (for example, a symbol timetable is only helpful if the person understands symbols).

Understanding is a hidden disability. We tend to over-estimate what people can understand, and then we may use sentences that are too long and complicated. How can we check the person has understood?

Expressing – the ability to say what they want/feel/think

- People might have words, but the more anxious they are, the harder it is to make themselves understood (as it is for all of us)
- If people don't have words, then they have to find other ways of letting us know what they want.
- If someone is not able to get their needs met, they can either become frustrated, possibly leading to anger and behaviours of concern, or they may give up and become passive and withdrawn.

We all need reassurance, support and attention; imagine if you couldn't get the attention of the person you wanted to speak to? Some people can find it really hard to get someone's attention, and this can come out as behaviour.

So it's really important that we think about

- Are we supporting communication at the right level?
- Have we made every effort to give the person the tools and resources to tell us what they need?
- If the communication is complex, do we need to refer to a speech and language therapist for some extra help?

The more someone is able to meet their needs through communicating, the less they will need to rely on behaviours of concern. This is about helping to plan and have structure in a week. It's important because it helps us to know what we're doing, mentally prepare ourselves, manage transitions and cope with things that we might not like so much.

We might have a calendar, or a diary. These are not always accessible for people we support for various reasons, so we might need to think about other ways to structure the week.