

Speech and Language Therapy

Communication Impairments

There are three main difficulties with communication which are described within this leaflet.

It is important to remember that communication problems don't affect intelligence. Some people may simply have difficulties with the process of using, or understanding speech and/or language.

Aphasia

Aphasia is when someone has difficulty communicating following damage to the speech and language area of the brain. Aphasia in itself does not affect intelligence and will affect each person differently, ranging from mild to severe. A Speech and Language Therapist will assess the severity of aphasia and identify any appropriate therapy. If English isn't someone's first language, this can be done with an interpreter.

The main areas affected are:

- **Understanding:** someone may not understand everything that is said to them. A lot can be guessed through body language and gesture because words have lost their meaning. In the mildest form, group conversations and complex questions can be difficult to follow. At its most severe, aphasia may effect understanding of everyday words making it difficult to make sense of even single words or a simple sentence.
- **Talking:** someone may find it difficult finding the right words, or may get words mixed up, e.g. saying 'knife' instead of 'fork'. Sometimes people may mix up sounds, e.g. 'topato' instead of 'potato'. Some people are unable to speak at all, while others find putting sentences together more difficult.



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- **Reading:** someone may no longer be able to read written words, whereas others may have difficulty with longer paragraphs. If someone can read aloud, this does not necessarily mean they have understood what they have read.
- **Writing:** thinking of how to write or spell can be difficult. Some people may be unable to write their name, whereas others may be slower at writing long sentences. Muscle weakness in the hand or arm can also make this more difficult.

Things to help:

- Use short, simple sentences. Allow plenty of time for a response;
- Ask questions that require a yes/no answer;
- Use and encourage all useful means of communication, e.g. gesture, writing, drawing, pictures, etc.

Dysarthria

Dysarthria is a weakness to the muscles responsible for speech. It can be caused by a variety of medical conditions. Speech can be slow, slurred and difficult to understand. Someone may run out of breath or may speak very quietly. Speech may get worse when the person is tired. The person's understanding will not be affected.

Things to help:

- Slow speech down and pause regularly;
- Try not to say too much at once. Keep sentences short and simple;
- Sit or stand upright to help your breathing;
- Try to reduce background noise when talking;
- Make sure dentures are in place and are fitting properly;
- Exaggerating your lips and tongue movements may help people understand you.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia affects the planning of what to do and how to do it. People with dyspraxia may find it difficult to programme and sequence their movements for speech. Someone may be unable to formulate any clear words or make repetitive sounds. There is no muscle weakness. Speech may sound slow, disjointed and difficult to understand. The person's understanding will not be affected.

Things to help:

- Ask questions that require a yes or no answer;
- Don't rush, allow plenty of time;
- Try not to interrupt someone then they are trying to speak;
- Don't pretend to understand someone. It's best to repeat back to the speaker to confirm what they've said;
- Encourage alternative means of communication, e.g. writing, drawing;
- Do not exclude the person from the conversation. Encourage participation.

These three difficulties often coexist. Each person will present differently.

Will it get better?

Most difficulties do improve but it is difficult to know how long it will take. Even if communication skills don't fully recover, there are many ways to communicate that do not rely on speaking.

Total Communication Approach

Total communication uses a variety of methods such as gesture, sign, drawing, facial expression and pictures. It is based on the idea that any means of communication is valuable as long as it is helpful.

Encouraging total communication doesn't reduce progress towards goals or improving other means of communication—in fact it can help develop communication again, as well as reducing frustration and giving someone a successful means to express themselves.

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Therapy

A Speech and Language Therapist will help to improve difficulties as much as possible. Other methods of communication can be explored such as gestures, pictures or electronic devices, etc.

Remember, therapy isn't just about time spent with a therapist— doing your own practice can be important too!

Further Information

If you have any other questions or would like further information, please contact the Speech and Language Therapy team on 024 7696 5709.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 5709 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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