

Communication skills in social care

Communication is all about making contact with others and being understood. This short guide will give you tips on how to communicate with the people you work with. It includes specific help when communicating with people with autism, dementia and hearing impairments.

Good communication skills will help you:

- develop working relationships
- provide clear information.
- give and receive information about the care and support you are providing
- provide emotional support to the people you work with
- carry out an assessment of an individual's care needs

As a social care worker you will use different types of verbal and non-verbal communication in your day to day work.

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1. What communication skills do you need?

Social care workers need to:

- know how to keep a conversation going
- use listening skills to check understanding
- organise a conversation
- use non-verbal communication
- ask questions
- understand cultural differences and how they might impact communication
- understand how disability and physical and mental conditions might impact communication.

2. How do we communicate effectively?

Here are our top tips to help you communicate effectively with the people you support. It includes guidance about verbal and non-verbal communication.

Verbal communication

Verbal communication is the use of words and sounds to share information with others.

Think about what you're saying

- First impressions count – saying hello and goodbye are an important way of gaining someone's trust before a conversation.
- Give accurate information – when someone is given inaccurate information or a poor explanation, it can often be confusing and hinder understanding. Ensure you give the person you are supporting all the information they need. If you don't have this, find out the answer and come back to them as soon as possible.
- Use open questions – they give people the chance to talk rather than give one word answers. For example you could ask 'How are you?' rather than 'are you ok?'
- Repeating and rephrasing - these are strategies that can help some people to understand what is being said to them.
- Avoid jargon, slang and acronyms – these will only make sense to people with specialist knowledge. A person without this knowledge won't understand what you mean.

Tone and pace

- Speak clearly and slowly – this will help people to understand what you're saying. Mumbling and talking too quickly can lead to misunderstandings. Speaking a little more slowly can help a person with a hearing or visual impairment, a learning disability or who is confused.
- Allow time for the person to respond. This can mean allowing silences while the person thinks and works out how to reply.

Clarify messages

It is important to show you understand what the other person is saying. You could summarise what they are saying to check your understanding. For example 'so just to check, you meant that ...'

Be an active listener

Active listening involves paying attention to what the other person is saying. To acknowledge that you are engaged in the conversation you can nod your head, make 'mmm' sounds and use encouraging words such as 'yes' and 'I see'.

Showing empathy when communicating

Empathy lets a person know that you understand how they feel and think. You can show this by using the same techniques as active listening.

Non-verbal communication

There are lots of ways we communicate that aren't verbal. We use our eyes, facial expression, hand and arm gestures and the way we sit and stand to communicate.

Eye contact

Eyes and eye contact can indicate feelings.

- Short or broken eye contact can express nervousness, shyness or mistrust.
- Long unbroken eye contact can express interest. If you are listening to someone, this can show you are paying attention to what they're saying.
- Making eye contact can be a way of building a connection with someone.

Facial expressions

Movements of the face can indicate how a person is feeling and allow you to express how you feel when communicating with someone.

- Smiling can mean someone is happy, feels comfortable in the situation or is excited.
- Frowning can mean someone is unhappy.
- A tense facial expression can mean someone is sad.
- Wide eyes can mean someone is excited or interested.
- Looking away can mean someone is bored or uninterested.
- A scrunched up head and nose and pursed lips could mean someone is confused.

Posture

The way we sit and stand can express feelings.

- Crossed arms could mean someone is bored, uninterested or angry.
- Leaning forward can mean someone is interested and involved.

Proximity

Proximity involves the physical closeness between people when communicating.

- Being physically close to someone may be reassuring and may be seen as accepting the person.
- Getting too close might make the person feel uncomfortable and threatened.
- Being too far away could indicate someone may feel isolated or uncomfortable.
- People need less personal space when they have a close, trusting relationship.
- Judge how the other person reacts – if they appear agitated, you may be too close.

- Standing at a slight angle can show you are relaxed and friendly.
- When communicating, you should move your proximity in response to the other person's body language. You could also ask questions such as 'Do you mind if I sit here?'

Environment

The environment can affect how well people communicate.

- Noise – this can affect someone's ability to listen and concentrate. To improve communication you could sound proof rooms, reduce background noise or create quiet areas specifically for talking.
- Lighting – poor lighting can mean you can't see non-verbal communication features such as eye contact or body language. When communicating with someone, make sure you are facing the light so the other person can see your face, particularly your mouth.
- Privacy – a lack of privacy may cause discomfort and discourage people from expressing their true feelings. Try to avoid sensitive conversations in groups and be subtle when talking about something that might cause embarrassment.

Other forms of communication

There are other ways we communicate.

Objects of reference

Objects of reference could be items such as pictures, toys, clothes and food. They may have a special meaning to someone. They could be used to reinforce a message you are trying to communicate, or to set the environment before communicating, for example a particular toy or photo may be comforting to an individual and could be used as an opening when beginning a conversation.

Technological aids

- Hearing aids - can help people hear every day sounds through a small device worn in the ear. They can be provided by the NHS or privately.
- Video phones and SKYPE - can be used so people can see each other when communicating.
- SMS text and email – allow you to send electronic messages between two devices such as a phone or computer.
- Hearing loop - is a special sound system for use by people with hearing aids. It may be useful at events or social gatherings with speakers.

Human aids

There are different people who can support communication.

- Interpreters
- Translators
- Signers

Braille

Braille is a system of raised dots that can be read with the fingers by people who are blind or who have low vision.

Images and pictures

Images and pictures can be used to help people learn, attract their attention and explain things. We process images at a much faster rate than words and they are often easier to understand.

You could use images and pictures in a wide range of social care settings.

- Images and pictures are a great way of socially interacting with someone you are supporting.
- There are widely recognised health and safety images that can warn people of potential risks.

3. Overcoming barriers to communication

There are also lots of different ways of overcoming barriers to communication for people with different health conditions.

This section will give you some tips for communicating specifically with people with:

- [dementia](#)
- [autism](#)
- [hearing impairments](#)

Communicating with someone with dementia

- Speak at a slightly slower pace, allowing plenty of time to allow the person to process what you've said and respond.
- Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice as this may cause distress.
- Don't talk as if the person isn't there or like a child. Show respect and patience and always involve them in the communication.
- Using humour can sometimes ease a situation – for example if someone gets the wrong end of the stick or makes a mistake.
- Avoid asking direct questions. Someone with dementia could become frustrated if they can't find the answer.
- Ask questions one at a time.
- Don't ask complicated questions. Whilst choice is important, too many options can be confusing.
- If they don't understand, use objects, images or hand movements to help explain.
- Someone with dementia might get confused between what has and hasn't happened, for example eating lunch or having a shower. Use your judgement to respond.

- If they say something incorrect, find a way of changing the conversation or go with what they are saying rather than challenging them.

Find more information

We have lots of resources to help you if you work with people with dementia.

Visit www.skillsforcare.org.uk/dementia

How to identify dementia

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/IDdementia

This leaflet explains what to look out for people that could mean they have dementia and what you need to do to help them.

The common core principles for dementia

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/CCPdementia

These principles explain how to care for and improve the experience for people living with dementia.

You can also find more information from other organisations:

Alzheimer's Society

www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=130

Communicating with someone with autism

People with autism have very varied ways of communicating. Until you know an individual's own way of communicating here are some general tips to keep in mind.

- People with autism may find it difficult to read social cues and body language. Use clear language and don't show frustration if you feel someone should know something already, or if they ask questions which seem repetitive.
- People with autism might take language very literally so try to use language precisely; for example saying "wash your hands in the sink" not "wash your hands in the toilet".
- People with autism might miss non-verbal cues so ensure your communication is as clear as possible. For example when you are leaving actually say 'I need to pack up ready to leave' rather than starting to pack up.
- Don't assume that someone with autism is ignoring you if they don't make eye contact. Some people can find this uncomfortable or unnecessary – some people learn to make eye contact to fit in but might be able to listen to you better if they don't.
- If you need to ask the adult a question, try to make the question as specific as possible. Broad, generalised, and vague questions are hard for autistic people to answer and can trigger anxiety.
- People with autism can be more or less sensitive than usual to senses like smells, noises, light or temperature. Be aware that this may interfere with their concentration and communication.
- Some people with autism have routines that are very important to them and disrupting their routines will make it harder to communicate with you.
- Many people with autism experience anxiety which they may hide or not know how to communicate – when anxious a person may not be able to hear what you are saying so keep communications simple and to the point.
- Sharing interests can be a good stimulant for conversation. Find something you have in common or be prepared to really listen to the person's special interests – that way you will learn more about what matters to them and show them you care.

Find more information

We have lots of information to help you if you work with people with autism.

Visit www.skillsforcare.org.uk/autism

Autism awareness learning resources

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/autismlearning

This document lists training materials that have been developed by a range of organisations.

You can also find more information from other organisations:

National Autistic Society

www.autism.org.uk/about/communication.aspx

Oxford healthtalk online autism resources

www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/autism

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists 5 good communication standards

www.rcslt.org/news/docs/good_comm_standards

Communicating with someone with a hearing impairment

- Body position is important. Make sure you are facing the person and they can see your mouth.
- Speak clearly, slowly and distinctly – do not shout as this might distort communication and make it harder to lip read
- Ensure you have the person's attention before you start talking. You could this be saying their name or tapping their arm.
- Avoid long, complex sentences. Keep them short and clear.
- Try to minimise background noise as this may interfere with hearing aids.

There are aids you could use to communicate with people with a hearing impairments.

- Hearing aids – Hearing aids can support you to hear everyday sounds such as the doorbell or TV, and other people talking. You can find out more about hearing aids at <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/hearing-problems/Pages/hearing-aids.aspx>

- Visual aids – visual aids can support communication and make things easier to understand.

They can be used in different ways to support people. You could:

- use white boards to communicate with someone with a hearing impairment
 - use images of food instead of a written menu
 - make a calendar with pictures for different tasks such as a doctor's appointment or a day trip out
 - make a flip book with common phrases, emotions or objects on as a pocket reference for people with a hearing impairment.
- Sign language – sign language is a visual means of communicating using gestures, facial expression and body language. You can find out more at <http://www.british-sign.co.uk/>
 - Hearing loop system – a hearing loop is a sound system for people with hearing impairments. A microphone and amplifier are connected by a loop cable to aid hearing. You can find out more at <http://www.ageukhearingaids.co.uk/hearing-aid-news/what-hearing-loop-system>