

Communicating with People with Complex Communication Needs

There is nothing more important than being able to communicate with those around you.

Many people with physical disabilities have trouble speaking. This is due to problems with the muscles used for speaking. A person with complex communication needs (CCN) is often not able to communicate through speech or writing. Many learn to communicate in other ways, including gestures, facial expressions, limited speech and the use of low or high-tech devices. Many have profiles or dictionaries containing information about how they communicate.

It is essential that health professionals and support workers get to know the communication style of the person they are supporting.

Tips for communicating with people with CCN include:

- Allow enough time to communicate – it is important to explain the amount of time you have, particularly for health professional in a hospital who have many other appointments
- Communicate with the person with CCN, not just with caregivers
- Reduce background noise

- Be welcoming and friendly
- Treat everyone with dignity and respect – having CCN does not equate to an intellectual disability
- Talk to the person as an adult. Speak in a normal tone of voice and at a normal pace and volume, unless they need you speak more slowly and louder e.g. hearing impairment
- Ask “What is the best way to communicate with you?” Read communication profiles
- Ask if it is OK to guess or finish their sentences if time is limited – this must never be presumed
- If an individual has a communication device encouraged them to use it. Watch how they use it and if you can, try to use it too
- Be patient. Allow extra time for the person to answer. Silence is OK
- Listen and look carefully. Eye contact and gestures are often helpful when communicating with people with CCN
- Give specific choices rather than open-ended questions



- Do not pretend to understand. Let the person know when you do not understand them. Ask them to repeat or say it differently
- Repeat your comment or question, if you feel they have not understood you
- Use simple language
- Speak in short sentences. Communicate one idea at a time

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