

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## Communication in Group Living: Considerations, Inclusion, and Activities

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Have you ever thought about communication? I mean really thought about it. The impact it has on those around you, the power it gives, and, without it, what is taken away?

Besides family and close friends, direct support professionals (DSPs) are the most important people in the lives of the people they support. This is especially true for individuals that reside in group homes. From the moment the residents wake up, until the end of the day when they go to sleep, the group home staff support the individuals with their daily needs. What can sometimes be overlooked is an individual's communication needs. The ability to communicate wants and needs, as well as being able to engage socially are just as important as the typical needs that DSPs provide. In this article, we want to address the considerations that DSPs need to take when communicating with the people that they support. How to ensure inclusion with all levels of communicators, and some activities that promote communication that can easily be integrated into daily living.

### What types of questions are understood? What is their vocabulary knowledge?

A Speech Language Pathology assessment contains pertinent information about the client's ability to understand and express information. Knowing the receptive and expressive language abilities of the individuals that are being supported is crucial. Receptive language is our ability to understand and process what is being said to us or what we read; expressive language is the ability to speak and write. Much of the information identified in an assessment report relating to receptive language may not easily be observed by basic interactions. Staff may often recognize areas of concern regarding a client's communication abilities but, without training, are unable to identify exactly what the issue may be or how to provide strategies to support the individual.

The Speech Language Assessment determines and outlines any communication disorders, speech language disorders, swallowing disorders, or feeding disorders. Information is gathered from different sources to fully grasp the individual's speech needs, and the best course of treatment. Different sources can include family members, friends, teachers, community involvement, and support staff. A Speech-Language Pathology Assessment may be obtained by contacting your local provider and making the request.

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## **We have a Speech Language Pathology Assessment, now what?**

A speech assessment can contain a lot of information about the individual and their communication abilities. Often when the word “assessment” is used, it can be a deterrent for some staff to read the document. Comments such as, “I won’t understand the language,” “It’ll be way over my head,” “There’s so much information,” and “It’s so long” are often heard. An excellent way to simplify the information from the document, make it more “user friendly” and perhaps less “intimidating” for staff, is to create a Communication Profile. This is a document that takes the most pertinent information from the assessment and organizes it into a working document for staff. It becomes a shortened document with headings such as ‘expressive language abilities,’ ‘receptive language abilities,’ ‘how to set up the environment for communication,’ and ‘strategies to support the person’s understanding.’ Creating the document with headings, perhaps in a chart form, can allow the document to be less overwhelming and intimidating for some, resulting in staff being more willing to read the information. The Communication Profile can be a very useful document for new communication partners, employment providers, as well as new or call-in staff. This is a document that can be created jointly with the Speech-Language Pathologist and/or the Communicative Disorders Assistant.

## **Being aware of my own language can support my client’s communication needs**

Stepping back and reflecting on our own language can be a great strategy for helping the individuals we support learn and further develop their communication abilities. Ask yourself: Do I communicate at a level the individual can comprehend yet grow with? Are my questions presented at a level that they can comprehend and respond to? Am I allowing enough time for the client to process the question, form a response, and respond? Think about the tone of voice, facial expressions, volume, and rate of speech. Being aware of the information outlined in the Communication Profile, while adjusting your own language to meet the client’s needs and receptive level is crucial for functional communication.

## **Setting up the environment for communication**

Let’s face it. Group homes are busy and sometimes downright chaotic! Staff and clients are constantly in and out of the home, chores are constantly being completed, not to mention the T.V. and/or radio that is often on in the background. These hectic environments are often not conducive to communication. Therefore, it’s up to the DSPs to create an environment that best supports the individual’s needs. This could consist of finding a quiet location such as a bedroom, readjust your positioning, so that your client’s back is to the distraction, as well as turning down the noisy electronics.

When communicating in a busy space within the home, always keep the client’s privacy in mind. Is the individual willing to share information in front of their housemates and other staff, or would they like to speak privately? Although we may not feel the information needs to be kept private, they might feel it does. By simply asking if they would like to speak privately and providing them with some options of where they would like to go to chat, we are meeting their need of increasing their autonomy.

Not only is finding a quiet environment important, but many of the people we support would be happy to have some one-on-one time. I think most of us would agree it is the optimal way to communicate. Many of us rely on our facial expressions and other forms of body language to fully receive the message, this is especially true for the people we support. So much non-verbal communication is lost from both the client’s perspective, as well as the staff’s.

Let's take a minute to discuss non-verbal communication. It is completely understandable and expected that not all conversations throughout the day can be within the perfect quiet environment, as group home support staff are continuously busy, and many conversations need to happen without preparation. The point we want to stress is, whenever possible, or when discussing serious matters, or asking the individual to make decisions, take the extra time to set up the environment. It can make all the difference for the individual to comprehend the conversation and can contribute the autonomy and the understanding of privacy within their lives.

### **Providing questions and visuals to support communication**

There are three forms of questions that we use. The simplest being yes/no questions, choice questions, and open-ended questions. Knowing what type of question the individual can comprehend and respond to is important information for everyone to be aware of. When we don't adjust our language to suit the needs of the individual, it can result in everyone becoming frustrated. The use of pictures or objects may be necessary for some individuals to comprehend the question and provide a response. Being aware of how many questions you ask the individual is important, this goes along with being aware of your own communication. It is called a conversation, not twenty questions, which brings us to moving past questions to further enhance communication opportunities.

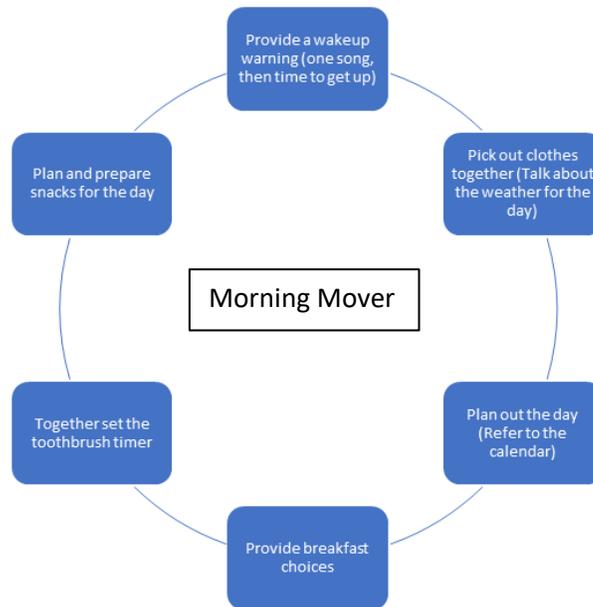
### **Find communication opportunities in the things you already do**

Within daily routines and expectations, support staff are required to wear many hats in providing support: chauffer, cook, cleaner, etc. Within these activities, there are many communication opportunities that, with some planning, can be expanded upon to create communication-enriched opportunities. As a support staff team, completing the Communication Opportunities Wheel can be an excellent tool to come up with ideas on how to expand communication within the daily tasks and activities that are already being done.

The many "hats" that DSPs wear on a daily basis:



An everyday task broken down into communication enriched activities:



### **Making the most of upcoming experiences & special events**

Getting out of the group home and experiencing outings and special events can be so exciting. Especially after being in lockdown due to Covid for so long. For many of the people we support, they often can't easily anticipate what to expect. In some cases, this can create a reluctance to want to participate the closer they get to the day of the event. With a little preparation, it can make all the difference in the client's experience.

**PLAN**-----Spend some time planning for the event. Look at pictures, watch YouTube clips to familiarize the individual with what to expect. Create a schedule using "First, then" for the events that will be taking place. Introduce any new vocabulary related to the event that the individual may not be familiar with.

**DO**-----When on the outing, point out the things you have been talking about. Model the vocabulary that goes along with the experience while taking photographs and collecting memory objects (souvenirs) of the event.

**SHARE**-----After the outing, rehearse retelling the event. Providing practice sharing the event can help the individual organize their thoughts and increase their level of confidence telling others about their experience. Photos, brochures, and souvenirs can be great conversation starters and can help support the individual's communication when sharing about their outing. Finally, ensure that communication opportunities are provided with different people to allow the individual to share their story.

### **Conclusion**

Communication is a basic human right; it is just as important as access to food or medication. Understanding how those we support communicate day to day will enhance their overall life, promote self-advocacy, and allow them to be an active participant within their lives, but they need your help. Communication comes in many forms, and it is the job of the DSPs to meet the client where they are at and help them grow. Understanding their communication needs, as well as your communication skills and style will be a benefit to everyone.

## Reference

The North Community Network of Specialized Care & Development Support Services: Muskoka-Parry Sound. (2011). *The Cooperative Communication Course: Instructor's Manual* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

## About the authors

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