





Let's talk about communication

# Silent plea

I speak to you a silent plea,
Look at my eyes why can't you see?
You speak with words I show you a sign,
I speak your language why can't you speak mine?

I need to talk show what I need,
My eyes are begging please take heed,
I have a book to show you my choice,
I have the thoughts you have the voice,

For me to talk takes not one but two,
A sign from me a word from you,
Can't you see I can't speak for myself?
How would you feel with your voice on a shelf?

It's not easy to learn how I speak,
It might take a day or even a week,
You'd be amazed at what we could do
Working together me and you.

Shirley Bonner Jones



#### Successful communication

Communication is an essential part of life; something most of us take for granted. Many people with learning disabilities however find it difficult to express themselves or to understand the communication of others, whether it is conventional speech or written language, or less formal communication through facial expression and body language. In a similar way, many of us also find their communication a challenge - to

We need to keep an open mind and consider successful communication might involve us being more proactive 'communication partners'.

understand what the individual might be trying to 'say' and to know how to respond in the most meaningful way. So good person-centred communication is essential; it's just a matter of being more creative! We need to keep an open mind and consider successful communication might involve us being more proactive 'communication partners'.

We might need to adapt what we do to ensure our communication is meaningful and consistent, for example, developing cues and structure into daily routines, or by including the use of sign language, objects, pictures or photos to clarify meaning.

# Communicating without speech

People who don't use speech can and do communicate, but often they have a more individual or unique style of communication. Challenging behaviour can also be a form of communication. If an individual's behaviour has been known to challenge those around them, we start from the belief that this is simply how the person has learned to communicate that things are not right. It is not an indivisible part of his or her personality. Solutions lie in finding new ways to understand and respond to the person, often using positive behaviour support approaches and importantly supporting their attempts to communicate more effectively.

Input and advice from speech and language therapists (SLT) are central to ensuring people have the right communication system and support. Their specialist expertise helps match the right approach to a person's strengths, needs and preferred ways of communicating naturally – and importantly, they consider approaches in the longer term.

By the time individuals come to be supported by Dimensions, most will have well established ways of communicating with those around them. It's likely they are most successful when communicating with those who know them well – families, keyworkers or supporters from their previous familiar settings. In general, we aim to keep going with what's working and build on that. It is vital that everyone supporting the person becomes skilled in the use of their personal system and commits to using it all the time.

## How to use this guide

This guide does not replace person-centred approaches to communication nor is it a communication assessment. How could it? But if you are looking for an introduction to some of the varied communication tools that are available, there may be something here to help you. Perhaps you are just starting out on your journey caring for and supporting someone with a learning disability and need to know how to get started. Perhaps you're looking for an app to support communication. Hopefully you'll find inspiration in some of the information, ideas and stories we've shared here.

The listing isn't exhaustive; we learn more about what works every day and new communications aids are constantly being developed, particularly online and notably at present in the field of eyegaze technology. Treat this guide as a start point, not an encyclopaedia. Remember too, to consider the practical aspects of communication aids – are they easy (and cheap) to acquire and maintain, can you get training and support to use them, are they portable and will they be accessible everywhere – in the swimming pool, on the bus? This is one of many reasons why it is really important to continue to value and support a person's natural ways of communicating alongside any system or aid. If they can use their voice or gestures for some communication, their 'aid' will always be with them!



# Contents:

Introduction	3
Some communication essentials	6
Communications jargon	8
Why communication is so very important: Karen's story	9
Objects	10
Pictures	12
Signs	14
Voice output	16
Rachel learns to communicate without speech	17
Apps	18



# Some communication essentials

#### Communication basics

For communication to be successful there are some basics to consider before we even start to think about communication systems and aids. These basics may seem too obvious to even mention, but in most cases the success or not of communication will be dependent on one or more of these factors.

First, we need to view everyone as a communicator. This positive view means we are actively looking at every response as an attempt to communicate; whether actions are intentional or not, they have the potential to become meaningful communication.

Successful communication needs these essential ingredients:

- someone to communicate with
- something to communicate about
- a means of communicating.

Having someone to communicate with or a 'communication partner' is a vital part of the two-way communication process. Without someone to listen and respond to our attempts to communicate, we would simply stop trying. This may well be the experience of many people with learning disabilities, particularly when they don't use the spoken word. It is essential that the communication partner takes an active role in listening, acknowledging and responding – in the way that is most meaningful to that person.

A communication partner can make 'conversations' meaningful, for example, by facilitating turn taking. Every response is seen as their 'turn', whether it be a smile, a vocalisation, a turn of the head or a deep sigh. The communication partner acknowledges this and then 'replies' helping the conversation to continue, just as if it were speech. With lots of regular repetitions the person begins to learn their actions are valued, they can make things happen and importantly, that communication can be fun!

Having something to communicate (about) is central to motivating anyone to want to communicate. It is the first step to gaining a sense of control in life – whether that be showing likes and dislikes, making choices or directing others, or more complex aims such as reminiscing or discussing the day's news.

It is crucial that everyone has a means of communicating. People with disabilities may have developed unique ways of communicating. It can be a huge challenge to recognise this and then interpret what that communication means. There is no real shortcut to getting to know someone well enough to develop this important relationship, but sharing with families and others who know them well will offer some valuable insights.

A consistent approach to a person's attempts to communicate can help establish successful communication skills. And everyone – whether or not they have a learning disability – will prefer to practice new skills in familiar places and with familiar people. Improvements in communication skills don't happen by accident – they are the fruit of hard work, carefully considered.

# Keep it simple

Everyone likes clear, simple language, but 'simple' means different things to different people. Here's a few things to think about if you suspect your words might be causing misunderstandings:

- use the person's name so they know you're talking to them
- try to give one bit of information at a time
- allow the person processing time
- minimise background distractions
- make sure the thing you say first, happens first.
   'Let's go to the garden centre and then to the café' is easier to understand than 'let's go to the café after we've been to the garden centre.'
- avoid negatives. Don't, can't, won't etc are relatively complex ideas
- avoid complex questions. Remember that 'what' can often replace other question words e.g. 'what person' is simpler than 'who'.

Ironically, communications aids have their own jargon which doesn't always make it easy to understand them! Here are a few terms that you might come across:

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems.	Augmentative Communication systems are those that are used alongside speech to help others understand and communicate more effectively. Sometimes these additional means of communicating are used to support a person to develop confidence in their communication approaches. These include low tech systems like Makaton, Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) and Objects of Reference.
Alternative Communication systems	These can be used instead of speech (but may also be used alongside speech). These approaches include Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA) and British Sign Language (BSL).
Communication Passports (or dictionaries)	This is one term for a range of person-centred thinking tools that collate information about a person – their character, interests, likes and dislikes, views and preferences. They should also describe the most effective means of communication with the person.

Whatever the jargon, remember that communication is a two-way process. So the systems in this guide are designed to help people:

- communicate their wants and needs to others
- understand what other people are communicating



# Why communication is so very important: Karen's story

Karen\* used to be cared for lovingly by her family until a crisis led to her entering an assessment and treatment unit (ATU). She is deaf and has a learning disability so she was left feeling isolated.

In the ATU she was subjected to seclusion, medication and restraint. She had no interpreter and no way of communicating her wants or needs.

Her brother remembers back to how the family felt at the time – that it was a necessary step because of her emotional state, "It became a downward spiral in terms of her aggressions."- "she needed that control."



Karen was referred to Dimensions by her local Transforming Care team. Working closely with people around her, we were able to move her into supported living with staff trained specially to meet her needs.

Fast forward two years, and by using person-centred support and Positive Behaviour Support techniques together with staff who can sign with her, Karen is herself again – independent, able to cook, clean and go shopping for herself and even go on holiday for the first time ever without her family.

"I moved from the hospital to Smug Oak. I'm now very happy here with my flat and also with the staff [Karen signs]".

Now Karen is happy, more independent and has even inspired her brother, Michael, to join Dimensions as a support worker!

\*picture has been changed to protect privacy.



Objects of Reference (OOR) are objects which have special meanings assigned to them. OOR were initially used with blind people and those with dual sensory impairment. They are now also used with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

#### So for example,

- cup = having a cup of tea
- trainers = going for a walk
- towel = bath
- swimsuit / swimming trunks = going to pool
- knife and fork = dinner
- book = college.

These are only examples and the objects listed here do not necessarily have to refer to the activities mentioned.

An Object of Reference is an accessible form of communication with people who have a complex learning need because it:

- provides information through touch
- is easier than a picture for some people to interpret
- is a concrete object linked to a symbolic word
- remains in place, giving time to process.

## There are four stages in teaching someone to use OOR:

- 1. how to communicate: to learn to make a request by exchanging an object with a person
- 2. objects have meaning: to learn a small number of objects have different meanings
- 3. discrimination: to make an intentional choice between two or more objects
- 4. distance: to use a range of objects, kept in a specific container, to make a spontaneous request.

#### OOR can be used to:

- support receptive language: an object of reference is presented just before the associated activity to give extra tactile and/or visual information on what is about to happen
- support memory: having a permanent tactile reference can act as a reminder
- communicate expressively: objects of reference that are well known to the individual can be used to make requests / choices.

#### When using OOR always:

- personalise the objects used and their meanings
- label the objects with what they are used to communicate
- keep the objects together in the same place
- try not to choose very large OOR as this makes it more difficult when not in the home
- speak naturally, but after saying the main sentence e.g. "Would you like to go [give the item] swimming?" repeat the main word "swimming", and then the sentence again "Would you like to go swimming?" This may not be suitable for all people that rely on OOR
- try to use as both a way of understanding (you talking) and expression (other person talking) e.g. when Zoran wants to go swimming he may go to the OORs, retrieve some swimming trunks and hand them to you.

Objects of reference are good for people who find other systems difficult to understand, who have dual sensory impairment, and who may find transitions (from one place or activity to another) difficult

The major limitation is that the system is not very transportable.



Many communications are supplemented by, or delivered through, symbols, photographs, photosymbols, line drawings and so on.

By showing a picture, you can support a person to understand what is about to happen – for example, a picture of a car might mean we're going into town. The person can also point to an image to tell you what they want.

Be mindful about which picture you use to represent which word. It needs to be meaningful to the individual. It needs to be consistently applied. It may require additional verbal or written explanation. Established images should be represented in a person's communications passport.

Pictures are often used by and with people who find signing difficult.

#### easy read

Sometimes, symbol-based communication becomes somewhat standardised, with the aim of achieving accessible communications to large groups of people with additional needs. Notwithstanding the extremely variable quality of easy read publications, our experience is that almost everyone either needs support to understand the easy read, or prefers the original text. Few people have just the right ability level to access easy read communications unsupported.

# Sources of pictures

A very wide range of symbols are available. Some of the best known are Photosymbols, Boardmaker, Change Picture Bank and Widgit. Designers can combine and edit symbols to make the meaning more precise.

Many on and offline tools exist to support image based communication. The apps are listed later. Talking Mats, Visual Timetables and PECS are just three of the offline approaches available.

# PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)

PECS is a specific form of communication using symbols. It was first trialled with pre-school American children diagnosed with autism. Since then, PECS has been used with learners of all ages who have various cognitive, physical and communication challenges. Formally, PECS consists of six phases and begins by teaching an individual to give a single picture of a desired item or action to a partner who immediately honours the exchange as a request. The system goes on to teach how to put pictures together in sentences. PECS does not require the use of a certain type of symbol, however simple black and white line drawings (e.g. Makaton symbols) are sometimes best as they are easier to understand and better for generalisation. 3D symbols (actual items under laminate) can also be used.

#### When using picture-based communication:

- make sure that the person can discriminate between different images
- start the teaching process by focusing on motivating things
- use appropriate images based on individual needs, preferences and abilities
- do not rush onto sentences until the person can request the right single thing consistently and well
- use additional images that the person does not currently use when communicating so that they may learn new words by observation
- keep the images in a book and separated by theme e.g. food and drink, activities, the home, places, people etc.
- have a duplicate book for staff if required. Do not use the book that the person we support uses, this is their voice, not yours.
- make sure the person's circle of support is trained and correct poor PECS usage
- remember to use images to communicate to the people you support; too often, images are used for expressive communication only.



### British Sign Language

BSL is a language in its own right, just like English or Polish. BSL is a complex language with its own syntax and grammar just like any other; it has a similar status to other minority languages such as Welsh and Gaelic. About 145,000 people in the UK consider BSL to be their first language. People who use BSL tend not to speak, although some do. BSL does not use the same word order as spoken English e.g. we say "I am going to work" whereas people who use BSL sign "Work I go".

BSL is good for people with significant hearing impairments. However, it is a complex language and may not be suitable for many people with intellectual disabilities.

When using BSL always learn the proper language. Use it properly and don't try and blag it - this often frustrates and confuses BSL users.

There are many ways to learn BSL. You can go on training courses or study from home, for example. A good place to start is here: https://www.british-sign.co.uk/

#### Makaton

Makaton uses signs derived from British Sign Language. Today over 100,000 children and adults use Makaton.

Makaton is good for people who have fairly good motor skills and control, who are sighted (although Makaton can be used with people with visual impairments), who are not profoundly deaf, and who have a good receptive vocabulary (ability to understand others.)

Most people start using Makaton as children then naturally stop using the signs and symbols as they no longer need them. However, some people use Makaton for their whole lives. Makaton supports spoken language and the signs and symbols are used with speech, in spoken word order.

When using Makaton always speak naturally. Sign only the important words. Use the correct signs.

You should sign all of the time even for words the person does not use as they may well learn new words by watching you - just like how we learn new spoken vocabulary.

And remember that signs used by a person with a learning disability may be different or less clear – just like spoken language.

#### You should:

- couple the signs with Makaton symbols throughout the house
- train the person's circle of support and correct people if they make errors with their signing
- use appropriate body language and facial expressions to make the meaning of the signs clearer.

The best way to begin learning Makaton is to attend a workshop. It means that you learn with other people, share your experiences, receive feedback on your signing and symbol work and practice with others. It also gives you the opportunity to meet and build a relationship with a Makaton Tutor, who can help and support you in the future. For more information visit www.makaton.org

# Signalong

Signalong is another signing approach derived from British Sign Language. Newer than Makaton, it is distinguished by its principle of 'one concept, one sign' meaning that there is no need to understand context in order to communicate.

Signalong says it has published the widest range of signs in Britain. As an open access system, it also appears to be increasingly popular with schools compared to more expensive approaches.



Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs) are devices used by individuals who are either unable to speak or whose speech is unintelligible. VOCAs or Speech Generating Devices (SGDs) are devices which enable the user to speak.

The simplest VOCAs store a single pre-recorded message, which is produced in the form of digitised speech when the person using the device presses a button, switch or key.

The most elaborate VOCAs include software that allows users to create and combine words to produce computerised synthetic speech. There are a wide range of VOCAs commercially available.

The most important thing is that they reflect as closely as possible the user's own abilities and that they fulfil the needs of the user. Dedicated communication devices are designed with communication as their primary goal.

They are available with both text-based and symbol-based programmes, and many are wheelchair mountable.

Typically they will store frequently used words or phrases in memory that can be accessed by a two or three key combination e.g. UB = "I need to use the bathroom, please." They typically include a 'Word Prediction Facility' as standard. This is a very useful tool as it significantly reduces the number of keystrokes a user has to make.

Symbol based communication devices are commonly used by individuals whose literacy skills prevent them from accessing a text-based system.

VOCAs are good for people who are unable to speak, or to make themselves understood. But hardware can be expensive and typically requires some technical ability.

Marian's daughter, Rachel, lived in a hospital for 15 years with 25 other people. Rachel doesn't speak. She loves life, she is totally absorbed by the world around her but she doesn't like following rules.

In the hospital everything was regimented. Everyone got up at the same time. Everyone was washed at the same time and everyone went to the day centre at the same time.

Rachel hated being ordered around.

The most demanding people in the hospital received most of the attention and so Rachel only had one-to-one support when Marian saw her. Marian would come to visit several times a week and together they would 'escape' and leave the hospital to go on trips.

When they returned Rachel would be upset and not want her mum to leave. Rachel would shut herself away and only come out of her room when she was made to.

Eventually, after the Winterbourne View scandal, the hospital was closed down and Marian began researching living options for Rachel.

With help from Dimensions, Marian found a bungalow for Rachel which she now owns. In the hospital environment Rachel had significant amounts of challenging behaviour but this has now all but disappeared.

Rachel is supported by permanent staff who she chose and who she has grown very close to. She has an action packed diary full of the activities she enjoys from meals out to swimming and wheelchair cycling.

Now that Rachel can make her own choices and have them respected, she is much happier.

Her staff team have worked with speech and language therapists to develop a detailed communication passport so that they know what Rachel wants even though she can't speak.

When Rachel wants to eat she will stand by the kitchen table and when she wants to wash she will sit on the edge of the bath. This has made a huge difference as Rachel is much less frustrated by people not understanding what she wants. "Now, I know she's safe. I know if anything happens to me she'll be ok" Marian



The iPad and other mobile devices have revolutionised the assistive communication world. Mobile is the most recommended device when an assistive communication device is needed. App stores have numerous assistive communication apps for individuals with learning disabilities. At Dimensions, we like to base our opinions on the evidence, so we have listed apps according to the evidence they offer that they work. However, you should not rule out using non evidence-based apps. Each person's learning disability is unique to them and the best app for that person may not always be the one with the strongest evidence base.

At the time of writing, ios (Apple) apps still dominate the field but Android and other software will catch up.

## Evidence-based apps

#### Proloquo2Go

Proloquo2Go is an award-winning symbol-based communication app that gives a voice to those who cannot speak. Over 175,000 people already use this AAC app as a powerful tool for expressing themselves and increasing their communication skills and language development. Its innovative features lets users, parents, teachers and therapists quickly personalise the app.

ios

Proloquo2Go is an AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) app used by people with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and other diagnoses. It is available in English, Spanish, French, and Dutch for iPad, iPhone, iPod touch and Apple Watch.

## Proloquo4Text

ios

Proloquo4Text™ is a text based communication app that gives a voice to literate children, teens and adults who cannot speak. It is designed to enable easy conversation and full participation in society. It achieves this through a customisable single screen layout with quick access to personal phrases, word and sentence prediction and other effort-saving features. Free voices in 18 languages are included to enable natural-sounding communication.

#### Go Talk Now

Flexible, easy-to-use, yet powerful app for people who have difficulty speaking.

## Partially evidence-based apps

# Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP)

ios

Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP) is a therapeutic approach using motor learning principles and a voice output communication aid to give non-verbal individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities a method to develop independent and spontaneous communication. Individuals using the LAMP approach learn to use words and build sentences to communicate their wants, needs and ideas by pressing buttons on a speech generating device.

Interventions currently in use with individuals with autism tend to focus on the perceived strengths associated with autism such as visual learning and the desire for structure. While LAMP utilises these strengths, it also addresses core deficits affecting language delay such as impaired motor skills, engagement, and auditory and sensory processing to improve spontaneous, generative communication.

#### ICommunicate

iCommunicate for iPad allows you to create pictures, flashcards, storyboards, routines, visual schedules and record custom audio in any language. Aside from being an AAC device iCommunicate also includes task completion and audio visual prompting. iCommunicate comes preloaded with 10,000 SymbolStix pictures. You also have the ability to insert Google images and the story boards are printable. One negative is that this app is for the iPad only.

ios

ios

# Picaa: Interactive and Cooperative Mobile Learning.

Important: The application is in English (as well as in Spanish) although sample activities provided are in Spanish. You can customise or create new ones with the pictures and sounds you want, including synthesized sounds (Text-To-Speech) in English.

Picaa aims to bring flexibility and adaptability in the education of children with special needs (autism, PDD, Down Syndrome, etc). The app allows defining five kinds of activities fully customisable to be performed by the users:

- Exploration: this activity can be used like an Augmentative and Alternative
  Communicator (AAC) system. Exploration activities can also be used like navigationbased histories that let students learn concepts through the navigation of a
  hypermedia system with components.
- Association: the student must indicate relationships between elements that belong to several sets.
- Puzzle: a decomposed image must be rebuilt from multiple pieces. Number, size and shape of pieces can be configured.
- Sorting/selection: a list of elements that must be ordered in a sequence or where the user must find a particular item.
- Memory (Memory-Match). Create activities for working memory, can use images and text.

# Apps for which we couldn't find an evidence base but which may nonetheless be useful

# ios

My Talk Mobile	Customise how you communicate through a variety of images, pictures, symbols and audio files including human voice. In 5 minutes, you can create your very own content and communicate in a way that YOU choose.
ααcorn AAC	Featured in Apple's 'Special Education' and 'Accessibility' collections of recommended apps. Helps even the youngest or most developmentally delayed child expand their vocabulary and dramatically improve their language comprehension
Avaz Pro	Developed for children who are non-verbal or who have difficulty speaking. Avaz has received top international awards, including being on MIT's list of Top 35 Innovations in 2011.
Speak for Yourself	Has the capability to begin with one word, but contains almost 11,000 Smarty Symbols® and allows the user the potential to access almost 14,000 words, with no more than two touches to say a word.
TouchChat HD	Designed for individuals with Autism, Down Syndrome, ALS, apraxia, stroke, or other conditions that affect a person's ability to use natural speech, includes features that were previously only available in much more expensive dedicated devices.
TalkTablet UK AAC	Award winning speech app for people with autism, aphasia and other speech conditions.
Sono Flex	A vocabulary app that turns symbols into clear speech. It offers language to nonverbal users who are not yet in full control of literacy.
:prose	Use simple touch gestures, including taps, swipes, and simple shapes to speak custom phrases aloud in over 40 languages and dialects.

Grace 4	A simple picture exchange system developed by and for non-verbal people allowing the user to communicate their needs by building sentences from relevant images.
Snap + Core First	A symbol-based communication app designed to be the most intuitive solution on the market.
Clicker Communicator	Gives a voice to children and young people with speech and language difficulties.
Total Suite	Created to build great relationships and friendships through its many innovative communication modes.
Choice Board Creator	Reinforces correct choice by expanding the selected image as well as playing the customised auditory rewards.
Widgit Go	An app for creating activities and grids to support communication, learning and language development. Use it in the home, in the classroom or on the go.
AAC Speak	Enables someone who is non-verbal to communicate by pressing buttons containing icons, words or letters.
Expressive	Featured on the "Autism Hangout" Podcast and the "TUAW. COM" as an app that is helping children and adults to communicate and learn.
CoughDrop	CoughDrop is flexible and configurable enough to accommodate the access and comprehension needs of many communicators.
InnerVoice:	InnerVoice combines facial expressions, emotions, written words, and actions with speech, providing a complete multisensory learning experience.
MyChoicePαd	MyChoicePad has been created in collaboration with The Makaton® Charity, creators of the Symbols and Signs used by Mr Tumble on CBeebies' Something Special.
Predictable	Multi-award winning app for people with speech disabilities who need a sleek, simple and smart way to communicate!
AlphαTopics	Sometimes just giving a hint or context is all your listener needs to understand you. The first letter or two. The general topic. AlphaTopics is for people whose natural speech is not always clear.

# Android

Autism myVoice Communicator	Designed to aid non-verbal children (even toddlers) and adults with communication. As seen on CBS 60 minutes
Alexicom AAC	AAC based on images added by the user, text-to-speech, and word prediction.
Autism Speech Diego- Says	Create phrases with two parts: action and object. Uses pictures. Research based.
CommBoards	Enables children and people of all ages with limited expressive abilities to express themselves by tapping on a picture or a symbol.

# Windows

Cough Drop	Uses the Cloud, allowing the user, parents, authorised
	teachers and therapists to see what the other parties have
	been working on so that they collaborate with each other to
	enhance the user's growth and success.





# Proving life can get better

Dimensions provides evidence-based, outcomesfocused support including sector leading positive behaviour support for people with learning disabilities, autism and complex needs. We help the people we support to be actively involved in their communities.



# Contact us to find out more:

www.dimensions-uk.org 0300 303 9001 enquiries@dimensions-uk.org

Find us on social media @DimensionsUK







# **Dimensions**

2nd Floor, Building 1430, Arlington Business Park, Theale, Reading, RG7 4SA