

Ways to Help

Communication Techniques for Families to Use

Many individuals can give accurate information if the questions are kept short and simple. Sometimes it might be necessary to repeat or rephrase a question asked, especially if the patient appears not to understand, or makes a sound to show that they do not understand. Your speech-language pathologist will help you to develop a communication system that best suits the patient. The following techniques may be helpful when attempting to communicate.

1. Use yes/no questions.

The therapists or family members may need to obtain information from the patient to complete certain tasks or to give the patient information or directions. A useful approach is to phrase questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" verbal or gestural reply. For example, if the patient is having trouble seeing, the caregiver must first find out whether the person has eyeglasses. If the patient says "yes," the caregiver needs to locate the eyeglasses. One could ask, "Where are your eyeglasses?" However, we cannot expect an answer such as "My eyeglasses are in the second drawer of my night table in my room." Rather, we should establish conversation with the patient such as the following: "Are your glasses here in your room?" "Yes." "Are they in your bedside table?" "Yes." It is important to establish the same form of the yes/no response for all persons who communicate with the patient. For example, if the person cannot use words, they may respond to yes/no questions with a head nod or eye blink. However, do not confuse the person by asking for a head nod one time and an eye blink the next time.

2. Prevent the person from becoming isolated.

Try to engage the person in some form of communication every day. A daily greeting such as "Hello," "Thank you," or "I'm fine" can be a pleasant exchange for a person with communication impairment.

3. Put yourself in a face-to-face position with the patient.

Encourage the person to watch your face when you speak.

4. Speak in a normal tone of voice.

Do not shout or raise your voice when speaking with the person. The patient hears you, unless there is a hearing impairment. Instead, the patient is having trouble understanding you, and the shouting will be an additional source of misunderstanding.

5. Talk with the person as you would with any other adult. Remember, do not "talk down" to the person.

6. Try non-speech types of communication.

Some patients can write words they cannot say, or draw pictures representing their thoughts. Others can point to pictures or words in a communication chart or in a notebook, or point to things in the room. Gestures and facial expressions are a very common and effective way to communicate non-verbally.

7. Use short, simple sentences.

All communication should be kept short and grammatically simple. "Do you want a sweater?" is easier to understand than the more complex statement, "The sweater is in the drawer in your room, and it is cold in here. Why don't you put the sweater on to keep warm?"

8. Change the topic

If the person has outbursts during discussion, it is important to remain calm. It may also be helpful to change the subject to avoid confrontation and continued emotional outbursts.

9. Provide clear feedback.

Provide clear feedback to the person about whether you understood or did not understand what was said.

10. Be patient.

Give the person time to understand you, and time to form their thoughts.

Helping with Language Problems

Receptive Language Disorders

Use gestures to communicate with the person if he/she is unable to understand the words. For example, point to things, wave 'hello', or give a 'thumbs up' for a job well done. Use pictures to communicate.

Expressive Language Disorders

Consider using a communication board or alphabet board to communicate. Develop alternate communication systems with friends and family. Consider ways to let others know when your loved

one is sick, needs to go to the restroom, is hungry or has pain. Educate friends and family that your loved one understands what is said, but has trouble getting his/her words out.

Very Important:

Let your local authorities know of your situation. For example, if your loved one needed to call 911, he/she may not be able to get the words out right to help the situation. If they know ahead of time, they may have an arrangement to just send someone out to check on him/her.

- Consider having your loved one wear a Medical Alert Bracelet that tells of the brain injury or language problem.
- Consider having access to a Medical Alert System.
- Consider creating a business card that explains the communication problem. This can be helpful when communicating with bus or cab drivers.