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# Adapting communication for different people

Tips for adapting communication to engage effectively when behaviour support planning



The  
Right  
Direction

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Working together on positive  
behaviour support (PBS)

# Instructions for behaviour support practitioners

The information in this document is intended to give behaviour support practitioners an introduction to some of the factors that influence communication.

It contains information that is intended as a quick 'starter' to communication and engagement, with other resources on [The Right Direction website](#) extending these ideas.

## What influences communication?

Did you know that **who you are** changes how you communicate?

The same things that make you unique as a person influence how you share information with others, including your:

- age
- gender identity
- personality (e.g., shy, loud, serious, funny)
- cultural and/or spiritual background
- life situation (e.g. living arrangement or employment), and
- attitudes (e.g. view of the world, view towards disability).

As a behaviour support practitioner, your **level of experience, skills and knowledge** in different areas also influences how you communicate and interact with people.

For example, if you are communicating with someone with lower literacy levels and therefore needs or prefers information written in Easy Read format, your skill in making Easy Read documents will change how well you can prepare to and interact with the person.

You will provide behaviour support to people from a range of backgrounds, who will all have different needs, preferences and types of disability.

You will need to:

- (1) be aware of factors that influence how you communicate and – most importantly – how this will influence the people you are communicating with.
- (2) be aware of others' unique features and needs, and understand that these will change:
  - a) how they communicate,
  - b) how they view you, and
  - c) how they understand the information you are sharing;  
and
- (3) adapt your communication style to suit others as much as possible to make sure you can:
  - d) engage with them (building rapport and trust),
  - e) share information clearly, and
  - f) uphold [their communication rights](#).

## 7 tips for adapting communication

To engage effectively during the behaviour support process:

1. approach everyone with an open mind,
2. discuss the person's wants and needs for the behaviour support planning process,
3. be aware of what influences your communication style,
4. take the time to plan and develop resources focused on engaging the participant,
5. choose appropriate words and pictures for visual supports,
6. consider the participant's native language(s) and culture, and
7. remember that communication is dynamic.

## 1. Approach everyone with an open mind

When preparing as part of the behaviour support process, you will review information and form an idea of who you are going to meet.

You might read a participant's communication profile or seek guidance from the person's support network to better understand the person before meeting them (e.g., their likes/dislikes, communication methods they use, etc.).

This will inform you and can also influence your ideas.

Take this information as a useful guide, without pre-judging people. This will help you approach your first communications positively and openly, without preconceived ideas about the person you are supporting, such as their capacity:

- to engage in conversation,
- to understand you, or
- how they will react.

## 2. Discuss the person's wants and needs for the behaviour support planning process

People have the right to choose how they would like to engage with the process – or if they choose to engage with it at all.

Your role is to help them understand [their communication rights](#). This includes checking they are comfortable with who is (or is not) involved in the conversation.

You can use the [Spectrum of Participation](#) resources to assist with having this conversation.

If the person chooses not to engage in the process, respect that decision and seek guidance from their support network instead.

### 3. Be aware of what influences your communication style

This can include your experience, skills and knowledge. Reflecting on your own background will help you consider how you might need to adapt your communication style to align with that of the person you are meeting. It will also help you identify any new skills or knowledge you need to develop to help you engage with the person.

For example, using 'professional' language may make you seem less approachable or difficult to understand by a person with a different background. Consider using plain language as much as possible (especially [when talking about behaviour support](#)) or Easy Read if that is the person's preference.

When meeting people, [take time to get to know them](#) and [allow them to get to know you](#).

Talking about your own communication style and influences might help in building rapport and trust. Be careful that the personal information you share is related to the conversations you are having with the person about *their* life and experiences, so that you don't accidentally overtake the conversation and focus it on you.



#### 4. Take time to plan and develop resources focused on engaging the participant

This includes thinking ahead as to how you can adapt your communication style to match that of the people you will be engaging as part of the behaviour support process. This takes planning, effort and collaboration with others.

For example, learn how to use the communication methods that the person uses and adapt them to allow conversations about behaviour support.

One way might be to prepare by learning more about discussion mats if the person communicates in that way. You can use [The Right Direction discussion mat resources](#) for [talking about behaviours or concern](#) or [restrictive practices](#) or personalise the provided [discussion mat and picture card template](#) with examples relevant to each participant.

You might also consider [Key Word Sign \(KWS\) as a communication strategy](#), using [Signs specific to behaviour support planning](#) or [behaviour support communication rights](#) if these will be helpful for the participant.

It is important to factor this into your behaviour support planning schedule so that enough time is allocated for genuine engagement with the participant (and their support network) during the behaviour support planning process.

## 5. Choose appropriate words and pictures for visual supports

Consider whether they are relevant to the participant's disability, age, gender and culture.

For example:

- Consider the using disability-related images that are relevant to the participant and their disability. If the person doesn't use a wheelchair, don't include images of people using wheelchairs.
- Carefully consider the use of culturally specific images to represent a broader concept. In some cultures, the word 'holiday' could be represented with images associated with Easter, while for others, images associated with Lunar New Year, Eid, or other holidays could be more appropriate.

## **6. Consider the participant's native language(s) and culture**

If English is the participant's second language, learn about their literacy and language levels in both languages by seeking guidance from the person and their support network.

If the person has limited literacy in their first language, consider having Easy English or plain language documents translated or interpreted by an interpreter, who may be a family member of the person or a professional interpreter.

Also remember that a person's culture influences their way of communicating. For example, in some cultures, direct eye contact is a sign of connection, while in others it may be considered confrontational. It is acceptable to shake hands in some cultures and in others it is not (this may also be influenced by the gender of the people involved in the situation). Where possible, adapt your behaviour to ensure you are not unintentionally intimidating or offending the person.

Be open to learning – it's okay to explain if you're unfamiliar with a custom.

## 7. Remember that communication is dynamic

In any interaction, communication is dynamic. People's needs and preferences change – even from moment to moment. This can depend on a variety of factors, including their mood, the topic of discussion and who else is (or isn't) in the room.

Even factors such as how the day has been so far (and a person's resulting mood or energy) can change a communication style, how someone is viewed by others and how well people understand them.

As a behaviour support practitioner, check in with yourself ahead of and during meetings, to stay aware of what and how you're communicating in those ways that are less-obvious to ourselves, but very noticeable to other people. This will also help you stay more in tune with others in the discussion and aware of their cues (and how you respond to them).



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