

Supported Decision Making

Communication Strategies

Supported decision making is helping someone to make their own decisions so they have control over the things that are important to them. Good support provides opportunities to learn and builds the ability of the person who is making the decision.

It is important to have a good understanding of a person's communication skills if you are supporting them to make decisions. This includes their comprehension or understanding, expression, memory and attention span. You can find out about their communication style by getting to know the person and talking to people that know them well.

Below are some general tips to help with effective communication when supporting someone. It is best to find out how each person understands their world, how they express themselves and to be aware of anything that affects their ability to communicate.

Support to help comprehension

- Speak slowly using familiar terms and short simple sentences.
- Avoid using jargon or complex words.
- Simplify the discussion by giving one piece of information at a time.
- Stick to one topic of conversation.
- Give the person enough time to process what you have said.
- Keep discussion relevant and in the here and now.
- Where you have to talk about abstract issues such as time, support the discussion by relating to concrete events such as mealtimes or by using visual supports such as calendars.
- Visual supports such as pictures, objects and for some people accessible written information, may be useful to help support understanding, attention and memory.
- Regularly check that the person understands the conversation.
- Use clear non-verbal cues such as facial expression, body language, gestures and tone of voice.
- Be aware that sometimes people may:
 - Say 'yes' or 'no' to questions they have not really understood
 - Frequently choose or repeat the last item presented to them without understanding the choice.
- Be mindful of the timing and the environment, to make sure the circumstances are best suited to the exchange.

Some people need to experience the choices available to understand them



Stress, trauma and anxiety can affect a person's comprehension

Support to help the person express themselves

- Give the person plenty of time to express themselves. Don't finish sentences for them or make assumptions about what they are trying to say or communicate.
- Observe the person's non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expression. What is it telling you about their understanding, will and preference?
- Pictures, objects and accessible written supports may be helpful to enable some people express their will and preference.
- If the person uses an electronic aid to communicate, ensure it is available and programmed for the discussion. For example, pictures or words relevant to the discussion may need to be added to the aid.
- An unsafe or restrictive environment can affect someone's willingness to express themselves.
- Be aware that some people experience significant side effects from medications that can affect how they express themselves.
- Ask the person if they would like someone in particular to support them to express their views.

Remember

- Communication support will vary from person to person and should be tailored to meet individual need.
- Communication is two way and breakdown can occur on either side.
- We all have times when we have difficulty understanding what has been said or what is happening. Build trust by being honest with the person about this and seek out help from others.
- People who have communication difficulties frequently rely on non-verbal cues to help them understand what is being said or what is happening.
- Communicate in an environment free from distraction and at a time that suits the person's ability to concentrate.
- Consider how much you can cover in one sitting; some people may only have the ability to pay attention for short periods of time.
- Physical and mental health can affect a person's ability to give or receive information.
- Cultural factors can impact on how a person provides or receives information.
- Communication is complex and expert input from a Speech Pathologist may be beneficial.