

# Communication

## What this is about

This fact sheet has been written to support frontline staff working in the criminal justice system about understanding how to communicate effectively with people who have communication difficulties.

**Evidence from the Prison Reform Trust shows that about 1 in 3 adult prisoners have learning disabilities or learning difficulties (up to 7% have an IQ under 70, and another 25% have an IQ under 80) and this is higher in children and young people.** Nearly 2 in 3 prisoners have problems with communication - understanding other people or expressing themselves or both.

Communication can be broken into the following distinct elements:

**Expressive language** means making use of words to form sentences in order to communicate with other people. It can mean speaking or writing. Difficulties in using expressive language can range from difficulties putting words in the right order or writing sentences, to being unable to form words in a way that others can understand. When someone is unable to express themselves it can lead to frustration at not being able to explain something, difficulty interacting with other people, and difficulty expressing their needs. An issue around people with learning disabilities or communication difficulties in the criminal justice system is not being able to tell a coherent story and not being able to tell the same story consistently. This can result in them sounding unreliable or dishonest when that isn't the case.

**Receptive language** means understanding other people's expressive language. Some people may not be able to form words and sentences themselves, but they can understand other people. This can range from being able to understand easily what others say, to being able only to understand key words and phrases - and then only when they are spoken clearly and slowly. Everyone is different; some people may be able to use both receptive and expressive language to different degrees, whilst others may be able to use one or neither.

**Body language (non-verbal)** is an important part of communication and can convey around half or more of what we are communicating. It is often used to emphasise points or to convey subtle messages. People with learning disabilities or other difficulties may not be able to read body language as well as others; it is especially the case for people with autistic spectrum disorders. This may include discomfort with eye contact, not understanding personal space, or not being able to 'read' other people's non-verbal cues.

### Example

John has an autistic spectrum disorder and mild learning disabilities. He was a victim of mate crime (when a person is harmed or taken advantage of by someone they thought was their friend) and was arrested because his flat was used by 'friends' to store marijuana plants. The arresting officer noticed that John was not responsive to his questions and did not give eye contact. John kept talking about needing to go home to watch EastEnders at 7pm. The officer called for an Appropriate Adult because he felt that John had a communication difficulty and needed help to understand what was happening. The Appropriate Adult spent time with John explaining what was happening – she gave him time to understand what she had said after each sentence and also wrote down the questions so he could read them. At times she used pictures – she drew his house and where his friends lived and asked him to name his friends who stored the plants in his house. She asked him if he preferred her not to look him in the eye and he said yes. The information gathering took longer, but by using these reasonable adjustments they were able to get a clearer picture of what was going on.

## How to help

If you think the person you are supporting has some form of learning disability or communication difficulty the following tips may help:

- Use short sentences using simple language and avoiding jargon
- Break information into smaller chunks so that one idea or concept is explained at a time. For example, if arrested, explain one at a time who can be considered as an appropriate adult rather than read out the list. Pause frequently, so as not to overload the person with words. Allow time to make sure that the person has understood
- Recheck the person understands you – e.g. “Can you tell me what I have just said so I know I have explained it properly”
- Be aware that many people have stronger receptive (understanding) communication skills than expressive skills
- A person’s expressive speech may sometimes give an impression of better comprehension than is actually the case, so check their understanding
- If you are in a busy environment with many distractions, consider moving to a quieter location as some people may find it hard to concentrate in such a busy place
- It can help if you can offer a visual aid such as a photo or drawing to support understanding (for more information on this see our ‘Making information easier to read’ fact sheet)
- If you are trying to explain something, such as the advantages and disadvantages of an intervention, the use of visual aids can be effective.

### Example

A community psychiatric nurse supported a client with mild learning disabilities with an intervention to reduce his drug taking. He realised that simply talking about the pros and cons of taking drugs was not helping Pete so he printed out a photo of a set of weighing scales from the internet and stuck it to a flip chart which was divided into two columns with ‘good things’ and ‘bad things’ about taking drugs. He talked to Pete and wrote down Pete’s responses in easy words accompanied with images, such as a pound sign to represent having more money, and a set of bars to represent going to prison. After the session he gave it to Pete to go home and look at it for homework. The visual representation really helped Pete and he began to respond to treatment.

## Further information

The Advocates Gateway has a short guide about how to question someone with a learning disability <http://www.theadvocatesgateway.org/images/toolkits/4Learningdisability211013.pdf>

The Box training package developed by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. The Box is a training programme that gives staff and professionals in the criminal justice sector the skills required to work more efficiently and confidently with people who have communication difficulties. <http://www.theboxtraining.com/free-resources/>

This is part of a series of fact sheets for people working in the criminal justice system. They are how to spot signs that a person has a learning disability; finding out about other services that may help; communication; making information easier to read; making appointments; making decisions; useful information and resources. To download these or for more information see: <http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/our-work/rights-equality/criminal-justice-system/>



foundation for  
people with  
learning disabilities

[www.learningdisabilities.org.uk](http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk)