

Communicating with Children & Youth with Neuro-Developmental Delay

These communication guidelines are meant for children and youth who have limited verbal and other communication abilities.

- ⇒ **Acknowledge them:** Say hello, touch their arm, notice their clothing or toys. “Hello Ken. I see you have suspenders on today – you look very handsome!” Even if they are asleep, ask how they are doing or acknowledge that they are there, such as saying, “I see Janie is sleeping right now – she looks like she’s having a good nap.”
- ⇒ **Get down on their level:** If they are playing on the floor, get down next to them to say hello. If they are in bed, get close to the bedside. If they are in a wheelchair, bend down to greet them at eye level.
- ⇒ **Make it personal:** Use their name, notice things about them, or remark on things in their environment. “I noticed that Marcus has a lot of Pokemon stuffed toys. Is that something he likes?” If you can, incorporate this knowledge into the care plan. “I’ll make a note in the care plan that Marcus loves having his Pikachu with him during respite visits.”
- ⇒ **Ask the parent or caregiver how to communicate with them:** They can help you understand what gestures, movements, facial expressions, sounds, or words may mean. Some children may be able to blink or make movements for “yes” or “no”. If it’s difficult to describe how they communicate, consider asking the family if you can make a video to help your colleagues understand. You can also work with the family to create an “All About Me” booklet to help other caregivers get to know the child or youth.
- ⇒ **Be patient and willing to take time:** When any children or youth have communication challenges, the visit will likely take longer, so be mentally prepared for this scenario. You may need to request or plan for more time in these situations. The worst thing you can do is rush, and not take the time to learn to communicate with them.
- ⇒ **Be aware of visual and hearing differences:** Ask the parent or caregiver if there is a place you should stand or sit so the child can see and be included in the conversation.
 - You may need to speak louder or speak closer to one ear if they have hearing loss. For children and youth with limited vision and/or hearing, touch can be a powerful way to communicate. Ask the family if holding their hand, stroking their arm, or touching their hair to say hello may help put them at ease – touch is often helpful, but some children and youth may prefer not to be touched.
- ⇒ **Ask about communication aids:** Ask the parent or caregiver if their child has any communication aids or tools that should be used to include them in conversation. Digital speaking tools, a writing board, a picture board, or a noise-making toy are examples of some communication aids.

- ⇒ **Include them in conversation:** Even for children who are non-verbal or have limited verbal skills, ask the parent or caregiver what their child enjoys, what makes them happy, and what is important to remember in their care. You may even direct some comments to the child, such as, “Dad says you like being around people, so I hope you enjoy visiting with me too” or “I notice you have a lot of pink in your room – I love pink too!” If the child is able to communicate in any way, such as yes/no questions, then direct some simple questions to them.

- ⇒ **If you’re not sure, ask:** If the child’s facial expression changes, they make a sound, or they seem to be communicating something and you’re not sure if it’s meaningful, ask the parent or caregiver about it. “I noticed Timmy made a sound when I mentioned doing a tube feeding. Is he trying to tell me something?”

- ⇒ **Observe and learn:** Notice how the family interacts with the child or youth. They may communicate in certain ways or do things subconsciously that they didn’t think to suggest to you - maybe the family hums a tune to soothe them if they are distressed. You can incorporate these tips into your care as well.

- ⇒ **Build a relationship:** Based on all the tips above, try and remember some of the ways that were meaningful to communicate with this particular child or youth so you can use them in future visits. They will likely be more at ease in your presence, and the family will appreciate your efforts to include and communicate with their child.

References

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