

# Quality of communication support for people with severe IDD living in supported accommodation settings



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## Introduction and Methods

As part of a wider research project into skilled support (Beadle-Brown *et al*, in submission), information about communication was collected using a range of measures. These included observations of social interaction and contact from staff, the use of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC), reviews of written information, questionnaires about the needs and characteristics of the people supported and interviews with managers. An observational measure combined the Engagement in Meaningful activities and relationships (EMACR Mansell and Beadle-Brown, 2005), The Active Support Measure (ASM) (Mansell, Elliott & Beadle-Brown, 2005) and a specific measure about the nature and variety of communication methods used by staff and the people they support. In addition, a staff reported measure of adaptive functioning and communication needs was completed by each person's key worker.

The differences in communication strategies between services providing good and less good support are discussed.

## Participants

There were 110 participants from 35 residential or supported living services for people with severe or profound IDD, autism, multiple physical disabilities and challenging behaviour. Services were either nominated by their organisations as providing good support for these groups of people or randomly selected from Care Quality Commission lists for the same geographic areas as nominated services.

## Results

Participant communication and effectiveness of use (%)	Whole sample N=106	ABS <151 n=64
No communication	8	10
Any verbal	38	27
Any vocalisation	54	56
Any gestures on their own	31	31
Gestures + vocalisation	20	18
Gestures + verbal	15	9
Object of reference	2	3
Object of ref. + vocalisation	1	1
Object of ref. + verbal	0	0
Symbols	1	0
Signs	4	1
Signs + vocalisation	3	3
Signs + verbal	1	0
Communication effective most of the time	65	59
Communication effective all of the time	28	19

Over two thirds (69%) of participants were reported not to use verbal communication and nearly one fifth (18%) were reported as not understanding verbal communication

Communication support from staff (%)	Whole sample N=106	ABS <151 N=71
Any non-verbal communication (inc gestures)	62	69
Any non-verbal communication (- gestures)	31	34
No communication used by staff	2	3
Gestures alone	15	13
Gestures with verbal	53	59
Objects of reference	13	17
Objects of reference plus verbal	20	25
Photos	3	3
Symbols/photos and verbal	2	3
Sign	3	1
Sign and verbal	4	3
Verbal only	80	78
Communication rated as mostly appropriate	79	65

Those people who were rated by staff as non-verbal were:

- more likely to have objects of reference used with them
- less likely to have appropriate forms of communication used with them
- less likely to have communication that was effective in getting staff attention and a response

During observations, communication was rated as consistently matching participant level for just over one third of people. Just under half of people (49%) were rated as consistently having their communication responded to.

## Does skilled support make a difference?

Where active support was implemented consistently, staff were more likely to use more formal non-verbal forms of communication, such as objects of reference and photos. They relied less on informal gestures.

People living in services where active support was good were more likely to be receiving appropriate communication from staff most or all of the time (100% for this sample, compared with just 50% for those people receiving less skilled support). They were likely to be living in services where support for communication was consistently good and appropriate most of the time (34% compared with just 0.9% for those people receiving less skilled support). In the less able sample, 94% of people in the skilled support group experienced effective communication in that staff appeared to respond and they got what they appeared to be asking for most of the time (with 44% experiencing it all of the time), compared to 42% in the less skilled group (with 8% experiencing it all of the time).  $X^2 = 17.73$   $p < 0.001$ ,  $n = 58$

Communication support for more severely disabled sample (%)	Mixed/ weak support N=45	Good support N=18	Sig-nificance
Any non-verbal communication (without gestures)	24	61	$X^2 = 7.61^{**}$
Object of reference	13	33	$X^2 = 5.75^*$
Object of reference + verbal	19	50	$X^2 = 5.67^*$
Photos	3	11	$X^2 = 5.16^*$
Communication rated as appropriate most of the time	69	100	$X^2 = 22.7^{***}$

## Conclusions

There was variability in the quality of support and outcomes but where people with more severe disabilities received consistently good active support they had better outcomes and received better support in other areas, in particular around communication.

More research is needed to understand what makes staff good communicators and whether improved communication is an inevitable outcome of person-centred active support.