How to support a person with increasing their ability to communicate with others

Introduction

This instructional guide can be used by caregivers who are supporting someone who may not always be able to tell others what they need or want. It includes step-by-step instructions on how to develop a plan to teach a person additional communication skills. Follow the seven steps below to develop the person's plan. The format and layout of the plan can be anything that works for the person and their team.

Tips

The following are things to keep in mind when supporting a person with building communication skills:

- Communication skill building is a life-long, time consuming process for *all* people and should not be overlooked or have low expectations just because a person has struggled with communication in the past.
- Approaches to teaching communication skills may need to be modified to adjust for a person's culture, beliefs and experiences.
- Communication is more than yes/no or making requests for personal cares. Skill development should support a full array of topics, emotions, and social contexts.
- People need opportunities for private as well as public communication. For example, needing to use the restroom may not be something someone wants loudly announced on an electronic device for all around to hear. However, that person may want to be loud when showing support for their favorite team at a sports bar.
- Challenging behavior is a form of communication, and teams can support the person with learning alternative ways to communicate their wants, needs and feelings.
- This guide is most effective when person-centered principles are applied to ensure the person's preferences and needs are reflected throughout the plan.

Step 1: Assess the current situation

Before developing a plan to teach a person new skills, you should assess the person's current situation and skill set.

Describe how the person currently communicates

- How do they communicate with body language or actions, which could include but is not limited to:
    - Eye movements
    - Facial expressions
    - Moving closer or further away from something
    - Waving or pointing
    - Intentionally leaving something or not looking at something
    - Pushing or grabbing, such as pulling a caregiver towards something
    - Touching or pinching
    - Restlessness
- How do they communicate with verbal language or sounds?

- How do they use electronic tools to communicate (e.g. pushing buttons on an iPad)?
- How do they use other tools to communicate (e.g. writing on a notepad)?

Describe what tools, if any, the person currently uses to communicate

- Tools needed at home (e.g. a pictures to choose from)
- Tools needed at school or work (e.g. visual diagrams to note work progress)
- Tools needed in the community (e.g. an electronic device and a specific carry bag to prevent damage)
- Tools needed in other settings (e.g. waterproof tools such as laminated cards to use at a pool)

Describe the person's culture when it comes to communicating

What does the person think is funny or enjoyable? What does the person think is inappropriate or stressful? What people do they prefer to be around that might be able to help with this plan? What other cultural considerations should be incorporated into this plan?

Language

What is the person's first, or preferred, language? What accommodations are in place to help speakers of other languages communicate with them and vice versa?

List what the person is good at communicating that other people typically understand

What are some things the person can communicate clearly to people that have known them for a short time? Are there specific words or phrases that a person uses to indicate wants, needs, feelings that others should know?

Are there differences in understanding between paid caregivers, family and friends? List those differences. For example, a person's mother may understand that when a person turns away from others that means their answer is "no," but a new paid support person may not recognize that body language until after they receive training.

Identify needs

List what the person would like to be better at communicating. If the team is unsure, list things that might help relieve stress for the person. This might include things like:

- Expressing emotions or feelings
- Asking questions about others, things, concepts, etc.
- Requesting care or changes to their services
- Expressing social connections, such as asking someone how their day went
- Expressing humor, such as telling jokes

Next, list what the person's care team would like to better understand. This might include things like:

- Knowing when the person is in pain or discomfort
- Understanding what the person's preferences and interests are
- Learning about how they feel about something

Step 2: Work with the person and their team to develop goals

Now that you know a bit more about the person, the next step is to develop some goals based on helping the person improve their quality of life. For example:

- Marilyn would like to have more input over what food is in her house.
- LaRae would like a way to get staff's attention when they need help, especially when they need to use the restroom. LaRae clearly communicates appreciation when staff give them an opportunity to use the restroom, but staff don't always know when it's needed so LaRae ends up on the toilet every four hours, regardless of need. This results in a big waste of time for LaRae every day, so staff would like to help LaRae have more control over that support need.
- Mai clearly enjoys many activities in her community, but never asks for them. Staff would like to give her a way to ask for things she enjoys.
- Mariana loves the Vikings and would like to demonstrate her support at games.
- Staff would like to know what activities Aaron is interested in, see an end to Aaron's self-injury and understand better what he is asking them to do. They can tell when he is upset but don't always know what to do to support him.

Step 3: Work with the person and their team to develop objectives

After developing some goals, the next step is to develop some objectives related to those goals. Objectives should be:

- **Specific**: Staff should know exactly what they are to do, what the person will do, and what is considered success.
- **Measurable**: The team should be able to track the person's progress and know if they are improving.
  - The team may need to take one or two weeks of baseline data to know how well the person is doing that skill currently (e.g. the person currently uses their communication device 10% of the time when prompted). The team can then compare the person's progress over time to see if they are making progress on their communication objectives (e.g. the person now uses their communication device 90% of the time when prompted).
- **Achievable**: Objectives should build off skills the person already has. For example, if the person has the ability to point, they may be able to use a device or visual that gives them options to point to.
- **Relevant**:
  - The objectives should be meaningful to the person, as well as the people who will be communicating with them. The more meaningful an objective is to a person, the more likely they will be motivated to work on the objective.
  - The objectives need to make it easy for the person to communicate – easier than other forms of communication. For example, if a person wants to tell staff they want to go outside, that person is not going to use an electronic communication device that requires the click of four buttons if they can do something else that's easier, like putting on their jacket.
- **Timely**: Generally it is recommended that objectives should be achievable within one year or less. However, the timeline will depend on the person's current skills, the difficulty of the task, number of repetitions needed to learn the task, how often the person is given an opportunity to practice, and many other factors. If the objective will take more than one year, it might need to be broken down into smaller steps so the person and their team don't become discouraged with the slow progress.
- **Frequent**: The objective should occur often enough to allow the person plenty of opportunity to practice, but not so often it becomes burdensome or annoying to the person or the people supporting them.

Objective examples

For four months on Monday afternoons, Marilyn will select at least three meal pictures posted in the kitchen so staff know what ingredients to get when they go to the store together.

If Marilyn independently points to pictures on other days, staff will reinforce her behavior by acknowledging her verbally and writing those items on the shopping list where she can see them.

In the mornings upon awakening for six months, staff A will prompt LaRae to push the blue assistance button on their wheelchair, and staff B will:

- Immediately respond to that prompt from another room.
- Show LaRae their corresponding lit up blue button on the staff device.
- Take LaRae to the restroom.

If LaRae independently pushes the button at other times, staff will make every effort to reinforce that behavior by taking LaRae to the restroom as soon as possible.

On Saturday mornings for two months, or other days Mai doesn't have plans, staff will prompt Mai to use her iPad to request "Can you please take me somewhere?" or "I would like to stay home today" so staff can offer her options from her two boards – one that shows a variety of things they can do at home and one that shows a variety of things they can do in the city. Staff should not start discussing plans until Mai pushes one of those buttons.

If Mai independently uses her iPad to make those requests, staff will make every effort to reinforce that behavior by offering her the options from her board and engaging in a selected activity that same day if possible.

During every Vikings football game for the season, Mariana will independently select at least one of the football related items from her communication device, which include:

- Touchdown!
- Please help me get a snack.
- Booo!
- Hooray! Go Vikings!
- I need my lucky purple hat.

Over six months every day after lunch, when offered an activity outside the home (one time – staff should not repeat the offering if ignored), Aaron will avoid self-injurious behavior and instead either:

- Decline the activity by walking away or ignoring staff.
- Accept the activity by patting staff on the shoulder or arm.

Important: Note that while some of the objectives are planned on a schedule to ensure the person is offered plenty of opportunities to practice, it is also very important to reinforce the desired behaviors when the person engages in them independently. Consistency in how staff respond to a person will speed up their learning and avoid confusion for the person.

Step 4: Make a plan to gather data and necessary supplies

Gather data

Each objective will need to be tracked to know if the person is successful in engaging in communication with others. There are many acceptable ways to track and record data on objectives. However, it is encouraged that data gathering be:

- Simple for staff to record.
- Simple for plan evaluators to consolidate and track trends over time.
- Conducted in a way that allows privacy for a person (e.g. staff should not get out a tracking sheet on a clip board while in a crowded place with a person).

Once you know how the data will be gathered, the team should determine how often the data should be reviewed and shared with other care team members. For example, many teams conduct a data review on a monthly or quarterly basis.

Gather supplies

Before starting the plan, the team should discuss what supplies and resources are needed to implement the objectives. If specialized technical assistance is needed with a tool or electronic device, the lead agency may be able to support the team by helping to access additional resources. Instructions for lead agencies can be found on CBSM: Resource: Guidance on support technology and service planning.

Step 5: Implement the objectives and gather the data

You are now ready to start the objectives! While the plan unfolds, it may need periodic adjustments so schedule some time within the first couple of weeks with the person receiving supports and the people implementing the plan to see how it's going. Make adjustments as needed so the plan works for everyone.

Step 6: Review the data

If the person is engaging in the new communication skill more than they were before, then the plan is likely working. However, it they are not engaging in the new skill, the plan may need to be adapted, or possibly replaced with a new plan. If assistance is needed, a school teacher, therapist, behavior analyst, positive support professional or other expert may be good people to consult.

Step 7: Reaching the plan's goal and moving on

Ideally, the person will learn the new skill and caregivers will continue to reinforce that skill throughout their life. However, that does not mean the person's journey with learning communication skills is now over. Improving communication skills is a life-long journey for ALL people. Teams are encouraged to work on a communication plan every year with people who might need support in getting their needs and preferences met.