

# Understanding the Relationship between Communication and Challenging Behavior

## ***Understanding the Relationship between Communication and Behavior***

Communication is the process of exchanging meaning between individuals—by talking or using body language, gestures (pointing, reaching, or giving), facial expressions, joint attention (sharing attention, directing the attention of another person, or following the attention of another person), and vocalizations (grunts and cries). People need to communicate to get materials, activities, attention, or assistance from others.

There are many types of communication disorders—some involve difficulty in the area of receiving and understanding information while some include problems or delays in expressing and articulating information. People with communication delays often exhibit challenging behaviors when their needs are not met. Because of the person's limited communication skills, their caregivers misinterpret or fail to notice their communication attempts. However, as individuals learn to communicate better and caregivers learn to recognize and respond to that communication, these challenging behaviors often subside. Behaviors that indicate that someone might have communication problems include using a limited number of words, having difficulty understanding concepts in the environment, having difficulty following directions, and demonstrating frustration when trying to communicate.

## ***Facilitating Communication to Prevent Challenging Behavior***

Caregivers can use several strategies to facilitate someone's communication skills and help prevent challenging behavior. These strategies include (1) reading the individual's body language, (2) providing the person with choices, (3) providing picture schedules to help the individual move easily between activities, (4) segmenting multiple-step directions and providing cues so the individual better understands the expectations, and (5) modeling communication skills.

**Reading a person's body language** is essential, especially when the individual has limited ways to communicate. Those who have a limited vocabulary might use gestures (e.g., pointing to an object) or eye gaze to let others know what they need or want. When there is a consistent and immediate response to nonverbal behaviors by caregivers or peers, the individual is less likely to become frustrated and engage in challenging behavior.

**Providing choices** gives the person the opportunity to communicate what he wants rather than using challenging behavior to communicate. When providing choices, the caregiver presents different objects, activities, or photographs from which to choose. The caregiver selects items that are motivating or reinforcing to the person. Typically offering only two choices is an ideal starting point. Starting with too many options can increase frustration.

**Using picture schedules** can also benefit. People often use challenging behaviors when they do not understand what is going on in the environment. Presenting a picture schedule prior to a change in activity increases the likelihood that the individual will understand what to do and will transition more smoothly from one activity to the next.

**Segmenting multiple-step directions and providing cues** can help individuals understand the direction. Segmenting involves breaking a task down into smaller, more easily understood, parts. Cues are behaviors provided by caregivers or peers to help a person understand what is expected in a particular context. Cues can be verbal (e.g., "Turn on the water first"), pictorial (e.g., showing a picture someone turning on the water), or nonverbal (e.g., demonstrating how to wash hands, pointing to the faucet when telling the person to turn on the water).

**Providing language models and labeling** (e.g., single-word vocabulary and multiple-word combinations) is another strategy. By modeling simple phrases and supporting the use of more complex phrases, individuals can learn new communication skills, which can be applied in different contexts. For example, labeling tasks, activities, and objects, and incorporating the labels into daily activities, increase the likelihood that the person will understand and be able to talk about things in their environment. Repetition across different contexts can increase the likelihood that people will use vocabulary appropriately (e.g., "Want more juice," "More book," "Need more music").

Content of this Fact Sheet was adapted from: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/www/www19.html>