



Communication

Communication involves the exchange of ideas through spoken or written language, gestures, numbers, or a combination of these. Communication problems are closely related to thinking or cognitive problems. We use communication in all aspects of life. The Speech/Language Pathologist (SLP) addresses communication and cognition. However, all members of the team work together to improve these skills.

Breaking down the communication process into steps shows how complex it is, and how much thinking is involved. Communication requires:

- Being alert enough to receive information from others.
- Paying attention and concentrating on information.
- Remembering the information in the right order.
- Understanding the meaning of the information, and how it relates.
- Organizing responses, thoughts and feelings.
- Transmitting responses through speech, writing, or gestures.

Speaking and Voice Problems

Speech refers to the way sounds are formed as we coordinate our breathing, voice, and the movement of our mouth, lips, and tongue.

Speech problems may be due to weakness or poor coordination of the tongue and lips, weak breath capacity, and/or changes to the vocal folds. Apraxia refers to the loss of ability to program motor movements, such as the movements required to talk. Although muscles are capable of moving, the muscles have trouble responding to signals sent from the brain. For someone with apraxia of speech, saying a word when asked to do so may be difficult. For example, if you ask the individual to say the

word “bathroom”, they may not be able to; however, they may say it a few minutes later without thinking about it when they need to use the bathroom. Dysarthria is difficulty speaking because of changes to muscle function. Speech may sound slurred and difficult to understand.

Some individuals have a tracheostomy tube (trach) placed in their trachea or windpipe. This is done to help them breathe. When the trach is open (does not have anything covering it), they are unlikely to have a voice. This is because air coming from their lungs flows out of the tube and does not flow through the vocal folds. The trach does not prevent them from being able to “mouth” words. As they become closer to being able to breathe on their own, a speaking valve and/or cap may be used to allow the person to “turn on” their voice. It is very important to follow the medical team’s recommendations during this process. Talk to your SLP to learn more about a tracheostomy tube and its impact on speaking.

What You Can Do

- Ask the SLP if there are strategies that can make communication easier.
- If needed, encourage use of simple words and short phrases, and slowing down for better understanding.
- Try to not rush conversation.
- Ask for a different word that means the same thing, rather than asking the person to repeat over and over.
- Encourage the use of gestures, communication boards, or writing on paper.

Language

Communication can be challenging because of cognitive or thinking problems. Communication difficulties may also come from damage to areas of the brain involved in understanding language, speaking in full sentences, coming up with words, and/or repeating words they hear. A loss of the ability to use language is called aphasia. A person with aphasia may have difficulty talking, writing, or understanding what they hear and read, depending on the nature of their injury. It may be difficult to think of the correct words to say and speech may lack clarity. For some, this may mean they can only say or understand a few words. For others, this may mean that they may say a lot of words but they are the wrong words or not even real words. Writing may also be impaired because, like talking, it requires the use of language. Keep in mind: having aphasia does not mean loss of intelligence.

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Aphasia is a bit like trying to communicate in a foreign country where you can only say and understand a few words. Sometimes people understand a lot of what is said to them, or sometimes they understand very little.

Signs of language difficulties include:

- Difficulty following commands
- Difficulty answering yes/no questions
- Trouble understanding long or abstract information
- Using wrong words in place of others, using words that make no sense, or difficulty finding the right words. Difficulty understanding the meaning of something he/she reads
- Difficulty putting words together to make sentences
- Difficulty writing and/or spelling words
- Saying things that don't have very much meaning or that don't make sense

What You Can Do

- Use simple or familiar words. Speak in short but normal sentences.
- Use gestures and/or written words too. This may help increase understanding.
- Pay attention to facial expressions and body language and what they communicate. If someone has difficulty understanding what is said to them, they may have to rely on body language and facial expressions to understand what is happening.
- Ask the SLP to show you strategies to help the individual communicate.