



CMWDT
Christian Ministries With Disabled Trust
Evangelise Equip Educate

Communicating with People with Disabilities



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The information in this booklet is also available in large print, audiotape and on-line at www.cmwdt.org.nz.

Other Booklets Produced by the Trust : -

- Helping People with Disabilities
- Working with a Group of People with Intellectual Disabilities
- Supporting People with Disabilities
- The Blessing of Including People with Disabilities in Your Church
- Personal Cares

Additional Resources can be found on our website or contact us.

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(Cover Photo: Yung Chen talking with Jack Oppenhuizen)

Communication

the act of imparting, transmitting, sharing or conveying a message.

Any effective communication involves at least two parties—both need to do two things: (i) to actively take on board the message, and (ii) to respond. We communicate such things as how we are feeling, what we want to do, or what we need to do. This booklet is designed to help you to communicate effectively with people with disabilities.

Some people with disabilities will have difficulty with communication—some with taking on board the message, and others with responding. This may arise from speech impairments, mobility impairments, intellectual impairments, hearing impairments, or visual impairments. These disabilities may exist from birth or be acquired throughout the lifetime from medical conditions or accidents. Some are temporary, while others are permanent. Some are visible, whilst others are not. All impairments are therefore quite varied. This means that a variety of communication techniques are required.

Some people shy away from talking to people with disabilities because they are fearful of getting into a situation in which they do not know what to do. For people who find communicating difficult, this can lead to frustration, agitation, sorrow and loneliness. Being able to communicate with people can allow much more happiness in life. There are many people in the community who because of disabilities do not attend a church. We must consider whether the gospel or church message has been presented to these people in a way they can understand, hear, see or feel.

Communicating is not just what or how we say something though. We also use non-verbal methods with our hands, eyes and facial expression. Today for example, we use e-mail, letters, faxes, newspapers, music, television, radio and poetry, just to name a few.

We encourage you to think about communication in its widest sense, including the use of as many senses as possible—especially visual, auditory and touch. By applying the guidelines when communicating with people with disabilities, you are being a blessing to them, and allowing them to be a blessing to you.

Language

There is some language that is more helpful than others when talking with or referring to a person who has a disability. The simplest way to know which language is best, is to ask the person themselves. The following are guidelines only. Generally speaking, the language below shows respect, dignity, individuality and puts emphasis on the person rather than the disability. The tone of your voice also conveys a lot.

Here are some guidelines for language. Be mindful that words do change over time, both in meaning, in use and in connotation and context.

Do use:	Don't use:
"person with a disability"	"handicap" "retard" "cripple" "crip" "invalid"
"wheelchair user"	"wheelchair bound" "confined to a wheelchair"
"a person with (condition)"	"suffering from..." "a victim of..." "crippled by..." "arthritic" etc...
"learning disability"/ "intellectual disability"	"mentally retarded" "mentally handicapped"
"hearing impaired"/ "hard of hearing"	"dumb mute"

Contacts for Advice on Communication

Enable Information

- A national disability information and referral service
ph: 0800 17 1981
fax: 06 952 0022
web site: www.enable.co.nz
address: PO Box 4547, Palmerston North

National Foundation for the Deaf

ph: 0800 867 446
fax: 0800 3323 4357
website: www.nfd.org.nz

New Zealand CCS (NZCCS)

ph: 09 625 9378
fax: 09 625 6177
address: PO Box 24 327, Royal Oak, Auckland

Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind (RNZFB)

ph: 0800 243 333
fax: 09 355 6919
website: www.rnzfb.org.nz
address: 9 Maunsell Rd Parnell, Auckland

Talklink Communication

- Provides communication solutions through technology for people with disabilities
ph: 09 815 3232
fax: 09 815 3230
website: www.talklink.org.nz
address: PO Box 44 053, Point Chevalier, Auckland

Telecom Special Needs Programme

- Provides relevant products and services to assist communication by phone lines.
ph: 123 or 0800 114 104 TTY: 0800 105 554
fax: 0800 106 665

Summary

By reading this booklet you have shown that you are aware of people with disabilities in your community. Within the world are some disabled people who live isolated lives. By reading these communication guidelines you have equipped yourself to connect with and walk alongside disabled people in your community. You can also assist your church to do the same.

As you would have read, all speech, intellectual, visual and hearing impairments are many and varied. No two people have the same abilities or disabilities. We can use both our strengths and their strengths to enjoy communicating. Everyone has valuable opinions to express and interesting perspectives on life that we may benefit from understanding. Many have learnt that...

***a person who hears less may see more,
one who sees less may perceive more,
one who speaks slowly may have more to say,
a person who moves with more difficulty, may
have a clearer sense of direction!***

Communicating is an important part of our daily lives. Furthermore, when we have a conversation with someone who has a disability, we are communicating God's love to them. By applying the guidelines in this booklet when interacting with someone who has communication challenges, you are enabling them to participate more fully in life.

Have you ever thought about what you say when you first meet a person with a disability? How about this for a good start... ***"Hello. How are you?"***

Language Guidelines



....a smile is worth a thousand words...

- The important thing is not to reinforce the stereotypes and negative images associated with disability. In general, people with disabilities are not worried about the words that you use, but the attitude in which you express those words to them.
- Use people first language. Try not to categorise people—we are all individuals.
- Don't worry about using expressions that could be interpreted as disability related puns such as 'got to run' or 'see what I mean?'. These are part of our common everyday language and are not offensive.
- Choose language that affirms rather than diminishes. People with disabilities would rather dwell on their strengths than their weaknesses. They do not want pity or to be unduly glorified for 'courageously' coping with everyday life.
- Often, because it may be difficult to talk to someone, conversation is limited to daily needs. Try to discuss a range of topics such as weather, family, sports, news, entertainment and hobbies. This makes for a much more interesting conversation for both parties.
- More often than not, people with disabilities do not want to be asked personal and intrusive questions. However, most people are more than happy to tell others about their disability.

Speech Impairment

Speech is one of the most complex functions that the body performs because so many muscles are involved—over 100! Speech impairments are usually the result of damage to the part of the brain responsible for finding words and/or the activation or co-ordination of the muscles of the jaw, tongue and vocal chords. Some people will not be able to speak, whereas others may have difficulty being understood. Lack of speech however, does not necessarily mean lack of intelligence!

- One of the biggest things to remember is to always speak directly to the person.
- Try to be at eye level, and to be a good listener. Put yourself in their situation and think about what they could be trying to say? Their body language and facial expression should be able to help you interpret what they are trying to communicate to you.
- Having a conversation with someone with a speech impairment takes time, so be patient. You will not be the only person who has found it difficult to understand them. They will be grateful that you are trying to communicate.
- At the end of a distinct section of conversation, it is often good to summarise and reflect back to the person. .
- When talking to someone who has a stutter, it is best not to anticipate and complete their words for them.

Aids

- Check whether the person with the speech impairment usually uses a communication device. Some people will have gestures they regularly use. Many devices exist such as communication boards, or talking computers with the aid of a head or mouth wand (shown opposite). Computers allow people to write sentences, sermons, and e-mails.

- Do not worry if you are not understood immediately. Try rephrasing your sentence rather than repeating yourself. Did you know that words such as “colourful”, and “I love you” look very similar when lip reading. Accents also make lip reading harder to interpret.
- Observe the person for signs of weariness – concentrating for too long can be exhausting.
- Would you consider learning sign language? If you are keen, contact your nearest Deaf Association office for details of classes in your area (www.deaf.co.nz).



Aids for Hearing Impairments

Some people with hearing impairment use hearing aids, whereas for others this is not useful. Others can lip read or understand sign language. People with hearing impairments can make the most of their hands and eyes by using the internet, e-mail and facsimile. Written notes are also helpful. They can also use assistive devices on the telephone with visual ringer indication and amplified voices and ringer volume/pitch.

Hearing Impairment

One condition that is not visible is hearing impairment. The degree of impairment is greatly varied. Often this is one of the loneliest disabilities, as people stop talking to them altogether! Unfortunately, many people with hearing impairment do not attend churches because they cannot follow the audible sermon and speaking. Because of this and a growing awareness, more and more churches are providing signing interpreting services and a loop system for hearing aids. Some churches are also supplying a written sermon or are using PowerPoint displays. When talking to someone with hearing impairments these guidelines should be useful:-

- Wave or tap gently on their shoulder to get their attention.
- Find out whether the person hears better with one ear — if so, speak on that side.
- Face the person directly so that your lips can be read.
- Maintain eye-contact and use descriptive facial expression and gestures — use many visual cues.
- Try to limit background distractions or noise — if necessary move to a quiet place.
- Speak clearly and distinctly at a moderate speed – but without exaggeration. Use everyday language.
- Don't stand in front of a bright light source since this puts the face in shadow and makes lip reading difficult.
- Remain still and try not to fidget – keep your hands away from your mouth and relax.
- Ask if you do not understand – never pretend that you do understand, because people will know if you don't!
- Do not chew gum if they are lip-reading. Keep the object you are talking about near mouth level.
- Don't be embarrassed to rely on written notes. They can promote effective communication.

- Every year new and improved devices are put on the market. You do not need to know how to use them, because the user will be able to. All you may need to do is put the device within reach of the person, and the wand in place!

Communication Board/Book

These vary from person to person. The words or pictures are pointed to with a finger or a head wand. An example is below.



Communicating with People in a Coma

"I do not know how often my experience has been repeated but I am certain that an unconscious person is very aware and affected by encouraging as well as negative remarks. Whenever you call on a sick person who is unconscious, don't feel it is hopeless trying to communicate. Hold their hand. Touch is so important. Talk to them. Tell them who you are. Above all, tell them you are praying for them and that you love them." Bev Everton

Questioning

If you are having a conversation with a person with a disability and you can not understand what a person is saying, try the following communication tools :-

1 Understand how the person communicates “yes” and “no”.

They may be using their eyes, tongue or nodding. No response may mean “no”. When you have determined these, it is possible to have a whole conversation with these answers. Take note of the amount of feeling which has been used to give the yes or no reply. Here is an example of this questioning technique:

<i>Have you got any brothers or sisters?</i>	Yes.
<i>A sister?</i>	No.
<i>A brother?</i>	Yes.
<i>More than one?</i>	No.
<i>Is he older than you?</i>	Yes.
<i>Is he working?</i>	Yes.
<i>Are you at school?</i>	Yes.

2 Concentrate on their lips.

If this doesn't help then concentrate on the sound only – they may be enunciating very carefully and precisely. After some time it will become easier to understand what is being said as you become attuned to their speech patterns.

3. Ask the person to **repeat it once**
4. Then ask to person to **say it another way**
5. Suggest that they give you a **keyword** or the **subject**
6. If you can't get the word, **ask for it to be spelt.**

If you still can not understand or you need more details try **alphabet spelling** as outlined on the following page.

Other Devices

People with visual impairment make the most of their other senses to communicate — especially their hearing and touch. Using their listening skills they can hear talking books and watches/clocks, use Dictaphones to remind themselves of things, a telephone to keep in contact with friends, and a voice activation computer with voice synthesizer for e-mailing and general word processing. The radio is also a great way for them to stay in touch with what is happening in their community and around the country.

Touch can effectively become their eyes too. This is why it is helpful for them to feel something that is being talked about. By using their touch they can read Braille books, read the time on watches, or use a Braille machine to create Braille notes. Check out the Braille alphabet below.

Some letters in the Braille Alphabet

•	••	•••	••••	•••••	••••••	•••••••	••••••••	•••••••••
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i

All Braille letters are made from 6 dots called a cell.

Other people with visual impairment can read text using a magnifying glass, or if it is blown up to large print size by using a photocopier or computer. Usually 'Arial' font size 16 is adequate. Verdana is also a good easily read font.

Visual Impairment

Visual impairment is varied. It could mean complete blindness to blurred or spotty vision, night vision or tunnel vision. It is best to ask the person how much they can see. The world can be a much friendlier place if the following guidelines are used :-

- When greeting people with visual impairment, tell them who you are and shake their hand or touch their shoulder.
- When surrounded by others, make sure they know you are talking to them.
- Ask if and how you can be of assistance — never force assistance.
- Speak clearly, but do not speak unnecessarily loudly.
- When at church, let them know when the congregation stands up and sits down.
- Describe what the things being discussed look like.
- When giving them something, tell them where you are putting it i.e.. *“the drink is to your left on the table”*.
- If something is wrong like a dirty spot on their clothing, don't be embarrassed to point it out and ask if they would like assistance, do be discrete.
- Speak to both the person with visual impairment as well as to their friend who is with them.
- When guiding, give verbal cues about what is ahead such as curbs, steps and doors.
- Always excuse yourself when you leave, otherwise they may continue talking thinking that you are still there!

Alphabet Spelling

This can be used at any time in any place, and is especially useful when sophisticated communication devices are not available. Anyone can communicate in this way once a person's “yes” and “no” responses have been determined. Practise this technique on a friend by asking them to think of a short sentence. Ask simple questions one at a time, and wait for the response. Ask “closed” questions that require short answers or give the person choices. For example: *“Do you want tea?” “Do you want coffee?”*

To determine a word, three basic questions are asked: *“Is it a vowel?”*, and *“Is it a letter from A-K?”*, and *“Is it a letter from L-Z?”* Here is an example of how you ask these questions. :-

1 **“Is it a vowel?”**

If yes, then ask *“A....E....I....O....U?”*

The person will indicate “yes” when you say the correct letter.

If not...

2 **“Is it a letter from A – K?”**

If yes, then go through these letters

“B....C....D....E.....F.....etc”

If not...

3 **“It must be M – Z”**, so try the remaining letters,

“L....M....N....O...etc...”

It may be helpful to write the letters down. When a word has been formed, ask: **“Is that the end of the word?”**

Mobility Impairments

There are many causes for physical impairments. Some impairments involve all four limbs, whereas others only involve one. When the lower limbs are involved, people with have difficulty with mobility and will often use a wheelchair, or crutches, or a walker. Therefore, most people will be sitting to communicate and converse. If this is the case it is good to do the following : -

- Sit down beside the person, in order to be at eye level.
- Do not move the person's wheelchair or walking aids.
- Do not lean on the person's wheelchair or "invade" the persons space.
- Assume nothing, always ask the person if in doubt.
- Try not to talk from behind the person, make eye contact instead.
- Talk directly to the person in the wheelchair, not just their friend.



Aids

People who cannot use certain parts of their body to do a certain task, can often use another body part. For example, if they cannot use their voice, they might use their finger, hands, mouth, chin, to communicate! People with mobility difficulties may have computers or phones that respond to voice recognition. Or speaker phone and quick-dial buttons on their phones. The internet and e-mail is a great way to keep in contact with people, and you can even do the shopping online!

Intellectual Impairment

There is a broad spectrum of abilities for people with intellectual impairments. Some will find it difficult to understand what is spoken to them, and to remember what has been said. For effective communication, both parties need to understand and be understood. To assist in communicating, try the following helpful hints : -



- Keep instructions to one or two simple steps.
- Take extra time to explain instructions if necessary.
- Write things down if this will be helpful.
- Treat adults as adults and children as children.
- People with intellectual disabilities have had different life experiences, and sometimes a limited peer group — think of this when considering conversational topics.
- Don't be afraid to assist people to stay on track with what they are talking about. Some people may also need to be gently reminded of when it is appropriate to talk about some topics. If it is not ok for you to say it in that situation or context, then it is probably not ok for them to say it either.