

The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

An Enriched Communication Approach in Sensory Loss

By DeafBlind Ontario Services

Have you considered the importance of the distance senses, and the impact on gathering information and communication?

This article aims to provide a practice reflection for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in learning about the Enriched Communication Approach and related strategies in supporting individuals who are Deaf, hard of hearing, and non-verbal with a developmental disability.

Why is knowledge about the sense of hearing valuable and important when providing services to someone living with this sensory loss?

The distance senses are vision, hearing, and sense of smell. The distance senses of vision and hearing significantly impact learning and gathering information from the world around us. The hearing sense specifically includes hearing and listening, as well as interpreting, localizing sounds, and being able to filter and selectively attend to auditory input. Therefore, it directly links to language acquisition, communication, spatial awareness, orientation, and sensory integration.

Why is this knowledge necessary for DSPs when providing services?

As a critical professional providing service, DSPs play a vital role in ensuring the unique and distinct language, communication requirements, and environmental considerations are met for a person who is Deaf, hard of hearing, and non-verbal with a developmental disability. The DSP must be knowledgeable about the range of effective communication strategies. According to Stuart (2019), a person supported may experience unique and continuous functional limitations due to the communication dynamics of this sensory loss. The following considerations may support the approach and related strategies in developing and enhancing communication.

Consideration # 1 – Understanding the characteristics, wants, communication level, and needs

- Supports should be provided that consider the person's characteristics, wants, and needs, so that they have a sense of belonging and connection (Brown (a)).

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- Communication with people with hearing loss and developmental disabilities may differ from communication with people with hearing loss in the general population. For example, if sign language is used, it may not conform to traditional American Sign Language or other commonly accepted non-verbal methods of communication (Brown (b)).

A person who is Deaf, hard of hearing, or non-verbal who also has a developmental disability may:

- require additional processing time for information and communication. It may be longer or intermittent and could be enhanced by the type of sensory loss(es) and/or environment,
- have challenges with expressive and receptive channels,
- have difficulty gathering and processing information,
- require consistent and routine strategies to connect and relate to concepts with communication and language,
- require enhanced or adapted learning methods to accommodate cognitive and sensory abilities,
- demonstrate challenges with sensory integration, i.e., the importance of the senses, and their impact on gathering information and communicating effectively,
- have spatial awareness and vestibular impacts. The vestibular impact could affect balance, as well as increase the risk of falls and disorientation.
- understand in a literal or concrete way i.e., here and now, and
- have difficulties learning incidentally, i.e., transferring and relating information learned previously to a new or another situation.

These characteristics may also be enhanced or varied based on the etiology of the person i.e., the person is Deaf and may also be on the autism spectrum. According to DeafBlind Ontario Services Training Outgoing Unique Committed Holistic (TOUCH)™ 1 Training Participant Guide, (a) it is important to know the underlying cause. The level of sensory loss and the combination of symptoms varies from person to person. “In fact, two people with the same diagnosis may present very differently when it comes to their communication, enhanced coping skills (behaviors), cognitive abilities and health. Individuals with developmental disabilities may have both a diagnosis of the disability, and a mental health diagnosis, referred to as a “dual diagnosis” and specialized supports may be required.” Understanding the considerations above can support the strategies for providing adequate information and communication.

Consideration # 2 – Understanding Enriched Communication Approach (ECA)

According to DeafBlind Ontario Services TOUCH™ 1 Training Participant Guide, the Enriched Communication Approach assists in creating a responsive environment, which addresses the person’s diverse communication styles and language needs. This involves expressive and receptive channels and the “layering of methods” to find the correct language and communication methods for and with each person.

ECA may include but is not limited to:

- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ACC) Devices
- Braille
- Body Language
- Calendar Systems
- Concrete Cues
- Experience Tools
- Facial Expressions
- Fingerspelling
- Gestures
- Haptics

- Pictures: variety & type i.e., coloured, textured
- Print
- Print on Palm
- Protactile
- Signing/Sign Language
- Speech
- Social Stories
- Story boards
- Two-hand manual
- Tactile Signing
- Tone of Voice

As per the DeafBlind Ontario Services TOUCH™ 1 Training Participant Guide (b)

The importance of utilizing this approach is:

- Language is *dynamic*; a sign seen, or word spoken is just a moment.
- A tangible card, an object is *static*, therefore, constant and can be repeatedly referenced in conjunction with language.
- Layering of concrete (actual object), semi-concrete (representation of an object), graphic (pictures), and abstract (sign or word).
- A “layering method” supports reinforcement and strengthens the meaning of the language and communication method.
- It considers the impact of the distance senses on the receptive and expressive process and gathers information effectively.
- It supports successful interactions, exchange of information, and conversations.
- It ensures collaborative conversations – exchange of information and communication, i.e., two-way street.
- It validates the importance of feeling connected and empowers the person to connect in the right way.
- It is not static: it should evolve and change to the person’s communication needs, development, and/or changes to vision, hearing, and mobility, i.e., dexterity.

Consideration # 3 – Communication process

Understanding the person’s preferred expressive and receptive modes of communication, and language is vital. Expressive communication typically refers to when you send a message (the output), and receptive communication is when you receive a message (the input).

It is very important to note, that a person’s expressive and receptive communication skills may be different. We should never assume a person’s proficiency and ability to express language formally is the same as their ability to receive language and information.

People may use a combination of communication methods, both expressively and receptively. For example, a person may receive and understand information in sign language, and may need pictures to help reinforce the meaning but will use sign language and speech to express themselves. Most people's receptive abilities develop faster than their expressive.

The analogy of the **iceberg** is a great visual concept when thinking about someone who may not consistently express with language, i.e., speech, written words, or sign language. **Above the surface**, you only see the tip of the iceberg, i.e., the person may share only a few consistent formal and adapted signs. **Underneath the surface of the water**, the iceberg is robust in stature. You can compare and relate this to the person's receptive abilities, whereby they may be taking in and understanding more messages, language, and communication modes given, therefore, conceptually understanding much more than what they express.

According to DeafBlind Ontario Services TOUCH™ 1 Training Participant Guide (c), this concept illustrates the importance of providing opportunities for the person to expand and develop language and communication skills. An example of this situation can be further elaborated in an example of a person who does not independently sign "coffee" or "coffee shop." However, when the DSP signs "coffee," the name of the coffee store with the person, and gives the coffee shop cup, the person gets ready to go out. Therefore, it is important for the DSP to always be working on the opportunity for the exchange of language and communication as a two-way exchange. They should consistently use the same methods and modes of communication and language with the person, in hopes that one day the person may sign "coffee," or hand you the cup to indicate they want to go out for coffee. Connection, consistency, and repetition are key practices in connecting the language, and the communication method to the concept with the person.

Consideration # 4 – Environmental considerations

- It is important to consider the environmental surroundings which could affect receiving and expressing language effectively, i.e., lighting, background sounds. The environmental surroundings could also affect the receiving and expressing, communicating, and processing information due to auditory and visual clutter.
- According to DeafBlind Ontario Services TOUCH™ 1 Participant Guide (d), it is important to know of the sensory loss, i.e., type and level of hearing loss, as well as the other co-occurring disabilities affecting communication, i.e., does the person have any residual (useable) hearing, if so, in which ear or both? Is there additional sensory loss? This includes understanding how to effectively use any residual (useable) hearing/vision, including aids and tech devices. Even with the best efforts, it is not always possible to accurately interpret someone's verbal or nonverbal communication. However, success rates improve with practice and employing a variety of strategies, such as establishing how a person communicates 'yes' and 'no,' offering choices, or allowing extra time for the individual to respond. Using communication aids such as plain language, picture supports, demonstrations, and alternative formats (e.g., electronic readers, large print, and translations, such as into braille or the reader's native languages) are helpful.

Consideration # 5 – Professional development of DSP

- This role requires awareness of Deaf Culture and its unique diversity in its history and heritage in addressing the overall communication needs of those who are Deaf, hard of hearing, and non-verbal with a developmental disability.
- It is important to continually increase your language skillset if required with the person, i.e., taking additional sign classes, or researching signs required for the activity, or

situation. There may be situations which may require an Interpreter or Deaf Interpreter (DI), i.e., medical appointments.

As recommended by the Training Box's Enrich language in communication, adapt your language to other's preferences: matching someone's own style or sensory preference improves the chance of being understood. How can someone hear what you are saying if they need you to paint them a picture? Appeal to all the senses if you do not know the preference. If you are communicating to a group, do not know, or cannot predict the natural preference, build in language and methods that appeal to a mix of all the senses.

- Developing an expressive and receptive list with a description of what is typically communicated by signs, gestures, sounds, etc. with the person can provide consistency in supports, and historical overview of the progression of communication and language.
- View each person's combination of Enriched Communication Approach, as individualized as they are. On-going review and evaluation of methods is a valuable process to ensure the correct techniques and approaches work for the person.

Conclusion

Practice reflection when supporting someone who is Deaf, hard of hearing, and non-verbal with a developmental disability. Practice reflection could enhance accessibility and inclusion requirements with the person, increasing communication and language opportunities. It is important to recognize the direct impact of building on your own skill sets in a variety of communication methods, including social connection, self-esteem, empowerment, and realizing the potential of the person supported.

"By using this approach and strategies, it can make the complicated simple and empower people to communicate and express themselves – be it through speech or sign, touch or movement, gesture or sound, art or dance" (Sense UK).

About DeafBlind Ontario Services

DeafBlind Ontario Services has over 30 years of experience providing specialized services supporting adults with sensory loss. This experience has expanded our knowledge and skills required when working with someone who is Deaf, hard of hearing, and non-verbal with developmental disabilities. Our specialized support team draws on their training and expertise to assess the preferences and needs of the person supported, so they can increase their independence, develop new skills, and strengthen their communication. DeafBlind Ontario Services believes that all individuals have the right to decide their future, to make their own decisions, and to have all information given to them in their preferred mode of communication or language.

For more information, please visit: <https://deafblindontario.com/>

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