



Tips for communicating with people with intellectual disability

Communicating effectively and appropriately with people with intellectual disability is critical to the deliver quality health care. This tip sheet contains some strategies and ideas to strengthen and enable our communication skills.

Be respectful



- ☑ **Treat adults** with intellectual, cognitive or developmental disabilities as **adults**. Use your regular tone of voice and don't speak down to them.
- ☑ **Body language is important** because people with an intellectual disability often rely on visual cues. Have an upright and open posture, lean in while speaking and listening. Don't fidget.

Focus on the person

- ☑ **Try and have the person's full attention** before you start talking. Use their name and make eye contact.
- ☑ **Eliminate distractions** and minimise background noise if possible.
- ☑ **Give information gradually and clearly** to avoid sensory overload. Only give one or two directions at a time to avoid confusion.
- ☑ Be prepared to **repeat the same information** in a different way if necessary.



Be clear and direct

- ☑ **Give information in writing** as well as verbally if that is the person's preference.
- ☑ **Use specific and direct language**. Don't use abstracts, acronyms, metaphors or puns. When possible, use words that relate to things you both can see.
- ☑ **Give exact instructions**. For example, "You will see the nurse at 10:30," rather than "Come back to see the nurse in 15 minutes." Don't use directional terms such as right, left, east, or west.



Keep it simple



- ☑ **Keep questions and answers simple** and easy to understand. Use supplementary visual aids, such as gestures, diagrams, or demonstrations.
- ☑ **Phrase questions without suggesting a desired or preferred response**, as some people may tell you what they think you want to hear.

Sources: Australian Federation of Disability Organisations @ www.afdo.org.au
Nursing League for Nursing @ www.nln.org