

Implementation of effective and total communication

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Lies de Jong. I work as a team leader with groups of young people at the Sensis Residential Day Centre in Breda. My co-speaker is Gisèle van Bon. She is a speech therapist at our centre.

Sensis has a clear mission: to become a multi-faceted network organisation for people who are visually impaired, with *expertise* as its main distinguishing feature and source of added value.

This means developing expertise in vision, orientation, mobility *and* communication. The clients living at our centre have more than one disability. They have a visual and an intellectual disability. Many of them also have a motor disability. Their average development age is from 2 to 4. But their average emotional development age is between 1 and 3. What this means is that many of them can't talk and so they depend on non-verbal communication.

This was the main reason for starting our 'Communication' project.

There were other reasons too:

1. There were enough communication courses for the blind. And enough for the intellectually disabled too. What was missing was a course that combined the two.

2. We needed a communication profile that the group leader could fill in. The profile would enable communication needs to be identified quicker.
3. The environment at the centre in Breda was not very well adapted. There was a lack of reference points and objects that related to the buildings and rooms.

The working group brought together knowledge from different parts of our organisation – the knowledge of the behavioural scientist, the speech therapist, the clients' teachers and the management – to direct the end result and embed it in our organisation.

When a client can only use non-verbal communication, it is essential that the client's signals are interpreted and confirmed correctly. Unfortunately, the feeling of not being understood tends to express itself in the form of undesirable aggressive behaviour. This calls for the teacher to have a sensitive, responsive basic attitude. Whether you have this basic attitude depends very much on how *you* were understood by your own parents or carers as a child. If you had a sensitive upbringing, this basic quality will be sufficiently developed in you too.

In a nutshell: professional attitude consist of: observation, interpretation and confirmation of nonverbal signals.

In the following two videos we see two communication situations: one in which care is taken and another in which it is not. Nick, who plays the main role in the videos, first came to the Sensis school when he was four. During the first year, in particular, the group leaders did not understand him. He was quite often aggressive and was seen as 'difficult'. It was only when a video analysis was carried out that it became clear that Nick really *was* doing his very best to communicate. Now, many years later, he has learned to make gestures and is enthusiastic and eager to learn. The situation in the video takes place in Nick's classroom during a group discussion.

Evaluation

In the first video we saw that Nick was involved in the discussion. He used sounds and gestures to answer all the questions the teacher and the other students asked. Each time he answered, the group leader confirmed his gestures. Nick felt that everyone understood him and he was enthusiastically taking part in the discussion. He was enjoying it.

In the second video we saw that Nick was being ignored. The longer this went on, the more frustrated he became. His sounds got louder and his gestures became more forceful. If it was normal for him to be ignored, Nick could display undesirable behaviour or withdraw and become isolated over a period of time. In short, this means he could start to behave like he did when he was four years old.

For the project group, these were important reasons for developing the 'Communication Central' course.

Firstly, the course provides a theoretical basis for professionals who work with people with a visual and intellectual disability.

In the presentation we discuss the special features of communication and language development. The different supporting communication options and levels of communication are also covered in the programme.

There is a wide range of literature for the professional who wants to find out more about what communication involves.

We also put the participants to work: they make video recordings of a client that show the various communication functions, types and aids.

In the general presentation we learn to spot their signals, to interpret them correctly and to respond to them properly – in other words, respond to them sensitively!

With many clients, video analysis and interaction as part of a team is the only way to really find out how a client is communicating and what he is trying to say. This is how they learn how to interpret behaviour.

To implement this method properly, a communication profile is prepared for each client, which can then be used to develop a communication plan. In this plan you can find the required adaptations for the client and his teachers to ensure the best possible communication. These adaptations may be supporting communication aids or changes to the client's surroundings. The photos show some examples.

The communication profile is part of each client's overall treatment or care plan and this makes communication a central aspect of everyday interaction with and by the client.

The implementation process is completed by adapting the client's surroundings, training all the professionals involved, and including communication as a key part of the overall treatment or care plan.

Before and after the course a questionnaire is used for self-reflection to see how the teachers communicate with their clients. A demonstrable difference proves the method's success.

In the grounds of our centre in Breda we have developed outside reference points. These are steel boxes that contain objects associated with nearby buildings for people to touch.

Some of these outside reference points have talking signs. When anyone comes within four metres of the box, the talking sign 'tells' the person exactly where they are in the grounds.

Demonstration of talking sign. These outside references enable our clients to move independently around the grounds.

You will soon receive a handout from us which summarises all our project group's final results and includes an email address. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.