

Communication Dictionaries and Communication Passports

This article is an updated version of an article originally written in the 90's

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Communication dictionaries had been employed by the Speech and Language Therapists in Oldham, since 1993. The dictionaries had taken many guises and were used to raise staff awareness of communication, in particular how the members of staff or the person's family, interpreted mainly non-verbal communication. Communication dictionaries can be an essential component of person centred plans. The dictionaries combined ideas from the original Speech and Language Therapy design from 1993 with ideas from Essential Lifestyle planning - listening to people who do not use words to talk. Difficulties with both designs were identified and a combined version was piloted by the team in Oldham which included Therapists and a group of staff on part-time secondment with the team, known as Total Communication Co-ordinators. Finally a version which everyone felt happy with was produced.

Usually dictionaries take five, 1/2 day sessions to complete including a half day training session outlining the dictionary process and covering topics such as understanding of spoken language and symbolic development. Each Total Communication Co-ordinator facilitates a dictionary group, consisting of family members, staff, friends and the service user themselves, if appropriate. The aim of the session is to produce a document which gives detailed descriptions of how the person communicates and how we can best communicate with them.

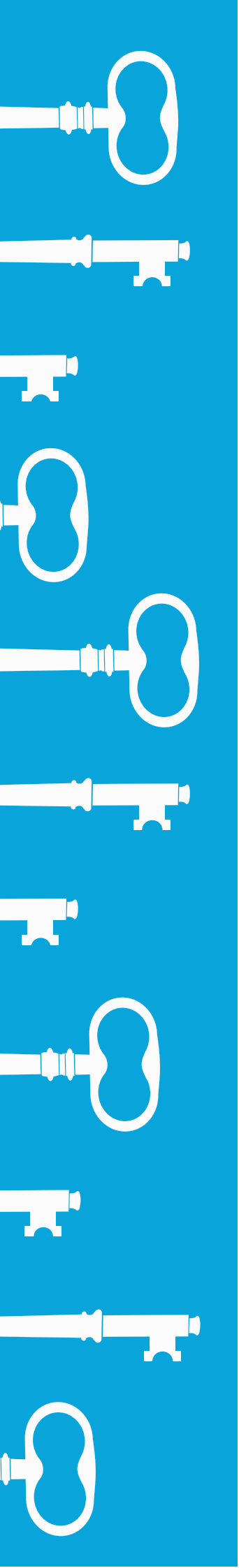
Although on the surface an apparently simple document, many of the benefits can be found in the process itself and the skill of the facilitator is paramount throughout.

Each group member is encouraged to contribute descriptions of how they interpret the persons' movements, facial expressions, gestures, vocalisations etc. It is the facilitators' role to attempt to encompass all views. With infants, who are themselves non-verbal, there are usually only 2 main carers, the potential for consistency in response and support is much greater than with multiple carers. Parents shape their child's communication and help them to develop cause and effect by responding as if the child had communicative intent.

<https://www.communicationpassports.org.uk>

Dictionaries are a means of preserving knowledge. Often it can take years for teams to build up an understanding of an individuals' communication and as staff changes seem sadly inevitable this knowledge is all too frequently lost. Dictionaries provide a means of protecting vital information and potentially protecting the individual too. They can be a useful starting point for further communication work and can be useful for new carers during the process of transition.

When supporting people with complex learning disabilities who don't use speech, we often respond 'intuitively'. In his book, 'Six Thinking Hats', Edward de Bono describes intuition as 'a complex set of judgements'. Communication dictionaries can be seen as a structured thinking process, a way of mapping our interpretations of an individuals' communication.



Although paper-based, dictionaries can be summarised into video; line drawings or photographs can also be included, for example, of a difficult-to-describe facial expression or an idiosyncratic sign.

The dictionary itself is divided into two parts.

Part 1 is the expressive section and requests descriptions of basics such as how the person shows they are bored, happy, hungry, tired, etc.

Part 2 is about receptive language, how we let the person know certain things, for example, where we are going, the dictionary asks what we do now and then what would be ideal.

Here the skills of a Speech and Language Therapist may be especially relevant as it is important to consider whether the person is able to understand the use of spoken words or whether they may require additional cues such as objects of reference, signing, photographs and so on.

Finally, dictionaries are living documents, as language grows and changes, so should a person's communication dictionary. Regular monitoring and additions to the dictionary are part of the on-going process.

Involving managers in the production of communication dictionaries can be extremely useful as managers then take on responsibility for ensuring the dictionary is reviewed regularly and the contents shared with relevant people. www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk

Communication Passports

The findings of the Communication dictionary can then be summarised into a passport. Passports come in many guises. The model used in Oldham is based on the work of Sally Millar and Gretel McEwan. (Call Centre, Edinburgh).

Passports are personalised books with simple, manageable information, photographs and picture reflecting the person's style. We have also used objects if the person is unable to use photographs, drawings or symbols, some people have preferred to make a video. Passports provide a summary of the person's communication dictionary in as accessible format as possible. Passports embody a person centred approach, they are open-ended, so that they can be added to or changed as necessary.

McEwan and Millar describe the purpose of passports as providing 'a wholly personalised form of practical information about a person'. They also emphasise that the process of creating a passport is valuable in itself as it is likely to bring about: a Communication amongst key people in the service user's environment.

- A change in attitude amongst people supporting the service user.
- Increased confidence and sense of value in the carers.
- New insights and solutions to communication problems.

A finished passport provides:

- Practical, functional information.
- Consistency
- Continuity
- Increased confidence and sense of value in the service user.



In a similar way to dictionaries, passports also preserve valuable information, which often goes unrecorded and can be lost during times of change.

Passports enable people to cross frontiers, they provide conversational openers.

Using this approach in Transition

Dictionaries and passports are a means of preserving vital detailed information about a person's communication during transition, whether the transition is from school to college or from the parental home to a new home with staff support.

The process of getting to know someone who does not use words to talk can be slower than when each conversational partner uses spoken language. Dictionaries and passports can help to speed up this process.

The individual may understand what is being said best if the verbal message is supplemented in some way, perhaps by signing, by the use of symbols or by objects. The communication dictionary and passport will give details of how best to support someone to understand what is happening.

Stories

Ideally communication dictionaries and passports should be introduced during school years, preferably early years. Each document could be gradually built up and people would then leave school with a wealth of information about their chosen means of communicating. However a variety of factors not least the shortage of Speech and Language Therapy resources mean that for many people this process is just beginning as they enter 'adult services'.

Simon is one person who was involved in producing a communication dictionary which proved to be even more useful than anticipated.

Simon is 20 years old, he shares a house with three other men and has a team of people around him who support him. He attends a day centre twice a week, he loves music and computers. Simon has cerebral palsy and communicates using a combination of facial expression, gestures, vocalizations and pointing to photographs. The Speech and Language Therapist is currently working with Simon, his family and the team to explore the possibility of introducing a communication aid. The starting point for their work was a communication dictionary.

Midway through this process, Simon was admitted to hospital with a severe chest infection. The staff from Simon's house and his Mum, were worried about the medical staff understanding Simon's communication, especially as he didn't have a communication aid. They asked the nurses to read his communication dictionary and were delighted with the response from the hospital staff who found the document invaluable.

The detailed descriptions of Simon's communication helped them to feel more confident in their interpretations of his vocalizations and facial expressions. Everyone felt a little more relaxed about Simon's stay in hospital and he is now fully recovered



Where to go for more information

For Further information Contact:

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Updated work

Since its original development in the 1990's, the term communication dictionary has been applied to other approaches which potentially fall into the category of a communication profile. It appears to have become a more generic term and does not align to this type of approach. For this reason, the original work has been updated and adapted and is now known as the Communication Consensus Framework which more accurately describes the complexity of the approach.

This tool will be available to Speech & Language Therapists this year following training.

To express an interest in both the training and tool,
please contact alison@totalcommunication.org