

How I manage adults with mild-moderate learning disabilities

All speech and language therapy services have caseload pressures - and the adult learning disability field is no exception. Arguably, those at the milder end have the greatest potential to benefit, yet the way prioritisation works often means they don't receive any speech and language therapy input. It is widely accepted that a multidisciplinary, environmental approach which reduces barriers should have the biggest impact, but does this take sufficient account of individual need?

The following article is one of three contributions to this feature on adults with mild-moderate learning disabilities in the Spring 01 issue of *Speech & Language Therapy in Practice*, pp.27-28.

Big issues

The service culture in Oldham has shifted towards consultation and person centred planning. Alison Matthews explains how speech and language therapists and creative arts therapists can facilitate this.

Prioritisation systems invariably mean that adults with mild to moderate learning disabilities are at the end of lengthy waiting lists.

Our approach in Oldham has been to focus input both into work with individuals and work with the environment. This is often a difficult process in itself and achieving a balance often seems impossible. Our approach has been to adopt a Total Communication philosophy. Our definition is:

'Total Communication is about communicating in any way you can. It is not just about talking it's about signing, pointing to pictures, objects or photographs. It is also about using gestures or body movements. Facial expressions tell people how you feel. Writing, drawing, miming and drama and other art forms are also ways of communicating.

Through communication we build relationships with other people, we let others know how we feel and what we think. Being able to communicate and knowing that you are being listened to is important. People who don't use speech can communicate, it's just a matter of being more creative. Oldham Learning Disability Service Total Communication Project hopes to begin to find ways of enabling everyone to communicate and to provide ways for people to tell us if they want to be involved, how they are to be included and what they want to be included in' (Matthews & Dean, 1997).

Our Total Communication project focuses resources into three main areas, each over-lapping the other:

1. the service users' "world" or communication environment (usually staff or family members)
2. the world of the service and
3. the community at large.

In the 1990s, services were emphasising inclusion and in Oldham a commitment to the values of inclusion is still prevalent. However, a shift in service culture towards consultation and person centred planning has taken place. Speech and language therapists and creative arts therapists are ideally placed to facilitate consultation and to prepare the groundwork for effective person centred

planning.

Successful

One approach to improving the individual's environment has been to provide training for communication partners. One of the most successful ways we have found has been through a Total Communication Conference. This is a large three-day event with a variety of workshops, all exploring different forms of communication. Over the last five years we have run over 40 workshops ranging from symbols bingo, drama, signing and dance, through to samba, gardening and fashion. The conference aims to:

- provide positive experience of communication by involving people in workshops
- improve access issues across the community
- give people opportunities to have fun, explore their creativity and meet old and new friends
- promote community awareness of total communication
- look at how total communication is used.

The initial idea to hold a conference stemmed from the desire to raise awareness about communication across the service and to increase levels of motivation to implement change. Many services are devised to provide input for those people who are at the 'action' stage of change (Procaska & Di Clemente, 1986). The conferences provide opportunities for information to be given to people who may not actively be contemplating changing their approach to communication. For those people at the contemplating stage it provides a boost for motivation, increases their knowledge base and hopefully tips the balance towards change.

In 1999, People First (an advocacy group run by people with learning disabilities) approached the communication therapy team with an idea for a workshop about advocacy. I met with them once a month to begin planning. The workshop gradually began to take shape, the group chose the title 'Speaking Out Making Changes', and designed their own symbol.

Aims of the workshop were to:

- explore the questions "what is your life like now?" and "what would you like to change?"
- speak out and be heard
- plan change
- make a collage and use drama.

On the first day of the conference, people in the workshop made two collages, one to show what their life is like now and one to show what they would like to change. The group worked with an artist, a person centred planning worker and one of our total communication co-ordinators. Total communication co-ordinators are members of staff on secondment to the communication therapy team one and a half days a month to undertake development work.

On the second day, group members worked with our two dramatherapists and the 'Big Issue' Drama Group. The Big Issue group was set up as an advocacy group following experimentation at a previous conference with a technique known as 'playback theatre'. Playback was developed in the mid 1970s by an American actor and psychodramatist, Jonathan Fox.

Respect

Playback Theatre Manchester took part in the earlier experiments with this technique. It was the

first time the group had worked specifically with people with learning disabilities. They describe Playback Theatre as a form of improvisation where the stories told come from personal experiences. The storytellers are assisted by a conductor to tell their story and, in the case of the workshop, by the collages. The story is then spontaneously acted out. The storyteller is then the playwright and director of their own autobiographical drama. By sharing and dramatising parts of our own lives, by hearing each other with respect and no judgement, we affirm that everyone's story is unique and worth telling. We make connections, bridging the gaps between us, and our sense of isolation diminishes, while our sense of ourselves both as individuals and as members of a wider group increases. This is why Playback is sometimes referred to as Therapeutic Theatre. Dramatherapist Jayne Liddy has worked with her colleague Julie Williams to develop this technique in combination with a total communication approach.

During this process the drama group brought the collages to life, each person having the chance to see their own story and to comment on the changes they imagined on the final day. The common themes from the collages were then brought together; these included:

- getting an education
- pets
- getting your own house
- music and hobbies
- choosing what you want to eat
- making decisions about your future
- going on holiday
- transport
- romance and having a relationship
- being responsible for your own money.

The biggest issue of all seemed to be that people did not feel they were being listened to. In an attempt to address this, service managers were asked to a final presentation incorporating art work, sign and drama and were invited to respond.

Since the workshop, People First commissioned a student from the Human Communication Course at Manchester University to produce a report summarising their work. The report is produced in an accessible format using pictures. It is also available on tape in English, Bangla and Punjabi.

An interesting aspect of the workshop was the commitment shown by People First to advocate for other service users with greater communication support needs. Part of the therapist's role is therefore to encourage the use of all forms of communication in order to successfully achieve this.

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References

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