Overview on Supporting Parents Who Have Children with Disabilities

Communicating with Children with Disabilities

While speech is considered the primary form of communication, words are not the only way to convey meaning. Body language, facial expression, and tone of voice are also powerful means of communication. This has implications for children with different disabilities.

Everybody, regardless of disabilities, is able to communicate in some way. However, children with disabilities can face significant barriers in communicating their views and feelings. One of the main barriers is that people without disabilities often lack a commitment to communicate with children or adults with disabilities. But it is possible to overcome these barriers.

Some points to keep in mind are the following:

* **Attitudes:** Many believe that children with disabilities who do not communicate in the same ways as other children are unintelligent or disobedient. This negative attitude is a major barrier to effective communication.
* **Assumptions:** Children with multiple disabilities are often wrongly assumed to be unable to communicate. Their communication may be more subtle, such as the flickering of eyelids or other small movements. Good communication with children with serious disabilities requires time to build a communication method. A first step is to ask others how the child prefers to communicate.
* **Gender:** It is usually more difficult for girls with disabilities to express their views. In most cultures, the greater expectation of passivity from girls compounds the barriers that they face due to disabilities.
* **Physical environment:** A poorly laid out area without clearly defined boundaries can be confusing to children, especially those with sensory or cognitive disabilities. Lighting and temperature are also essential elements to consider. For example, cold/warm and bright/dark places can affect mood and behaviour. All parts of the environment need to be made accessible to children with physical disabilities
* **Lack of time to build a relationship:** Children with disabilities who are not used to being asked their opinions or being listened to will need more time to build up confidence and trust. It may take time to explore the best ways of communicating with a particular child. Parents may need to be more patient with themselves and their children when spending One-on-One Time with their children.
* **The disabilities:** While in-depth knowledge of all disabilities are not required, it is important to understand if and how the child’s ability to use speech and body language is affected, and what specific methods of communication best suit the child.
* **Modelling:** Parents should continue to model the behaviours that they would like to see in their children. This is especially important when it comes to helping children communicate and interact with others.

Here are some practical tips to support parents in communicating with their child with disabilities. You can remind parents that:

* When talking to a child with disabilities, they are interacting with a child, and keep the same tone and language as they would with any child of a similar age.
  + If the child cannot hear, it is important that they stay still, including their head, while talking with the child. Remind them to make sure they are looking at their child when they speak, and make sure that their child is looking at them and that their child can see their face and mouth.
* With a child with intellectual disabilities, always speak clearly, using short sentences. Remind them to use the child’s name so they know you are talking to them.
* It is very important to respond to the child’s attempts to communicate, so they understand the effectiveness and importance of communication. If a child points to an object of interest, they can point to it and clearly name it to indicate that they have understood and are listening.
* It takes time for children with disabilities to build up confidence and trust, as they are not used to being asked their opinions or being listened to.
* It may take time to explore the best ways of communicating with a particular child. They may need to be more patient with themselves and their children when spending One-on-One Time with their children.

Involving the Whole Family Including Children with Disabilities

Parents/caregivers may encounter resistance from partners or other adults in the family when introducing new household rules or trying to establish new routines.

You should encourage parents to involve the entire family. Make sure that all members of the household. Extended family - grandparents/caregivers, aunts/uncles, cousins - who are living under the same roof should be included in the discussion of household rules.

If anyone in the family has disabilities, make sure they are equally involved. Children and adults with disabilities can face significant barriers in communicating their views and feelings. One of the main barriers is that people without disabilities often lack a commitment to communicate with children or adults with disabilities. But it is possible to overcome these barriers. Sometimes this process can be time-consuming, but it is necessary to ensure their right to participate.

Children with cognitive, intellectual and/or behavioural learning disabilities take more time to learn and may have difficulty communicating. Many children with learning disabilities can learn to read and write, grow up to have jobs, and have a family of their own. Even children with more severe intellectual disabilities can be supported to participate in school and in their community and will benefit from inclusion.

Children with learning disabilities may have difficulty understanding, remembering, processing and communicating information. Specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia etc, come in many different forms, such as difficulties with letters, numbers, proprioception and coordination.

Here are some tips for supporting parents with children who have learning disabilities:

* Simplify language, summarise information and use a variety of communication methods including gestures, and pictures. Treat children with respect! Communicate in ways appropriate to physical age as well as level of cognitive development.
* Use visual images - photos, drawings, videos - to promote communication, especially when discussing abstract ideas or to help children explain their feelings.
* Consider the use of audio, audio description, easy access, subtitles, simplified (or plain language) and other assistive software.
* Be willing to repeat points, questions or answers several times to be understood.
* Give children adequate time to express themselves.
* Check in to make sure that the person understands the topic or activity to be completed.
* Incorporate hands-on learning activities into routine.

Providing Appropriate Support for Children with Disabilities

The following practices can help parents make children with disabilities feel more accepted, included, and confident during One-on-One Time as well as other times:

* Always ask children with disabilities how best to meet their needs: consider the child as the best expert about their disabilities.
* Always ask if and how a child wants or needs to be assisted. Respect the child’s wishes if your offer is not accepted.
* Allow children with disabilities to take the same risks as other children in order to help them to gain confidence. Over-protection denies them the chance to explore, discover what is possible and learn how to keep themselves safe.
* Only help children with disabilities when they need it. Too much support denies them the chance to become independent and can feel patronising.
* Be open and flexible to change to accommodate the children involved.
* Focus on reinforcing each child’s strengths and abilities rather than those things they cannot do, for example, a wheelchair user might have strong arms and hands, a deaf child might be great at drawing.
* Build on children’s strengths by praising children who say, “I don’t understand” or ask for help or thank them for asking and then offer help or an explanation.
* Give children plenty of time to both understand what is being talked about and to formulate their responses.
* Model good communication so that children learn from what they see and hear.