



Chapter One Introduction: Thinking about communication

Have you ever stopped to consider what messages you are giving? We communicate all the time, often without realising it or appreciating how our actions are interpreted by others around us.



By glancing at your watch you are giving a message that time is important to you. Doing this when talking to someone may indicate that:

- The conversation you are having is not important
- You are bored
- You are expecting someone else to arrive
- You have an appointment or need to be elsewhere

or perhaps you are feeling hungry and you are just about to ask the other person if they want to stop and have a cup of coffee!

Sometimes we explain our actions and sometimes not. We leave them to be interpreted by others. One action may have several different meanings. The person who is seeing the action will need to interpret it using a 'jigsaw' of information. This may include words, body language, situational and environmental understanding.

However, this may not be easy for all individuals, especially children and young people who have difficulties in understanding and interpreting communication. This includes children who have communication difficulties and those who do not have English as a first language. We live in a world where sitting at the table and having a conversation over a daily meal is now unusual. The skills involved in communicating effectively have not been learnt by all children and this often causes communication confusion.

This book takes a look at how communication happens and how it is given, received and understood. Many communication techniques are explained, and ideas are given on how to improve the giving and receiving of information for all, including those with specific communication impairments.

All animals communicate in some way: dogs will bark at people they don't know; lions will 'scent' their territory; and even ants use movement, smell and touch to communicate.

We communicate in similar ways: we use touch, body language and movement to indicate how we are feeling and what we mean. This non-verbal communication is very powerful, and the interpretation provides us with approximately 95% of our understanding. However, we live in a verbal world and sometimes we rely too much on speech and language.

Speech and language are an essential part of our human development. We have evolved to become social animals using very sophisticated verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

There are about 6,000 different languages used worldwide; some are only spoken among very small communities and are very particular to a region, area or tribe. Only one third of these are thought to have systems of writing; the others are purely spoken language. The most common language is Mandarin Chinese, used by approximately one billion people. The next most common languages are English and Hindi.



Language changes over time, both oral and written. One of the most recent changes includes the use of text language through mobile phones and social networking sites. We also have many dialects and slang. The way we talk also makes a difference to our understanding. The same words can have different meaning through the inflection in our voice.

No two individuals use language in exactly the same way. The vocabulary and phrases people use are linked to their backgrounds, where they live, their age, educational level and social status.

The same message can be given in hundreds of different ways. It is up to the listener to interpret the message. Some children do not use spoken language at all. They are non-verbal and communicate through the use of symbols, signs, by understanding signals given from the situation they are in, or by seeing objects that help them relate to the message.

Language can alter the brain and shape how it functions, particularly in the early years of learning. Speech is an activity unique to humans, involving both physical and mental activity. It involves the brain to decode and interpret information, and the body in the use of the diaphragm, ears, lips, tongue and vocal chords to respond.

You may wonder why parrots talk. In fact, they are not talking as such; instead, they are imitating sounds that they have heard by using muscles in their throat and directing airflow to produce learned noises. A parrot might seem to say “hello” or “goodbye” or may just enjoy repeating the sound of a squeaky door or the ring of a mobile phone. They do not process information given, nor respond in the form of conversation.

We use language naturally, but it is one of the most complex parts of human development. It is not surprising that we sometimes get it wrong or become confused over what messages are being given and received.

Unless we are speaking remotely, for instance, over the phone, the interpretation of language is primarily understood through the contribution of non-verbal signals.

Many children and young people have difficulty in understanding and processing the spoken word and in interpreting body language and may need some additional visual clues to help piece together the messages being given.



George is on the autism spectrum. He dislikes eye contact and prefers to turn his back on those wishing to speak to him. He finds it very difficult to hear and process verbal communication.

He gets confused by non-verbal communication, particularly in relation to understanding facial expressions. He will respond to his name, and will comply with some instructions if given clearly and repeated using the same words several times.

He needs additional support to understand the meaning behind the words. This is given by using objects of reference. For instance, when it is time for dinner, his mother will stand in front of him, tell him it is dinner time and at the same time hold out a plate, knife and fork.

We need to recognise that each person is individual and therefore will require a person-centred approach to ensure their specific communication requirements are met.