

The Minimal Speech Approach

It is common for many people to use too much language when talking to, or giving instructions to individuals with learning difficulties. It is a trap that all of us can fall into quite easily without realising it. There is also a common misconception that we often assume that some individuals with learning difficulties can understand a lot more than they actually do. This often happens because an individual may be very verbal and we believe that everything that he is saying, he understands. Some individuals learn a lot of phrases and often use words that they do not understand, but the listener assumes that if they are using the language they must understand it. Another reason we often get a false impression of the true nature of a person's understanding is that they are able to follow instructions. However, some individuals become adept at following contextual clues and have a memory of certain routines, and they are not necessarily following the verbal instruction.

It is important that we have an awareness of our own language level when we are not really sure of an individual's level of comprehension. In these cases, we should always keep our language simple. Assessing language levels and capabilities is often very difficult and is best carried out by a speech and language therapist who can observe the individual in a range of communication situations and environments. It is also important to make sure that the individual does not have a hearing impairment which is preventing him from actually hearing the commands.

The minimal speech approach focuses on using one or two key words rather than a sentence. For instance, a carer could say to an individual "Right, get your coat and boots and let's go to the beach". The individual may not understand any of this, and completely ignore the carer, or may just follow what others are doing. Alternatively the carer could take the individual to their coat, hand it to them and say "coat". The individual could then be taken to his boots, and the carer would say "boots", as she helps the individual to put them on. This may seem like a rather long-winded way for a busy carer to show someone what he needs to do, but in time it should show positive benefits. It is important to create a focus of attention and then use language. So if we are putting an individual's boots on, we say "boots". This way, a connection can be made between objects or events, and particular words. In the longer term, we hope the individual will not have to be physically shown the objects, but will recognise the word.

When using language it is also important to avoid using abstract language and terms. Initially it is probably best to stick with nouns (ball, cup) and verbs (run, swim), rather than use adjectives (big, old), prepositions (in, behind), pronouns (he, mine), or time concepts (tomorrow, this afternoon).



The minimal speech approach can be used with adults or children with a severe communication delay. Just using single words can often be much more effective than sentences. There is now evidence to show that simplifying language not only helps individuals with autism have a better understanding of language, but also has positive effects on behaviour and encourages more interaction and responses. Behavioural difficulties often occur because individuals do not understand what is happening or what other people are expecting. By simplifying language, inappropriate or challenging behaviour may be avoided.

Adding further cues alongside single word commands can also facilitate understanding. Using visuals, a sign or gesture, or objects alongside the speech can give the individual further cues. It is also worth noting, that if you use visuals etc, still use single words, as a longer sentence can distract from the other cue.

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Finding You, Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch With People With Severe Learning Disabilities Combined With Autistic Spectrum Disorder by Phoebe Caldwell

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