



Unified Rugby Course

➤ Communication

Trust Rugby International Spain

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Communication with people with (and without) learning disabilities.

Follow the [link](#) below to watch a short clip from the film “We Are Champions” and use the following questions as a self-reflection on communication.

1. What limitations or difficulties in communication and language do the people with learning disabilities seen in the video have?
2. What communication mistakes is the coach making?
3. What communication skills does the trainer need to develop, practice and maintain?

Sensitivity and empathy is a personal quality and a communication skill to be developed by all those who are going to interact with people with learning disabilities taking into account the emotions and needs of others. From the scene we highlight the special communication needs (SCN) of three of the characters.

1. Difficulties in understanding messages

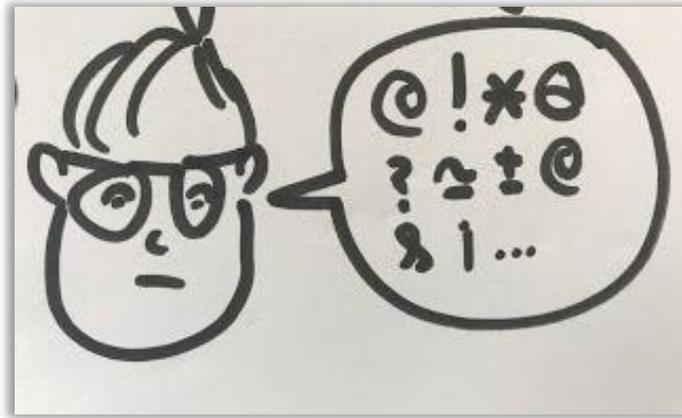


We can infer from this scene that he has no difficulty in elaborating messages and that his communication problems particularly affect the comprehension of messages. He understands the message according to the exact meaning of the words. Comprehension refers to difficulties in understanding the meaning of the sentences he perceives. The coach uses an overly ambiguous phrase that the player cannot understand, requires inferring or interpreting what is meant by "partner".

Communicating with people with learning disabilities who have comprehension difficulties is essential: Use simple, clear, specific and descriptive but always adult form lexis (unless they are children).

- It is also advisable to reinforce the message with non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, etc.).
- We could also support the message with images, drawings, photographs or pictograms, or have them observe the enablers, modelling what it is that we are asking them to do).
- Observe their feedback to see if they have understood and rephrase until they do.

2. Unintelligible speech

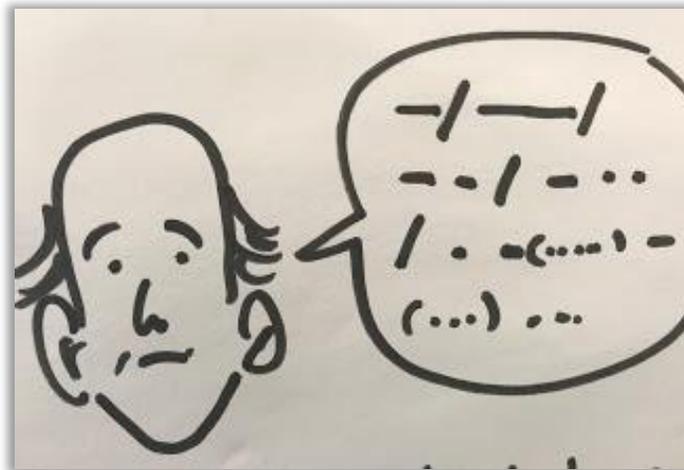


We infer that this gentleman with Down's syndrome has no comprehension problems but has problems in elaborating messages, being unintelligible speech to an "untrained" ear. There are anatomical, physiological and neurological factors that appear in people with Down's syndrome that are pointed out as being responsible for this characteristic of speech, for which some people with Down's syndrome are not clear or understandable to people outside their immediate environment.

Guidelines for communicating with people with learning disabilities who have difficulties in elaborating the message include:

- Do not forget that they do NOT have comprehension problems, so when communicating with them, do not raise your voice, make exaggerated and unnecessary gestures, or use inappropriately simple vocabulary.
- We will never say that we have understood if we have NOT understood. Let us express our inability to understand him and ask him to choose another way of communicating his wishes, with other words, reinforcing the message with gestures, in writing, with a communication board, by means of images or pictograms, with an iPad...

3. Speech fluency disorders (dysphemia).



Communication guidelines **for people with dysphemia** are:

- Don't finish his sentences or interrupt him, let him express himself.
- Avoid making comments such as: "Speak more slowly", "Don't be nervous", etc... as these comments make the speaking situation more tense and unpleasant.
- Don't get angry or belittle him if he gets stuck.
- Maintain eye contact and don't be embarrassed, mock or laugh at the situation.
- Talk to him, but don't ask too many questions; encourage him to talk when he is more relaxed.
- Pay more attention to what he wants to say and less to how he says it.
- Don't try to get him to speak correctly.
- Avoid asking him/her to speak in front of other people, don't force the situation.
- Beware of facial expressions that show that you are repulsed by their stuttering.
- Do not correct or draw attention to their repetitions or blockages.
- Never label him as a stutterer or talk about his problem if he is present.
- Don't "help" the person who stutters by completing the sentence; "LET THEM TALK".
- When you speak, use a conversational and adult rhythm, without sounding unnatural or exaggerated (remember that they do NOT have comprehension problems). Avoid exaggerated gestures that are dispensable.
- Try to convey to the person that it is what they say that is important, not how they say it.
- When the person who stutters comes out of the block or speaks fluently, you don't need to say: "You did well", "I congratulate you, you are speaking much better". This makes him/her feel evaluated every time he/she speaks.



Non-verbal communication.

Preverbal and pre-intentional communication as well as primary gestures are the foundation of any communication and add richness to the more abstract and complex ways of communicating. We get a lot of information, and very significant information, through facial expressions, body language or tone of voice, and it is therefore essential to be alert to any form of communication that can contribute to a better understanding of what the other person is saying.

For people with generalised support needs, words or other formal means of communication may have little meaning and therefore be of little or no use. Preverbal and/or pre-intentional forms of communication, applied within the framework of creative approaches or strategies, can enhance and improve the communicative exchange.

In articulating them, the following guidelines for good practice need to be taken into account:

Good practice

- It should not be forgotten that the central element is non-verbal communication: facial expressions and body language should be used.
- It is essential that facial expressions and body language are consistent with what is intended to be communicated.
- Language is secondary, but not superfluous. When using it, it is essential to opt for a basic vocabulary and simple, short sentences.
- The meaning of what is being communicated should be reinforced by modulating the tone and volume of the voice. Tone is fundamental and should be adjusted to the content of what is to be communicated. In this respect, it is necessary to avoid the systematic use of an imperative tone, very often associated with short, simply structured sentences.
- It is necessary to observe and interpret the facial expression, body language and vocalisations that the person makes in response to any event in the environment or as a manifestation of their feelings, emotions, desires, needs, rejections or fears.



People with severe communication difficulties usually limit themselves to communicating basic needs (if they are thirsty, cold, need to go to the toilet, etc.) and have great difficulty in communicating feelings. They often remain uncommunicated and then they are externalised in the form of behaviours that the support people do not understand, usually out of context. It would be necessary to facilitate pre-established moments for communication, where people feel comfortable to express, if they wish, what they feel. Hence the importance of taking inclusion beyond sports to a social level where people with disabilities can engage in social relations with other people without disabilities in a relaxed environment.

Intensive interaction

So-called "intensive interaction" consists of sharing individual moments of interaction with the person with communication limitations, using with them the means they themselves use and in a way that is meaningful to them. It is a practical approach, applicable to people of all ages who are at a preverbal stage of communication, with very limited communication and social development skills, often with associated sensory or behavioural difficulties.

Short sessions should be organised in which the content of the interaction is mainly based on the use of facial expression, tone of voice and body language, adapting them to individual specificities. As a result, opportunities for mutual understanding and enjoyment are created, which, in turn, allows the building of a relationship between the person with a disability and the support professional interacting with him/her to begin. Undoubtedly, this communication is most effective when it is framed in an interpersonal relationship.

Their application can help develop skills in the use and understanding of:



- eye contact;
- facial expression;
- turn-taking in communicative exchanges;
- the use and understanding of gestures;
- understanding body language;
- concentration and attention;
- physical contact;
- touch;
- smell.

It is vitally important to reflect on our own forms of non-verbal communication - in particular, facial expressions, eye contact, gestures and body postures - since, if used well, they can be of great help to the person with a disability in understanding us. Indeed, people who have difficulties in understanding and using verbal language tend to rely heavily on non-verbal communication as a complement of information and as interpretative clues to the meaning of verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication guidelines



Maximise the use of facial expressions, gestures and eye contact, and simultaneously apply any additional support deemed appropriate: objects or drawings, for example, which can help to clarify the verbal message.



Put a practical example of what you want the person to practise in front of them throughout the conversation.



Always keep in mind their personal preferences in terms of ways of communication. Thus, for some people with autism, for example, direct eye contact may be very unpleasant; for others, physical contact - for example, a hand on the shoulder - may be appropriate because it is meaningful to them, while in other cases, it may be overwhelming.



Just as it is necessary to pay close attention to our own non-verbal communication, it is essential to pay attention to the person's non-verbal communication: associating their reactions clearly with the situations in which they occur is a good way to interpret and understand not only what they want to communicate but also what they are feeling.



It is particularly necessary when people face significant limitations in expressing themselves and their feelings or the way they perceive a certain reality. This is particularly the case for people with profound or severe learning disabilities who have a very poorly developed



level of communication and usually have very poor means to react to what is happening to them. In such situations, it is very likely that they try to express their feelings through their behaviour and that, in this way, they may present problematic behaviours which, in reality, are a way of communicating a need, a pain, a feeling, a fear.



Non-verbal communication is also fundamental to improve communication with people who can express themselves verbally, both because their facial expression or their look reinforces what they are saying, and because they provide complementary information that communicates something markedly different from what the words convey, which can lead to questioning the true intention and trying to analyse more carefully the different means and indications that reinforce one or another interpretation of what the person is expressing.



From this perspective, it should be borne in mind that, like verbal communication, non-verbal communication is personal and specific to each individual, so that it is necessary to register, on an individual basis, the repertoire of facial expressions, looks, gestures or postures and their corresponding meanings, in order to have as many personalised and well-adapted means of communication as possible for the person with whom we are trying to establish a



relationship.

Sources:

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