

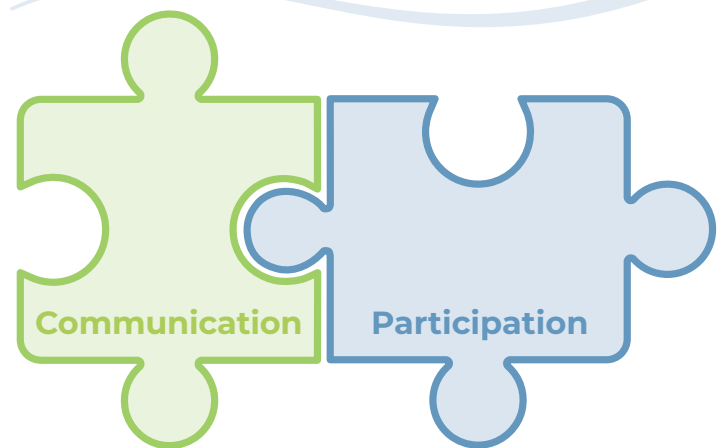
Being a Communication Partner

A quick guide to having conversations with people who use the alphabet to communicate

An alphabet based communication tool may be used if someone needs support to make themselves heard and understood due to a communication difficulty. They might use a paper based system like an alphabet chart and / or an electronic communication aid.

Positive and effective communication involves two or more people interacting in a skilful way, so when someone is using an alphabet based communication tool, it's not just down to them to make conversation work.

As a 'Communication Partner' (the person they are communicating with) you can help make the conversation more successful, inclusive and effective for everyone.



If you can embrace some of the ideas below, you'll be helping to create conversation in which all participants are actively involved.

Ways in which a communication partner can help:

Allow time

Whether someone is using electronic or paper based tools, it is going to take longer to construct a message than it does for someone using speech. Be generous with your time and try not to rush.

Find out how someone communicates yes and no

This sounds so simple, but if you aren't clear on this, everything else is going to get very confusing very fast! Sometimes it's straightforward, but not always. People might eye point in a certain direction or using blinking, for example. Don't be afraid to ask someone to show you how they do it.

Learn how the system works

Read any instructions and take the time to practise. If you're meeting someone who's been using a different way of communicating for a long time you could observe them communicating with an experienced communication partner before trying it yourself.

Top tip! Sometimes it's helpful to practise communicating with the system away from the pressure of an important conversation. You might ask someone to spell out an agreed word so you can see how it works or find out something fun like their favourite animal.

Make sure you know the rules of the game (aka the interaction policy)

Particularly with paper based systems, you need to know things like how someone will indicate that they have something to say in the first place, how they will signal a space, or how they will let you know that something's gone wrong. These rules are often the difference between conversation flowing or breaking down.

If the rules haven't been written down, consider offering to help with this.

Keep track of conversations

When someone is spelling letter-by-letter on a paper based system, it can be hard to keep track of the conversation. You can use a pen and paper or the notes/messaging tools on your mobile phone.

Predict (but only if it's welcome!)

A familiar communication partner may well be able to predict a word or even a sentence that someone is communicating after only a couple of letters. This can speed things up, but do make sure they actually want you to do this. If they do, consider agreeing a maximum number of guesses before they return to spelling out the word or sentence.

Acknowledge when things go wrong

Communication will sometimes go wrong - it does even when both parties are communicating using speech. Calmly acknowledge that you are lost or confused and take steps to sort it out.

Above all... relax!

Communication enriches our life on so many levels. Try not to be fazed by the tools and focus instead on the person using them.

Check whether someone has more to say

If you are communicating with someone who is using a tool that you are involved in holding or delivering (some paper based systems involving eye pointing, for example) then do check whether or not they have more to say after they've shared their message. It can be very frustrating if someone has more to say, but can't because you have put their tool down thinking the conversation is over.

Don't speak for someone (unless they want you to)

Try and keep the person involved in conversation and don't speak for them unless they ask you to. Even if they do sometimes ask you to respond on their behalf, don't assume this is always okay. Check with them first.

Be their 'wingman' (if they'd like one)

At appointments, or when less familiar people visit, you may want to offer to take on the role of facilitator, providing a bridge between the person who is communicating using paper based or electronic tools and someone who has never encountered this way of communicating before. As well as helping them to understand how the communication system works, you may also need to actively re-direct any questions towards the person you are supporting.

Copies of this and other helpsheets are free to download from [acecentre.org.uk](http://www.acecentre.org.uk)

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