

Accessibility for People with Communication Disabilities

Fact Sheet

The silence of speechlessness is never golden. We all need to communicate and connect with each other – not just in one way, but also in as many ways as possible. It is a basic human need, a basic human right. And much more than this, it's a basic human power. (Williams, 2000).

Communication is a basic human right. All people are entitled to express their needs, exchange information, establish relationships with one another, connect with their communities and participate in all aspects of life. Without access to a means of communication, people are likely to experience marginalization, social isolation, discrimination, victimization, inequitable and compromised services and opportunities. Communication disabilities may affect speaking, understanding, reading and writing and are caused by disorders that are sensory (deafness/hearing loss, blindness/visual impairments), motor (inability to speak or use gestures because of complete or partial paralysis) and/or intellectual/ cognitive and language-based (conditions that can limit learning and understanding of spoken/written language, memory, organization and independent function). This fact sheet focuses on people for whom communication access is a challenge because of motor and cognitive disabilities, rather than conditions primarily involving hearing and vision.

1. Millions of individuals have significant communication disabilities and cannot rely on their natural speech to communicate what they want to say. They may have limited or no speech and benefit from augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods, strategies and technologies to communicate. People with either congenital conditions (cerebral palsy, autism, intellectual disability, Down syndrome) or acquired conditions (brain stem stroke, traumatic brain injury, aphasia, motor neuron disease, multiple sclerosis, post laryngectomy) are among those who rely on AAC.
2. AAC methods/strategies include speech generating devices, communication software, paper communication displays and books with letters or symbols/pictures, sign language and gestures, and/or communication assistants who support interactions (e.g., interpret impaired speech with unfamiliar partners).
3. Having limited or no speech does not automatically imply a lack of understanding, or limited intelligence, or reduced competency or hearing loss. However, some people who use AAC also have difficulty understanding spoken and/or written language because of accompanying sensory, cognitive and/or linguistic disabilities.

4. When they have access to AAC technologies and supports, people with limited or no speech can be effective communicators. Without such technologies and supports, they experience major barriers to daily communication at home and in their communities.
5. Communities require guidelines to remove barriers and provide access to equitable services for people with limited or no speech during emergencies, to ensure safety, conduct legal transactions, participate in the health care system, and exercise their right to communicate fully in all areas of their communities.
6. Guidelines and accommodations are also required to ensure communication access to information and to mainstream communication technologies (e.g. text-based materials, telephone, the Internet, etc.).

Useful Resources

International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Links to chapters throughout the world. www.isaac-online.org

Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada. Resources and on-line video clips about communication access. www.accpc.ca

Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centre on Communication Enhancement (AAC-RERC). Information about projects and resources including communication access in emergency situations. Webcasts by people who rely on AAC and researchers. www.aac-merc.com

Building Accessible and Inclusive Communities. Accessibility information for schools, media and marketplaces. www.togetherwerock.com

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Key information about the treaty and its signatories. www.un.org/disabilities/convention/facts.shtml

United Nations Enable: Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. Updates on the Convention. www.un.org