Total Communication

Total communication uses a variety of methods such as gesture, sign, drawing, facial expression and mime. It is based on the idea that any means of communication is valuable as long as it works.

What are the Benefits of Total Communication?

The struggle for speech often leads to frustration and anger. In some cases the difficulties are so great that the person ‘gives up’. The effects of communicative failure are felt by everyone close to the person with Aphasia. Even strong relationships are likely to be affected.

We can lessen the frustration by offering the person with Aphasia an alternative to speech. Through mediums like gesture or sign we can give the person with Aphasia a simple means of expressing basic needs and keeping up contact with relatives and friends.

Of course, all people with Aphasia want to speak well again. Encouraging total communication does not abandon this goal. Alternatives, like signs, may actually stimulate speech.

Total communication helps to motivate the person and offers a commonsense strategy for dealing with communication failure. It does not interfere with the recovery of other language skills such a speech.

Where do you start?

A good place to start is with ‘yes’ and ‘no’, if this has not already been achieved. Signs for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ might be head nods and shakes or a thumbs up and down. Many people with Aphasia confuse these two words, i.e. saying yes when they mean no, so achieving his/her goal can make a considerable difference to their communication.

Where next?

Once ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are established you could go on to develop a few
**basic needs signs.** These might include: glasses, teeth, razor, comb, toilet, hearing aid etc.

The **best setting** in which to introduce these signs is in their **natural context**, i.e. while dressing or in the bathroom. You could start by demonstrating the **sign** while holding up or pointing to the relevant item. Later you might produce the **gesture** while asking the **person with Aphasia** to **pass** you the **object**.

You can practice the recognition of signs by presenting a series of pictures of the objects and asking the person with Aphasia to point to each one in turn, using a sign as part of your instructions.

**How to encourage the use of signs**

People with Aphasia learn to recognise **gestures** and **signs** reasonably quickly. However it is often much more difficult to stimulate sign production.

One exercise which may help again uses **objects** and **pictures**. The person with Aphasia is shown a **picture** of an **object**. It is important that you do not see what is in the picture. He/she must **communicate** the **item** to you in such a way that you are able to **pick** the **appropriate** one from a **group** of three or four **objects**.

You may also use ‘real life’ situations to **prompt** sign **production**. For example rather than simply handing the person with Aphasia his/her glasses you can wait until there is produced a **clear request** from them in the **form** of a **sign**. Humour can be another way of promoting the use of signs. For example you might think up signs for each family member. These ‘**name signs**’ could draw upon running **family jokes**, such as a paunch gesture for a grandad, or a ‘walk-man’ **gesture** for a teenage son.

You may have to make a **decision** about whether or not to use **speech** while working on **signs**. Usually you will sign and speak **simultaneously**. Some therapists believe that the **use of speech and signing together** may actually **help** the person with Aphasia to **retrieve words**.