

SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION AFTER A BRAIN INJURY - SECONDARY & COLLEGE



Which communication difficulties are often diagnosed following an Acquired Brain Injury?



Aphasia: An acquired language disorder that can impact auditory comprehension, verbal expression, reading, writing and interpretation of symbols. (or some of these areas). It does not impact on intelligence.

Apraxia of speech: A processing difficulty (disrupted messages from the brain to muscles of the mouth) impacting on planning and sequencing of muscle movement related to speech production.

Cognitive Communication Disorders: These can be complex and may include difficulties with attention, memory, verbal reasoning, reduced processing speed and literal interpretation of language.

Dyspraxia (DCD): A difficulty planning and sequencing movements (including muscles involved in speech) making the sequencing of sounds in words difficult.

Dysarthria: difficulty with the movement of muscles needed for speech production. This may result in changed pitch, volume, tone, rate of speech and breathe control.

Dysphagia: Impaired swallowing

Social Communication Difficulties (often associated with frontal lobe injuries): May include difficulties recognising everyday social cues, disinhibition, impulsivity, difficulties remaining on topic, inappropriate eye contact, perseveration on a topic



How can this present in school/college?



- Word-finding difficulties
- Frequent semantic errors (using related but incorrect words e.g. spoon for fork)
- Slow processing speed (impacting on expressive and receptive language)
- Sequencing difficulties (of sounds to form words / of words / of ideas / of events)
- Difficulties moving the muscles involved in speech-sound production making speech unclear
- Poor breath control (making speech loud or quiet or broken into short utterances)
- Memory difficulties making it difficult to follow or contribute to a conversation or to learn new vocabulary
- Difficulties in understanding (due to processing of sounds / words / sequencing of words)
- Impulsive and disinhibited language (calling out / inappropriate language / verbalising unfiltered thoughts)
- Reduced attention / reduced listening skills

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General strategies to support communication skills:

- Ensure that all staff working with the student are supported to understand ABI and are aware of the difficulties faced
- Provide an available, informed adult to talk to – to support the impact of reduced communication skills on emotional wellbeing
- Disinhibited and impulsive language can easily be interpreted as challenging behaviour. Over-teach social expectations but do not penalise, as this is involuntary.
- Peer awareness: If consent is gained, informing classmates of current challenges can promote understanding and prevent bullying
- Personalised timetabling / curriculum – allowing for cognitive breaks and success
- Support organisational needs through visual aids rather than language-heavy information
- Reduce the quantity / length of assignments, and allow additional time for assignments and exams etc. Exam arrangements should be considered.
- Reduce distractions to allow focus on communication
- Support friendships and social integration



Maths / Sciences



Challenges:

- Communicating own ideas and understanding
- Understanding and use of specific vocabulary
- Semantic errors may give the impression of lack of understanding
- Difficulties in recalling a sequence of actions or processes

Strategies:

- Pre-teach new / specific vocabulary (or provide a vocab sheet with definitions)
- Keep instructions brief, break them down or provide a written copy
- Support notetaking by providing handouts or copies of slides etc.
- Where possible, use visual aids (e.g. diagrams, charts, flow charts and checklists)
- Model key vocabulary in a question to aid word-recall

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English / Humanities



Challenges:

- Understanding subtleties of language
- Recall, understanding and use of interesting vocabulary
- Communicating own ideas and understanding
- Speed of language processing
- Difficulties in sequencing events
- Difficulties with inference

Strategies:

- Adjust speed of speech to allow time for processing
- Present verbal information in bite-size chunks and check understanding after each. Reduce overload of information
- Do not repeat language immediately – you will be adding to the language load rather than reinforcing a message
- Reduce distractions and gain attention before giving key information
- Allow extra time for reading and allow extra time to prepare and give answers
- Support notetaking (peer support / copy of lesson plan / handouts etc.)

Masking



Many children don't want to stand out from their peers and will mask their language difficulties. Indications of this may be:

- Copying the actions or language of others
- Using humour to distract from their reduced language skills
- Withdrawal from social situations or reluctance to speak in class
- Off task / avoidance behaviour
- Using stock phrases or repeating the answers given by others
- Finding reasons to leave a communication demanding situation
- School refusal
- Perseveration or returning to familiar topics of conversation

Fatigue



Fatigue (cognitive, physical, emotional) will have a significant effect on receptive and expressive communication.

For more information see additional resources on fatigue on our website.