A Family Services Guide

Different Forms of Communication

Including behaviour as communication

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

Different Forms of Communication

Communication is far broader than spoken words. Autistic adults, children and young people communicate in many different ways, and understanding this range helps adults respond to what a person is really trying to say – including when their behaviour is doing the talking.

Verbal communication

Spoken language

May be fluent, delayed, or may fluctuate depending on stress, environment, or energy levels (situational mutism).

Echolalia

Repeating words or phrases heard previously (immediate or delayed), which can be used meaningfully to communicate.

Scripting

Using memorised phrases, often from favourite media, to express a feeling or start an interaction.

Non-verbal communication

Body language, posture and movement

E.g. pacing, rocking, or stimming.

Facial expression

May not always match internal feelings.

Gesture, pointing, eye gaze

Or leading an adult by the hand.

Vocalisations that are not words

Humming, sounds, tone of voice.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

PECS and symbol/core boards

The Picture Exchange Communication System and other symbol-based boards.

Visual timetables and choice boards

Visual timetables, now-and-next boards, and choice boards.

Communication apps and devices

Communication apps and speech-generating devices.

Sign-supported communication

E.g. Makaton.

Written communication

Some people find writing or typing easier than speaking.

Behaviour as communication

A core principle

All behaviour is communication. When a person cannot express a need, feeling, or discomfort in words, behaviour becomes the message.

- **Behaviour that challenges is often communicating pain, sensory overload, anxiety, confusion, or an unmet need –** not defiance.

The question to ask

Not “how do I stop this behaviour?” but “what is this behaviour telling me?”

Supporting all forms of communication

Follow the person's lead

Accept their preferred communication method rather than insisting on speech.

Give processing time

Give processing time before expecting a response (see our separate fact sheet on processing time).

- Use visual supports alongside spoken language
- Watch for changes in behaviour as a sign something has changed for that person

Remember

Every person communicates – sometimes with words, and sometimes through behaviour, body language, or another route entirely. Watching, listening, and following their lead is the surest way to understand what they need.