

# Communication with Students with Sen- sory Impairments

-Good Practice-



## Guidance on how to communicate with us

### First considerations

- **Become familiar with my particular sensory impairments,** i.e., eye condition, near and distance vision, etc., **always be ready to communicate with me and to respond to any verbal and non-verbal communication from me.**
- **Check that I am wearing my glasses, if needed,** and that these are clean and that the prescription is up-to-date.
- **If I use hearing aids or cochlear implants, check that they are fitted and working properly.**
- **Check that you are in the best position to communicate.** Make sure there is good lighting in all areas and the layout of the room is consistent as I may mistake shadows for obstacles. Keep things in the same place so I can easily find them by myself. This enables me to be more independent. Also, think about where I sit within the room, do the blinds on the windows need lowering? Is it too noisy?
- **Get my full attention before you start.**
- **Position yourself where I can see you as clearly as possible** (e.g. with your face well-lit) and try to be on the same level as I am rather than standing over me.
- **When signing, consider your clothing.** Where possible, wear high contrast colours to your skin tone. Also, avoid wearing patterned tops as this can make it more difficult for me to define your signs.
- **Have enough time to spend with me.** If you feel rushed, maybe it is not the best time.
- **If there is a time of day where I am more able to communicate** (e.g. in the morning) try to make the most of it.
- **Make sure any of my other needs are met before you start** (e.g. I am not hungry or in pain).

### When using speech

#### Using your voice:

- Students with a visual impairment are unable to observe facial expressions and body/facial expressions so they obtain information from your voice.
- When communicating with students with a visual impairment it can be distracting if presented with too much body or arm movements.

#### Think before you speak:

- **Speak clearly and calmly,** use tone and volume appropriate to age of students and the situation.
- **Allow time between sentences** for students to process the information and respond. This might seem like an uncomfortable pause to you, but it is important for helping students to process and communicate.
- **Use individual words and short sentences.**
- Try to **communicate with students in a conversational way,** not question after question (it can feel like an interrogation) and give time for a response.
- **Don't talk about students as if they are not there** or talk to them as you would a young child (unless they are young!) - be patient and have respect for them.
- **Include students in conversations with others.** Being included can help students to keep their sense of identity and feel valued. It can also help to reduce any feelings of exclusion and isolation.

## The top 10

**1. Approach.** Do you have my attention? A gentle touch cue to my upper arm will alert me to your presence as I may not like sudden surprises!

**2. Introduction.** Say your name so that I know you are there. If you have a personal identifier for example, a bracelet or keyring, allow me to feel it as this will help me identify you. Remember to let me know when you are leaving so I know that the interaction is coming to a close.

**3. Positioning.** Position yourself so you are in my visual field, bring yourself down to my facial level and check to see if you need to be on my left or right side or directly in front of me. Offer items and objects so they are accessible for me. Use positional language and, please, remember, I can't see you if you are behind me.

**4. Tone of voice.** Please, speak naturally and at a steady pace. Do not obstruct your face and ensure your tone and use of language is age and ability appropriate. Over exaggerated lip movements and talking really loudly can make it harder for me to understand you especially if I have hearing loss. Support your communications with gestures and facial expressions and re-phrase what you are saying if necessary.

**5. Nonverbal communication.** I might not be able to pick up on non-verbal communication such as body language, facial expressions or gestures. Do not assume I have seen or understood something. Please, allow me time to process information and respond to you. Remember that silence can give me space to use my voice.

It is also important for me that you consider your levels of energy/dynamism when interacting with me: you might need to be calmer at times and more energetic at other times.

## The top 10

**6. Make a connection.** If eye contact is difficult offer your hands for me to touch. Respectfully mirroring my vocalisations, facial expressions, gestures and movements can be a way of showing me that you are listening.

**7. Means of communication.** Make sure that I have at hand any relevant materials to support my communication, i.e., object cues, objects of reference, pictures, switches and/or any other technology that I use.

**8. Supporting wheelchair users.** Remember that I have a visual impairment, so, please, use verbal and touch cues so I know when we are turning a corner or coming to a stop. If you are walking too quickly, I am unable to observe what is going on around me or know where I am going.

**9. Verbal Commentary.** Use clear and consistent language as I need to know where I am going or what to expect. For example, give me a warning as I am approaching uneven surfaces so I can prepare myself. If I am entering a room, tell me where I am and introduce other people. Explain what is going on, I am interested to know what other people are up to.

**10. Advocacy.** Please, be respectful and don't talk about me to others when I am present. Listen and don't talk over me if I am saying something or vocalising. Talk positively and praise me when I do something well and support me if I need guidance. Please, be aware that I may not be comfortable with physical touch or being too close to others. Allow me to initiate interactions/conversations and follow my lead so I am in control and can express my views, wants and opinions.

## About this document

- At Linden Lodge, we are supporting students to learn all of the means by which people are able to make contact with one another:
  - relate, interact, connect, exchange meanings, send messages to each other, be together, be social and achieve shared understandings.
- All our students are different and have their own way of communicating. We are making sure that everyone's way of communicating is valued and responded to.
- For that reason, we need to make clear to others how to better offer their support.
- Having sensory impairments have particular implications for communication development.
- Sensory impairments create barriers between a child or young person and the physical and social world around them.
- People with sensory impairments need different support to develop their communication that those that do not have sensory impairment.
- This leaflet aims to answer the question *"What is that different support needed?"*

The information contained in this leaflet was collated following consultations with all members of staff at Linden Lodge School, including the therapy and habilitation teams. May 2019