

Communicating with children with disability

Summary

The core of any research or consultation with children is building good communication between researcher and child. The following is a set of basic communication tips for working with children with disability.

Process

When communicating with children with disability, consider the following points:

1. It takes two people to have a conversation.
2. Think about the child's age, level of understanding and communication method.
3. Be a good listener. This involves being observant, supportive and understanding.
4. Lots of communication happens without talking. Think about the child and your:
 - Tone of voice
 - Jokes and laughter
 - Eye contact
 - Gesture and other non-verbal communication
 - Where you both sit.¹¹⁸
5. When you talk together, remember to:
 - Ask open questions (however sometimes closed questions may be necessary for some children)
 - Ask one question at a time
 - Use simple language
 - Check the child understands you
 - Communicate in the child's first language
 - Don't panic; slow down and wait
 - Don't feel the need to fill the gaps in conversation
 - Look at the child rather than their interpreter or communication aid
 - Think about your own body language and tone of voice
 - Observe what is happening around you. Is there a lot of noise creating a distracting environment? Are there too many people in the room for the child to comfortably communicate?¹¹⁹

Practice examples

1. Aime is a 12-year-old girl with a physical disability and lives in PNG. She cannot speak nor use sign language, but communicates using her body. She can smile and giggle when she is happy. She can cry out when she is unhappy, or uncomfortable. With the assistance of Aime's grandmother, who knew her well and understood how Aime communicated, we were able to determine answers to questions. She is not comfortable making eye contact so we were careful to avoid looking directly at her in a way that would make Aime uncomfortable. Spending time with Aime helped us to understand how she communicated and for everyone to feel comfortable together.
2. The researcher asked Toimpa what his hopes and dreams are. Toimpa gave the sound and action of a car. When asked why, he gave the action of driving a vehicle. Toimpa is 13 years old and has a physical disability as well as limited verbal communication. His speech is unclear and he can only say a couple of words at a time. Time spent with Toimpa and speaking with his parents made us aware how his displayed emotions demonstrate how he feels about things, with clear indications of happiness and approval, and sadness/upset and disapproval. His happiness around cars – both real and with the toys he chose – demonstrated his love for them. From this we would conclude that having some involvement with cars, and even driving a car, is one of Toimpa's hopes for the future. His parents laughed and confirmed that this was true.