



Office of Developmental Primary Care

Improving outcomes for people with developmental disabilities

What I Wish My Doctor Knew About Non-Traditional Communicators

Medical Alert



- **As with all people assume they are intelligent and competent until they prove otherwise!**
- **Speak normally (tone, volume, speed) unless asked to do otherwise.**
- **Be patient – almost all non-traditional communication methods are extremely slow.**
- **Don't fill the "silence" while the other person is composing a thought with more of your own speech; allow both parties to say a reasonable amount.**

- Take turns speaking – say a short amount and then give the other person a chance to speak; be careful of interrupting; try not to talk about more than one idea at a time.
- Acknowledge and rephrase communication attempts. When responding to a question, include the question in your response to let the person know that you heard and understood them.
- Don't ask them to "perform" for you by asking them to say certain words or asking questions just to watch them communicate – do not treat people like zoo exhibits.
- Don't worry about saying they "speak" or you are "talking" to them.
- Let the person know if you don't understand something.
- Offer to find a place to sit or remain stationary if the person is trying to type or write the conversation – most have trouble "timing" communication to occur during extremely short pauses.
- Don't "take advantage" of the communication difference (for example, don't refuse to read a written message as a way of silencing disagreement).
- If someone uses an interpreter or assistant, address communication to the communicator, not the assistant or interpreter.
- Don't touch people's communication devices.
- Extensive question and answer sessions about their communication methods can be annoying to many; ask if the person minds before engaging in extensive questions.
- If you notice someone typing or writing otherwise composing a thought, give them a chance to say something when you are done speaking.
- Ask before assuming the person would like you to finish her sentences.
- Don't pretend that there is no communication difference!
- The best communication is when both parties remain calm, relaxed, and interact as they would if both parties spoke normally.

Compiled by Joel Smith. Used with permission. Revised: 3.25.14