

Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability is usually categorised by limited ability in at least 2 areas of adaptive behaviour, i.e. communication, self-care, home living, social skills, self-direction, leisure and work, learning, and following direction and instruction. Intellectual disability can require a range of different support systems. (Intellectual Disability Rights Service, 2009).

Supporting someone with an intellectual disability

It is important to convey simple messages when communicating with members living with an intellectual disability, and the following communication tools may be useful:

- Most people with an intellectual disability will try to bluff their way through rather than ask for help. Give permission to say, “I don’t get it”. Acknowledge that this is hard stuff. For example, “I need to make sure I explain it properly. Please tell me if I’m not clear enough”.
- Check that the person understands – reinforce the important messages
- Use short sentences, simple language, no jargon
- One idea at a time
- Slow down
- Abstract concepts are especially difficult; be concrete.
- Expect an answer but be prepared to wait. With some people you may need to wait an uncomfortable time to make sure there has been time for the person to process the information and answer
- Try not to interrupt. Do not finish the person’s sentences
- Signpost “OK, that’s all I need to know about that. Now can we talk about”
- Open questions and encourage free recall – let the person tell their story
- Remember body language messages – these speak very loudly for someone with an intellectual disability
- Minimise distractions where possible
- Remember that on top of a child’s normal limited concentration span, there may be further limitations – be patient

