Ways to Communicate with Persons with Special Needs

A complete assessment of the learner’s abilities and limitations helps you develop an individualized approach to teaching a person with special learning needs. Find out what resources are available and if the learner has assistance before you begin teaching. Coping strategies and resources have probably been established over time and these factors need to be considered when communicating health information.

Hearing Impairment
People with hearing loss often have problems discriminating between words that sound alike or have a similar cadence. High frequency sounds are usually hard to hear and they often need repetition since they can’t process sounds very quickly. Ways to teach someone with a hearing loss include:

• Be in a quiet place away from distractions when giving health information.
• If the person has a hearing aid, make sure it’s working.
• Touch the person on their shoulder first and call them by name to get their attention. Face the learner and sit close to the person’s best ear.
• Only one person should speak at a time.
• Speak slowly and articulate clearly in a low-pitched voice. Do not cover your mouth when speaking so person can read your lips to help with hearing. Do not shout.
• Use normal facial expressions and gestures.
• Repeat or rephrase information when necessary.
• Avoid complex sentences.
• Use print or visual formats for teaching.

Vision Impairment
People with a vision loss often have problems with visual acuity, depth perception, judging distances, peripheral vision, discriminating colors, and seeing fine detail. Ways to teach this learner best include:

่อ Make sure the person’s glasses are on or contacts are in place.
ério Use verbal instructions or audiotapes.
ério Be descriptive in what is happening and what you expect.
Use touch and objects to reinforce instructions. Make sure that you position yourself and materials directly in front of person.

Shine light from behind the person onto the teaching materials.

Decrease glare by using soft white light and pale yellow or pastel paper. Do not use glossy materials.

Use materials with 14 to 16 point print that are high-contrast, such as black on white or black print on yellow. Use serif print.

Use vivid, high-contrast, discriminating colors.

Give the person enough time to test out depths, distances, and peripheral items.

Use a magnifying glass.

**Cognitive Impairment**

People with memory loss or cognition problems often repeat themselves, have poor short-term memory, answer questions inappropriately, hear words incorrectly, and are unable to understand meanings. They often are confused by abstract information and sometimes cannot process certain words. Sometimes they have trouble finding the right words to use when expressing themselves.

- Be brief and selective in the information you give. Do not overwhelm with information.
- Teach in short, frequent sessions. Focus on one bit of information at a time.
- Be consistent in the words you use and in the message you give.
- Focus on concrete tasks and avoid abstract concepts.
- Use simple words in a familiar context.
- Link new learning to past experiences.
- Use visual aids and provide reminders such as calendars, lists, medicine containers, timers, alarms, etc.
- Repeat information frequently and use cues to help them remember.
- Ask person to explain in his or her own words what they were taught.
- Teach others in the family.