



# Communicating with Parents with Learning Difficulties

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Robert Strike, a father with intellectual disability, has constructed a seven point plan for workers who are supporting parents with learning difficulties.

## **1) Look beyond the label- you will be surprised! Labels are for jars and not people!**

Few generalizations can be made about parents with intellectual disabilities. Therefore each parent should be approached as a unique individual with unique strengths as well as limitations.

## **2) Talk to us not at us, nor through others!**

Sometimes professionals do not give parents with intellectual disabilities the same respect that they give to other parents. Parents with intellectual disabilities should be respected as their child's parents, and should be addressed directly.

## **3) Hearing is not enough. LISTEN to us and RESPECT what we say**

Listen to parents with intellectual disabilities the same way as you would listen to any other parent. And respect what they have to say. Professionals need to treat parents as genuine partners in the support planning process.

## **4) Do things with us not for us**

- To promote self-sufficiency, professionals and significant others should avoid 'doing for' parents with intellectual disabilities. Learning opportunities are created by doing 'with' rather than 'for'.

## **5) Explain things slowly and get to the point!**

- Long-winded explanations are confusing. Use plain language and get to the point.

## **6) Talk to us Face to Face**

- Face to face communication works best. Ideally, face-to-face meetings should take place in the environment where the parent feels most comfortable.

## **7) Be honest with us... we have antennas for bullshit!**

## Checking for Understanding

Sometimes the parent you are working with may agree with statements or say 'yes' to questions regardless of the content. This may occur because:

- The parent does not understand the question
- The parent does not understand the type of answer that is required
- The parent may not be easily able to remember information that would help them answer the question
- The judgements the parent is being asked to make may be too difficult for them at this time
- The question may be poorly phrased, too long or too complex

If you do not check that the parent has understood your conversations and the information you are giving them, the parent may not get the most out of your time together, and you may end up with an inaccurate understanding of their needs and the supports they may require.

### Tips for checking understanding:

- Use either/or questions instead of yes/no questions. An example of this is "Did that make you feel happy or sad?"
- Include an option of answering "I don't know" to questions and make sure the parent knows that it is ok to say this
- Keep questions short and simple
- Use some open-ended questions, e.g., "Tell me what you've been doing this week to practice the skills you've learnt in this program?"
- Avoid statement or questions that have too much detail or are too complex
- Ask factual questions that require immediate and concrete answers
- Ask the parent to explain a comment you have just made, or to tell you more about it, e.g., "Tell me what it may feel like when labour starts"
- Ask for examples to illustrate a comment
- Ask how the parent is going to do the task

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### Further Reading

Strike, R., & McConnell. (2002). Look at Me, Listen to Me, I have Something Important to Say. *Sexuality & Disability*, 20(1), 53-63.

Healthy Start Tip Sheets: Checking for Understanding. Available at:  
[http://www.healthystart.net.au/component/docman/doc\\_download/22-tip-sheet-checking-for-understanding](http://www.healthystart.net.au/component/docman/doc_download/22-tip-sheet-checking-for-understanding)

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