

# Communication Access

for people with communication disabilities

Guidelines and Resources on Communicating with People  
who have Communication Disabilities



**Breaking Barriers Together**

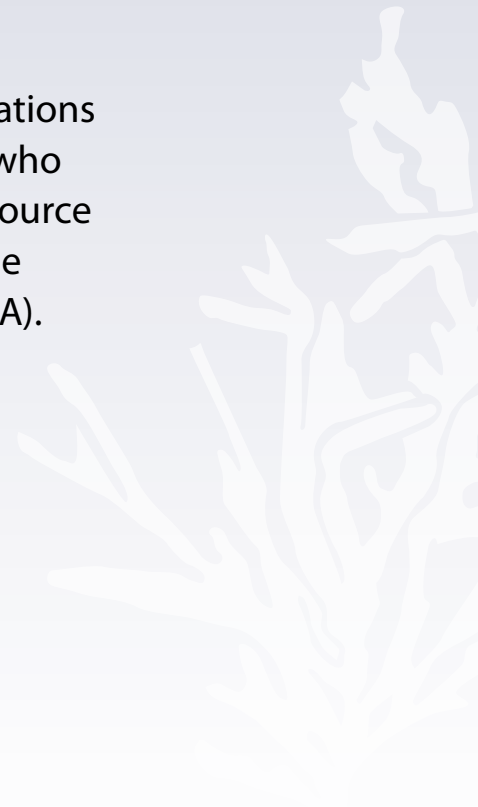
visit [www.ontario.ca/accesson](http://www.ontario.ca/accesson)



This booklet is intended to inform businesses and organizations about providing accessible goods and services to people who have communication disabilities, and may be a helpful resource in complying with the customer service standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA).

For information about Ontario's accessibility standards, go to **[www.ontario.ca/accesson](http://www.ontario.ca/accesson)**

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## The Right to Communicate

Being able to communicate is something many of us take for granted. Speaking and understanding, reading and writing are skills that most of us use every day. We communicate to express our feelings, thoughts and opinions, to ask questions, and to give and get information. We do this with lots of people for lots of reasons. For example, we might ask for things we want in a store, discuss our medical concerns with a doctor, order a meal in a restaurant, talk with a bank teller about our bank account, or call a friend for a ride to town.

**Communication is the foundation of much of our lives.** It is also a basic human right. This right is protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code. In addition, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) is in the process of setting out legal requirements to make sure that Ontario is accessible to people with disabilities. Today, thousands of people in Ontario have disabilities that affect hearing, speaking, reading, writing, and/or understanding. Although they may use different ways to communicate than people who do not have these disabilities, they have the same rights to communicate as others.





## Communication Disabilities

When someone has a communication disability, there are four main areas that can be affected:

- Speaking
- Understanding what others are saying
- Reading
- Writing

Some of the main types of communication disabilities affect the following:

**Hearing:** People who are deaf or have a hearing loss can find it difficult or impossible to hear what a person is saying. Sometimes their own speech may not be easily understood.

**Movement:** People who have disabilities such as cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis may have difficulty using gestures, turning pages in a book, writing, or moving their muscles to speak.

**Cognition:** People may have disabilities such as intellectual or developmental disabilities that can affect memory, learning, understanding, or problem-solving.

**Language:** People who have aphasia may be unable to use or understand spoken or written language. They might have difficulty understanding others, speaking, reading, or writing. Aphasia can be caused by a stroke, injury, tumour, or certain illnesses.

Many people with communication challenges have multiple disabilities. For example, people who have cerebral palsy may be unable to speak, walk, or physically manipulate objects. People who have autism may have challenges learning and using language, as well as interacting with others.

Regardless of the type of disability, all people who have communication disabilities are individuals and communicate in their own ways. They can communicate more effectively when given the right supports.

That's where you come in.



Sign language interpreter

## Communicating in Different Ways

People communicate in different ways because of the type of disability they have as well as their personality, preferences, needs, skills and circumstances. Most individuals use many ways of communicating. For example, someone might use some speech, gestures or body language with family and friends. This same person might use a speech generating device with other people or when speaking over the telephone.

Some ways people communicate:

- Speech (speech may be unclear)
- Body language and facial expressions
- Gestures (e.g., wave to signal goodbye)
- Pointing or looking at objects and people
- Sign Languages (e.g., American Sign Language, Langue des Signes Québécoise, Signed Exact English, and Adapted Sign Language)
- Writing, typing or drawing
- Spelling on a letter board, which is usually custom-made for an individual
- Pointing to pictures symbols and/or written words on a communication display, which is custom-made for an individual
- Using a communication device, which is usually obtained through an augmentative and alternative communication clinic.



The best way to find out how a person wants to communicate with you is to ask them.

For information on augmentative and alternative communication services, clinics, and assistive devices, please contact the Assistive Devices Program of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. (Contact information is in the “Resources and Organizations” section at the end of this booklet).



## Communication Barriers

People with communication disabilities may face major barriers when accessing goods and services in their communities. Here are some problems they have encountered:

*“People pat me on the head and talk to me like I’m a child. They assume that because I can’t speak, I can’t understand or think.”*

*“People don’t know what to expect. They feel intimidated because they don’t want to look stupid. They usually just ignore me.”*

*“Most times, people don’t let me communicate what I want. They just ask me yes and no questions.”*

*“It takes me much longer to spell out what I want to say than it does for someone to speak. People don’t usually make allowances for my slower rate of communicating.”*

*“People have a hard time accepting that I can make my own decisions and consent to my own medical treatments.”*

*“People just hang up when I talk over the phone. My speech is slurred. They think I’m drunk.”*

*“When I started to spell out what I wanted to order, the owner of the fast food restaurant called the police to remove me from the premises.”*





## Tips for Providing Communication Access

- Be prepared to accept various ways of communicating from people who have communication disabilities (e.g., devices, displays or a communication assistant.)
- Do not assume that a person with communication disabilities has difficulty understanding what you are saying. However, be aware that some people do have these additional challenges.
- A person with a communication disability usually needs more time to communicate. Find out whether the person wants a longer appointment or multiple short appointments.
- Find a quiet place to talk with minimal distractions so that you can concentrate on the conversation.
- Ask: “Is there anything I need to know or do that will assist us when communicating?” You should not ask the person why they have a communication disability.
- Follow the person’s instructions and provide any communication supports he or she requires (e.g., more time, a communication assistant, a sign language interpreter, or alternate text formats).





## Communicating with a Person who has a Communication Disability

Everyone communicates in different ways. Do not assume you know the best way to communicate with people with disabilities. Many have prepared instructions and can tell you what to do to communicate with them smoothly.

Here are some basic tips:

- Be patient. Do not rush the conversation.
- Ask one question at a time and wait for a reply.
- Wait for the person to finish his or her reply. Do not guess unless the person has given you permission to do so.
- Face the person so that you can pick up on visual clues like the person's body language, facial expressions and gestures.
- Talk directly to the individual, not to the person who may be with him or her.
- Do not speak about the person or refer to him or her in the third person in front of him or her.
- Speak naturally and clearly, using your normal tone, volume, and rate.

# Using Communication Tools

## **If the person uses a communication board or book:**

- Say, "Please show me how you say "yes.""
- Say, "Please show me how you say "no.""
- Say, "Please show me how you communicate."
- The person will either demonstrate or show you his/her communication instructions. These instructions are usually on the person's communication board or wheelchair tray if he/she uses one.

## **If the person points to items on a board:**

- Say the letter, word or picture that he or she selects out loud.

## **If the person uses a way other than pointing, such as an eye gaze to select items on his/her communication board:**

- That person might want someone to help you communicate with him or her.
- If not, write down the items that the person selects so that you can keep track of the message.
- Next, try putting the words together into a sentence.



**Example:**

The person selects the following items on her board: “Bus - Home - Time.” Using these words, you could suggest, “Do you want to know what time your bus is coming to take you home?” If the response is “no,” suggest another meaning, such as, “Are you telling me it’s time to go home on the bus?” Keep trying until the person responds, “yes.”

**If the person uses a speech generating device:**


- Stand or sit in front of the person.
- Do not look over his/her shoulder.
- Do not ask how he/she uses the device. You don’t need to know.
- Wait for the person to construct his/her full message.
- If you have never heard synthesized speech before, it might be hard to understand at first. Tell the person if you don’t understand. He or she will either repeat it or indicate that you can come around and read the screen on the device.

### **If the person's speech is unclear:**

- Watch how the person says the words.
- Take the time to get used to the person's speech. It gets easier the more you listen so the person may need to repeat what he or she is saying a few times before you understand. This is especially the case if the person is using a speech or voice aid.
- Tell the person if you don't understand what he or she is saying. The person will either say it another way, show you what they are talking about, spell it out verbally, write it down, use a communication device, or point to letters, words or pictures on their communication board.

### **If the person is having difficulty understanding speech:**

- Use "plain language" when speaking or writing. "Plain language" is clear and straightforward. Its focus is to make sure that the audience understands the message. It avoids unnecessary words, jargon, technical terms and long, unclear sentences. For information about plain language go to [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov).
- Slow the pace by pausing between your sentences. Allow time for the person to speak, nod, signal "yes" or use their communication board or device.

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- Use non-verbal ways of communicating: gesture, show objects or point, write down key words, or draw a picture or diagram.
  - If there is a communication assistant present, this person may rephrase what you are saying or use other strategies to help the individual understand you.
  - Keep in mind that there are many reasons people have challenges understanding spoken language. Each requires different types of supports.

***Examples:***

A person with a hearing loss may need a sign language interpreter.

A person with aphasia may require the speaker to write down key words or show a picture of what is being talked about.

A person with an intellectual or developmental disability may require the speaker to use short, simple sentences.

A person with communication disabilities may also speak a different language. They may need an interpreter in their native language as well as supports for their communication disability.

### **If the person is deaf or has a hearing loss:**

- Make sure the person is looking at you before you start talking and that he or she can see your mouth.
- Find out what the person wants to use when communicating with you. It could be his or her own amplifier or communication device. Or he or she may ask that you write down what you are saying.
- Speak clearly and at a moderate pace. Do not shout.
- If what you say is not understood, say it in another way instead of repeating it.
- If requested, arrange for a sign language interpreter (a person who translates spoken language into sign language) or a captioner (a person who writes or types what is being said). Contact The Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) for these services.

### **If the person is deaf and blind:**

- A person who is deafblind may need an intervenor. An intervenor provides information to the person through sight, sound, and touch, using their preferred way of communicating. This can include tactile signing systems, sign language, braille, large print, communication boards or other methods. Contact the Canadian Deafblind Association Ontario Chapter for these services.

## If the person uses a communication assistant:

- A communication assistant is someone who:
  - interprets a person's impaired speech or
  - assists a person who uses a communication display or device.
- Ensure that the assistant has permission to help the person communicate with you. Once you have done so, accept the person's messages as given to you by the assistant.
- Speak directly to the individual, not to the assistant.
- Watch the person direct the assistant so that you know he or she is communicating and approving their messages. In some cases, an assistant may support the person by selecting words or pictures on his/her display or device or putting these items into sentences. If you are unsure about a message, ask, "Is that what you wanted to say?"



Speaker with sign language interpreter



**If the person does not have a communication assistant:**

- Be prepared to get communication assistant services upon request.
- Ask the person if there is someone who can assist them or if there is a Speech Language Pathologist who knows how he or she communicates.
- Contact Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada for information about communication assistants.



## Special Situations

### **Communicating Over the Telephone**

Find out how the person wants to communicate with you on the telephone. He or she might prefer:

- To use a device
- To use a communication assistant
- For you to ask questions to which he or she can answer, “yes” or, “no.”
- To use email or fax instead.

If you have a receptionist, make sure he or she knows how the person will communicate over the telephone.

### **Written Communication**

People with physical disabilities may have difficulty writing. They may need a note-taker. Note-takers are often available in educational settings.

### **Making Text Materials Accessible**

Make sure that text material is in formats that people with communication disabilities can access and understand. Some may want information in plain language, enlarged font, electronic formats, or braille. Or they may require the assistance of someone who can help them to read and understand documents.



Wall clock with day and date.



Person with ergonomic keyboard.



## **Decision-Making and Consent**

Most people with communication disabilities make their own decisions though, like everyone else, they might rely on others for advice.

In some special circumstances (such as in a healthcare or legal setting), you may need to know if the person has a formal supported decision-making agreement that sets out a process that fully respects the individual's values, beliefs, experiences and preferences and names the person(s) who can assist in making decisions. Some people have a "Power of Attorney" so that someone can make these decisions on their behalf.

## **Obtaining Signatures**

Not being able to hold a pen does not mean that a person cannot approve or sign a document. People who cannot write and who understand the meaning of a document may use an alternative mode to sign it. They may use an X, a stamp, a thumb-print, or they may authorize a legally-appointed person to sign on their behalf.

## **Privacy**

Be mindful of each person's right to privacy. While each person is responsible for making privacy agreements with their own communication assistants, some situations (such as group counseling for example) may require communication assistants to sign agreements that also protect the privacy of others.

# Communicating in Essential or Emergency Situations

People with communication disabilities need to be able to communicate quickly and effectively in emergency situations with first responders such as police, health care workers, and fire fighters.

If the person does not have access to their communication board or device, use “yes” and “no” questions to get information.

## ***Example:***

You want to identify the source of a person’s pain.

Say, “Do you feel any pain?”

When the person responds with a yes, confirm you have understood. Say, “You told me “yes”, you are in pain.”

Then ask, “Where is your pain?” Wait for a response.

If the person cannot point with a finger, hand or eyes, suggest body parts. Say, “Does your head hurt?” If the person says “no,” keep asking questions.

For more information about communication access for first responders, see **[www.aac-rerc.com](http://www.aac-rerc.com)** and click on “Disaster Prep.”

Where communication is highly significant and critical (for example, within legal, health, police, emergency contexts), organizations should consider:

- Training a core group of internal staff to support communication access.
- Having context-specific resources such as communication displays and accessible call bells.

Contact Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada for training and resources.

Person using earphones with amplification system.





Handheld magnifier



CNIB large print calendar



## Checklist for Communication Access

Does your organization have clear policies, procedures and practices to ensure that people with communication disabilities can:

- Use their preferred method of communicating when receiving your goods and services.
- Have their personal communication needs met in personal meetings, over the telephone and via written communications.
- Have access to sign language interpreters, captioners, note-takers, intervenors and communication assistants upon request.
- Give feedback on how well their communication needs are met within your organization.

Has your organization provided the following training and resources to all staff who interact with the public?

- General guidelines for communicating and working with people who have a range of communication disabilities.
- Information on how to access community resources for sign language interpreters, captioners, note-takers, intervenors, and communication assistants.


## Resources and Organizations

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Community Partnerships - Canada (ACCPC) provides training, resources and information about communication assistants and communication accessibility for people who use communication displays and devices. Tel: 416-444-9532. Website: **[www.accpc.ca](http://www.accpc.ca)**

The Assistive Devices Program from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care can provide information about communication devices and services in Ontario. Tel: 1-800-268-6021 (toll-free in Ontario only). In Toronto, call 416-327-8804. TTY: 1-800-387-5559. Website: **[www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/adp/adp\\_mn.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/adp/adp_mn.html)**

The Aphasia Institute, Toronto supports people who have aphasia as a result of a stroke or accident. Tel: 416-226-3636. Website: **[www.aphasia.ca](http://www.aphasia.ca)**

The Canadian Hearing Society provides services for people who are deaf or have a hearing loss. Tel: 1-877-347-3427. In Toronto: 416-928 2504. TTY: 1-877-347-3429. In Toronto TTY: 416-964 0023. Website: **[www.chs.ca](http://www.chs.ca)**




Ontario Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists provides information on speech and language services. Tel: 1-800-718-6752. In Toronto: 416-920-3676. Website: **[www.osla.on.ca](http://www.osla.on.ca)**

The Canadian Deafblind Association Ontario Chapter provides services for people who are deafblind. Tel: 1-877-760-7439. TTY: 519-759-3597. Website: **[www.cdbraontario.ca](http://www.cdbraontario.ca)**

Together We Rock: Building Accessible and Inclusive Communities provides presentations and resources that promote accessibility in schools. Tel: 905-404-9590. Website: **[www.togetherwerock.com](http://www.togetherwerock.com)**

International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Canadian Chapter provides information about augmentative and alternative communication. Tel: 416-385-0351. Website: **[www.isaac-online.org](http://www.isaac-online.org)**



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