



Glossary of Communication Terms

The following definitions are used and explained in more detail throughout this resource. Please note that there are varying interpretations of these terms, with no consensus. An attempt was made to define them in ways that are generally accepted and understood by a wide range of stakeholders.

Communication: Communication is a two-way process of giving and receiving information and occurs between two or more people.

Effective communication: Effective communication is when people understand each other's messages.

People who have Speech, Language and Communication Disabilities

People who have disabilities that affect communication: People who have disabilities that affect communication live in every community. They cross all ages, ancestry, colour, race, ethnic origin, linguistic, cognitive, intellectual abilities, creed/spirituality, gender identity, sexual orientation, financial, family, marital status and cultural communities. In addition, they may or may not have other disabilities such as physical, intellectual, sensory, learning ability and mental health issues.

Speech, Language and Communication Disabilities: Refers to a range of disabilities that can impact one or more areas of a person's ability to hear, attend, understand and remember spoken language as well as to speak, read, and write. Disabilities that may impact on factors that affect communication include cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, Down Syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, multiple sclerosis, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease), aphasia (after a stroke or other neurological damage), dementia, acquired brain injury, head and neck cancer, Parkinson's disease and other disabilities.

Speech Disability: Speech refers to the sounds we use to make words. People who have disabilities that affect their speech may have unclear speech or no speech.

Language Disability: Language refers to how we understand what is said, abstract concepts and information and/or express thoughts using appropriate words and grammar to convey intended meaning. A language disability is not always indicative of a cognitive disability.

Communication Disability: Communication is how we interact with others, take turns in a conversation, use eye contact and understand another person's perspective. People who have disabilities in communication may have challenges interacting socially with other people.

Cognitive Disability: A cognitive or intellectual disability, either from birth or later in life, can affect areas such as attention, memory, learning, problem-solving, reasoning and planning that impact on a person's listening, understanding, speaking, reading, writing, social communication and decision making.

Formal, symbolic communicators: People who communicate using speech, writing, typing, pointing to pictures, symbols, letter boards, or selecting items on a communication device.

Informal, non-symbolic communicators: People who communicate using body language, vocalizations, pointing or looking at objects, facial expressions and behaviours.

Communication Barriers and Accessibility

Communication Barrier: Any obstacle that prevents the effective exchange of messages in face-to-face, group or telephone interactions, and via reading and writing. Barriers include disrespectful attitudes, information that is presented in ways that the person cannot understand what is being said and/or written; not having effective communication methods, aids, supports, time or opportunity to express intended messages.

Communication Access: Communication access refers to accessibility accommodations and support that a person may need for effective two-way communication in face-to-face interactions, communicating over the telephone, at meetings and case conferences, when reading and understanding written information, using websites and social media, completing forms and signing documents.

Communication Methods and Aids

Communication Methods: People who have speech, language and communication disabilities may use speech, vocalization, mouthing of words, body language, facial expressions, eye gaze, gestures, reaching, touching, pointing, mime, adapted signs, writing, drawing, typing, selecting pictures, photographs, symbols, written words, and letters on a board or a communication device.

Communication Aids: Items that a person use to communicate. For example: pen, paper, letter board, picture / symbol board, written words, speech or text generating device, smart phone, tablet and apps, artificial larynx, hearing aids, hearing amplification device, communication notebook, calendars, planners, memory aids, switches to operate call bells or devices, eye tracking technology, adapted call bells, pain scales, pictures that support comprehension; voice amplifiers, glasses and other visual aids. Some communication accommodations support comprehension and others support expressive communication. Most communication aids are personalized for an individual.

Communication Support Person(s)

Communication Assistant: A person, approved by the individual who requires support, who assists with communication. A communication assistant conveys messages generated or directed by the individual, and may assist with comprehension, reading and writing if required.

Proxy Communication / Advocate: A person who knows the individual well and who says what they think the person might communicate if they could, or what they think is in the best interest of the person.

Speech-Language Pathologist: A regulated healthcare professional who conducts communication assessments, provides communication intervention services and recommends communication methods, aids, accommodations, and supports. A Speech-Language Pathologist may be required to provide appropriate accessibility communication accommodation and supports for people who have no way to communicate; participate in capacity assessments for patients with complex communication disabilities and assist in critical decision-making contexts such as medical assistance in dying.

Communication Intermediary: A Speech-Language Pathologist with additional training from CDAC to assist victims, witnesses and accused people who have speech and language disabilities to understand questions and to communicate answers effectively when communicating with police, legal or justice professionals.

Preferences and Decisions

Preferences: A person's expression of likes and dislikes.

Informed Decisions: A process whereby an individual, with or without support, demonstrates that they understand issues relating to a decision to be made, retains the information long enough to make a decision, considers consequences of the options and communicates a decision.

Communication Accommodations and Supports

Comprehension: Practices, visual aids and assistance that an individual may require to understand what another person is saying. Support may include the communicator speaking at a slower rate, pausing between sentences, using everyday language, confirming understanding, showing photographs, pictures, calendars, communication journals, videos, written words, maps, diagrams and objects to augment comprehension, memory and executive function.

Expressive Communication: Practices, communication aids and assistance that a person may require to communicate their messages to another person. Support that a communication assistant

may use includes echoing, interpreting, expanding and reformulating messages; validation of intended meaning and providing appropriate topic boards and communication aids.

Decision-Making: Practices, visual aids and assistance that a person may require to make and communicate a decision. Together with the individual requiring support, decision supporters may explore options; elicit preferences; identify pros and cons, consequences and risks; compare options; negotiate decisions, provide opportunities for deferral of decisions; resolve conflicts and develop plans to address actions arising from the decision.

Reading: Accommodations include websites that are compatible with the latest accessibility standards, as well as print materials in everyday plain language, alternate formats, support with reading and understanding.

Writing: Accommodations include accessible forms, assistance with note-taking and arrangements for alternate signature arrangements.

Telephone: Alternatives to telephone may include options such as email, text, video connection, message relay services and an authorized communication assistant to get and give information.

Legal Terms

The definitions in this section are based on law and legal sources but are general in nature so may not be equally applicable to all laws and legal contexts in Canada.

Legal Capacity: In general, legal capacity can be viewed as the power to control decisions about one's life, relationships, care and property. People exercise their legal capacity by making decisions with legal consequences. Recognition of legal capacity is based on the principle of respect for personal autonomy. Legal capacity, in the context of United Nations human rights treaties, refers to people's capacity to have rights, and to have the capacity to act on those rights on an equal basis with others without discrimination.

Capacity: The term 'legal capacity' is not often found in Canadian law. The term 'capacity' is much more frequently used in Canadian legislation. In that context it is commonly, but not always, defined to refer to an ability to understand information relevant to making a decision and an ability to appreciate the reasonably foreseeable consequences of a decision or lack of decision. It is sometimes referred to in short form as the 'understand and appreciate test'. This is a cognitive test.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ("CRPD"): The CRPD is an international human rights treaty which consolidates legal recognition of human rights for people with disabilities. It has been signed and ratified by Canada. Canada is legally bound by the treaty at international law, but it is not binding in Canada as part of domestic law until it has been implemented.

Article 12 of the CRPD – “Equal recognition before the law”: Article 12 specifically addresses the topics of legal capacity and decision-making. Equality in the exercise of legal capacity is at its core. Supports for making decisions are one vehicle for achieving equality. Article 12 requires State Parties to:

- Recognize that people with disabilities enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life (12(2))
- Provide access by persons with disabilities to the support they may require in exercising legal capacity (12(3))
- Ensure that all measures that relate to the exercise of legal capacity provide for appropriate and effective safeguards to prevent abuse (12(4))
- Ensure that safeguards respect the rights, will and preferences of the person, among other things (12(4))

Supports for Decision Making: The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines supports for legal capacity as: “a broad term that encompasses both informal and formal support arrangements, of varying types and intensity.” They include any measure that assists a person to have power over their decisions.

Supported Decision Making: A type of arrangement for providing supports for decision making, whereby support people assist a person to understand, make and communicate a decision, or interpret their will and preferences and apply them to a particular decision. The support relationship is a long term one, and is typified by personal trust, knowledge and commitment. It can take many forms. Decisions are based on a person’s will and preferences and not on an objective ‘best interest’ standard. Some jurisdictions in Canada provide legal recognition of supports for decision making, which may take the form of supported decision making.

Accommodations and the Duty to Accommodate: Accommodations are integral to achieving non-discrimination. The duty to accommodate is a core feature of Canadian human rights law. The duty extends only to the point of undue hardship.

Capacity Assessor: In law there is no single definition of ‘capacity assessor’. Assessments of capacity are undertaken in a variety of legal contexts, and the law dictates in each context who/what category of persons may legitimately assess capacity.