From Dr. Escudé...

Communication Difficulties as a Cause of Adverse Behaviors and Nutritional Issues

Communication Difficulties
There can be many causes of adverse behaviors in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Inability to communicate thoughts, wants, needs and desires can be quite frustrating and cause people to display various behaviors to make their needs known. When evaluating causes of adverse behaviors, communication issues should be in the differential.

Careful observation of the person’s actions and timing of them may give clues to what someone may be trying to communicate. Behaviors that occur around mealtime activities may interfere with a person’s ability to receive adequate intake. These behaviors may be a way of communicating food preferences, as well. We sometimes see self-injurious behavior (SIB) when people become angry or are experiencing pain or frustration. Aggressive behavior may also indicate that the person does not like where they are, who they are with, or that they want to be left alone. Developing effective alternative communication lines may reduce the reliance on aggression as a means of communication.

There are a number of techniques that can help to improve communication.

Intensive interaction tries to create a communication environment that is enjoyable and non-threatening to people with special needs. In some respects, the model is a play on the way we first start to communicate with developing infants, where interactions are short, and involve noises, touch and eye contact. Interactions are brief but can grow over time.

A minimal speech approach can be used to help reduce confusion which may occur when a long sentence is used. For example, saying, “get your coat and let’s meet in the hall to go outside,” may cause great confusion, but saying, “coat” may be better understood.

Using sign language, gestures, pictures or communication devices may also alleviate communication challenges. It’s also important to consider other factors including hearing or vision difficulties, environmental issues and sensory issues that may affect a person’s ability to communicate.
Sensory or Tactile Issues
Sensory issues may contribute to adverse behaviors as well as eating difficulties. If a person only eats certain textures of food, dislikes getting their hands messy, overstuffs or pockets food frequently, gags at the sight, smell, touch or taste of foods (not white actually trying to eat) or excessively chews or mouths objects, a sensory or tactile issue may be involved. Various techniques can be utilized to help improve this situation. These include things like playing in a variety of sensory bins, using a vibrating toothbrush and building off textures that the person does like. Techniques for non-eating related behaviors should also be explored.

Careful observation, patience and persistence can go a long way to creating better communication with people who have limitations in their ability to communicate verbally. Thank you for your careful attention to helping improve the lives of people we support.

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Dr. Escudé has dedicated his career to providing healthcare for people with IDD and other vulnerable populations and teaches on the subject throughout the country.