

Empowerment



Facilitating Voice and Personal Power

People with disabilities may need a lot of support and encouragement to speak up for themselves and to bring themselves into partnership with the process of receiving medical care. Many people feel intimidated when visiting their doctor and this can be especially true when you have an intellectual disability. The words used, the speed of a visit and the assumption that others know better how you experience your life and your disability can lead to compliance rather than collaboration.



As a direct support professional (DSP), it's tempting to want to simply step in and 'be the voice' of the individual you support. But as appealing as that may be, it's important to remember that your job is to support, not to silence. Working to help people with disabilities present their issues and use their voice is one of the most powerful ways of fulfilling your mandate as a DSP.

You will notice as a theme throughout this toolkit, that the involvement of people with disabilities in the health care process is paramount in the approach taken. What we need to look at is the everyday kind of approaches to 'voice' and 'choice' that you and your team take when supporting people with disabilities.

**Your job is to support,
not silence the individual.**

It's always important to be mindful of what your role is with the individual you are supporting. Helping a person find and use their voice is exciting and fulfilling. You are working to ensure that they get the best of service because they have learned to ask for it and expect it.

Keep reading to learn more about how YOU can facilitate the voice of the person you support, through targeted approaches and strategies. Then, review some ideas about how to promote positive communication during health care appointments and foster positive outcomes before, during and after appointments.



Tips on facilitating assertion and self advocacy

- 1 Ensure that when someone with a disability needs to speak to you about something, anything, take the request seriously.** People with disabilities are often used to being secondary to other demands. So by actively closing down distractions when you speak, like silencing your phone, turning it over so you can't see a distracting message light, shutting your door, etc., you are saying, 'I value you and I value what you have to say.' It's important that people with disabilities learn, from how they interact with you, that they have importance and that their voice is welcome.
- 2 Be there to listen and to help the individual discover their own path and their own way.** You don't know best how someone should live their life and your 'advice' could be seen as judgmental. It is important to know where you end and where the person with a disability begins. When you listen to someone with a disability, try hard not to immediately put on the 'problem solver' or 'advice giver' or 'opinion sharer' hat.
- 3 Offer opportunities for individuals with disabilities to express their opinion.** Watching the news or seeing a movie are perfect opportunities to give someone the floor to express themselves. Allow room for respectful disagreement – if someone changes their opinion to match yours, understand that this is often done out of fear of disapproval; make it safe for alternate and different opinions.
- 4 Sometimes you just need to let people make their own choices.** Just like anyone else, the people you support will have their own preferences and opinions, for example, the music they listen to or movies they want to see. It is important to remember that it is not your job to judge or change their preferences. It should be safe for them to be who they are in your presence.
- 5 Teach people to be assertive in situations where they need to speak up.** As much as possible, help the person you support to speak for themselves, rather than speaking for them, For example, if they need to speak up about rude treatment at a store, work with them so they can go in and complain to the manager, with you there to help if needed. Their voice has more power than yours in situations that involve them.
- 6 Discover strategies for individuals to learn about speaking up and speaking out.** Use techniques such as role plays, social stories, and practical try outs; know what kind of supports they need.
- 7 Don't be afraid of innovation and adaptation.** Explore different ways to facilitate communication. For example, a person may find it easier to make a video on their phone and play it for someone as a way to express themselves. What matters most is that you help them express themselves in the way they are most comfortable.
- 8 Make a language dictionary.** For people with significant disabilities who don't communicate by words, make a language dictionary of their communication strategies, how they say 'yes' or 'no' or 'more' or 'stop' along with their way of showing sadness or anger or fear or happiness – and any other words they communicate non-traditionally. Make sure that all who work with the individuals know of these strategies. Take this with you to health care providers or other places where it may be needed.
- 9 If a person uses alternative communication like a communication board USE IT.** It takes time but it's important. It's like leaving their voice at home, imagine what that would feel like.
- 10 Always be aware of your power in your work with people with disabilities.** If you govern it well, you will allow space for their power.