



Chicago  
Cultural  
Accessibility  
Consortium

## **General Tips for Communicating with Visitors with Cognitive or Behavioral Disabilities**

- Ensure you have the person's attention. Address the person by name; use eye contact and/or touch.
- Be aware of known communication difficulties:
  - Receptive (e.g. deafness, cognitive impairment, autism spectrum disorder) and/or
  - Expressive (e.g. cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder)
- When unsure of ability to understand, it's best to assume competence and adjust accordingly. It is more appropriate and respectful to assume competence than assuming a lack of understanding.
  - Speak directly to the person, NOT to family member, caregiver, companion with them. If there is a communication or comprehension issue, the companion will speak up and reply.
- If uncertain ASK about communication preferences/style/techniques
  - How does s/he say yes/no?
  - Does s/he use a communication device or aid?
- Use appropriate and respectful:
  - Language: simple, clear words & short uncomplicated sentences.
  - Visual information: pictures, diagrams, signs, gestures.
  - Tone & volume: a respectful approach reflects your degree of familiarity with the person, their age and the context of your interaction.
  - Interpreter if required.
  - Treat adults as adults.

- Wait for response. Allow person time to listen, process what you say and respond. DONT RUSH!
  - Close-ended questions (“Yes or no” questions) may be more effective than open-ended questions.
  - Negative phrases may be more difficult to understand. “No touching at the museum” may be harder to understand than simply saying “at the museum, we keep our hands at our sides.”
- Confirm understanding in the person’s own words. Do not simply ask, “do you understand?” (Most people say “yes”!) Remember: receptive language may be better than expressive language (or vice versa).
- Be honest and take responsibility for communication breakdowns, e.g., “I’m sorry I’m not understanding.” NEVER PRETEND to understand!
- If they don’t understand – KEEP TRYING. Repeat. Use clear simple words and concepts. Say it in a different way. Use different words. Use pictures. Take a quick break.
- If you don’t understand – KEEP TRYING. Try alternative strategies.
  - “Could you say that again please?”
  - Is there another way you can think of saying it? Could you use another word? Could you show me?
  - Is there someone who could help us? Involve family member/caregiver/support worker if appropriate. But remember to ASK FIRST!
- Everyone likes to have choices. Don’t eliminate the opportunity for choice. You might have to simplify the choice options, but do not remove the choice.
- Schedules may be helpful. Be sure to explain the schedule of events at the beginning, having a hand-out. Social stories may be a good strategy to help convey the schedule of events; it is associated