

Health care of people with intellectual disability

Communication and positive behaviour support

Knowledge and understanding of how to communicate with people with intellectual disability and how to provide positive behaviour support is important for safe and high-quality health care. Positive behaviour support involves strategies that address the needs of the person and the underlying causes of behaviours of concern.

What is a behaviour of concern?

A behaviour of concern is a behavioural response that creates a risk to the safety or wellbeing of the person or those around them. Factors such as the person not understanding what others are saying, or the person using a combination of verbal, non-verbal and behavioural communication, may cause the person stress which may lead to behaviours of concern.

Understanding how communication issues can lead to behaviours of concern

Poor communication can lead to behaviours of concern with consequent risks, like misdiagnosis, medication error and noncompliance with treatment.

It is important to recognise that a behaviour may indicate an unmet healthcare need including pain or discomfort. Misdiagnosis is a common risk for people with different communication needs. Life-threatening conditions can be missed if the person has a behavioural response to pain or physical symptoms that are, in turn, attributed to the person's intellectual disability rather than the healthcare need.

What strategies can be used to provide positive behaviour support?

- Consider communication difficulties, psychosocial and environmental factors as well as clinical issues.
- Assess whether the person's behaviours are the result of pain, or an underlying medical issue.
- Ask family, supporters, or guardians whether these behaviours have occurred before and in what circumstances.
- Communicate with the person in a way that they understand and ensure they understand what is happening. Ask the person's family or supporters to assist with communication. Consider using communication tools if available.
- Allow the person's family or disability support providers to stay to provide reassurance to the person.

- Ensure that clinicians and hospital staff who interact or coordinate care for people with intellectual disability understand how they can respond to individuals and manage the environment.
- For people with significant behaviours of concern, develop a joint plan (pre-admission or on admission) between the person, their family, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) service providers or guardian to identify potential risks and mitigation strategies.
- Identify alternate models of care or patient management plans to facilitate care for people with significant behaviours of concern.

Relevant actions in the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards

Action 1.29: The health service organisation maximises safety and quality of care:

- Through the design of the environment.

Action 5.14: The workforce, patients, carers and families work in partnership.

Action 5.33: The risk of aggression and violence is minimised by reducing environmental or procedural triggers for aggression.

Action 5.34: The health service organisation has processes to support collaboration with patients, carers and families to:

- Identify patients at risk of becoming aggressive or violent
- Implement de-escalation strategies
- Safely manage aggression, and minimise harm to patients, carers, families and the workforce.

Where do I get more information?

- Hear about [James' experience](#) with an intellectual disability and mental health conditions, and how non-medication strategies and psychotropic medicines help him in his day-to-day-life
- [A Better Way to Care](#)
- [Services if you're in hospital](#) - National Disability Insurance Scheme
- [Autism and developmental disability: Management of distress/agitation](#) - Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne
- [Caring for people displaying acute behavioural disturbance](#) - Safer Care Victoria
- [POSSUM Restraint-free Sedation for Kids](#) - Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service Organisation
- [Psychotropic Medicines in Cognitive Disability or Impairment Clinical Care Standard](#)

Examples of alternate models of care or patient pathways

- [South Australian Intellectual Disability Service](#)
- [Austin Health Specialist Disability Service](#)
- [GeneEQUAL healthcare videos](#)
- [Disability Liaison Officer program - Better Health Channel](#)
- [Disability Health Network](#) - Western Australia.

For more information, please visit: safetyandquality.gov.au/intellectual-disability

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