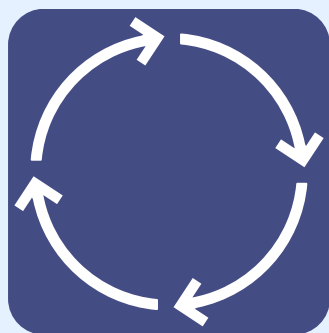


Receptive & Expressive Communication



Communication can be thought of as a 'chain', with different skills required at each stage.

There are lots of steps we must complete in order to decode the meaning of others

and to put our own thoughts into words.

However, in very simple terms, communication can be divided into two halves: understanding what other people mean (**receptive**) and conveying our own thoughts (**expressive**).

Why does this matter?

This distinction is important. Receptive and expressive communication require different skills. Individuals may have a different profile of strengths and difficulties in each area. Failing to consider this could lead to incorrect assumptions about a person's communication abilities.

For example, we might assume someone is able to *understand* others because they *use* specialist vocabulary themselves, when in fact they struggle to decode others' meaning (this presentation may be seen in some autistic people).

Understanding the different skills required for effective communication ensures that we gain a full picture of a person's communication profile, and don't make assumptions about their strengths, difficulties, needs, or the strategies to assist them.

Receptive skills

'Receptive' refers to the *understanding* of vocabulary, language and communication.

It can be described as the 'input' of language and communication. It is a person's ability to 'take in', 'decode' and understand information that they hear or read.

Under the umbrella of 'receptive language', there are many different skills which contribute to our understanding of spoken, written and non-verbal communication:

Receptive vocabulary – understanding the meaning of words.

Receptive grammar – decoding meaning expressed through grammatical features, such as word order (e.g., "*Kelly kicked Maija*" indicates that Kelly is the subject who performed an action which affected Maija, the object of the sentence).

Understanding communication – this area includes skills like understanding gesture, facial expression, conventional conversational routines and drawing inference from language ('reading between the lines').

Receptive language difficulties can be difficult to identify, as they may be hidden and less obvious than expressive language difficulties. Many people learn to mask their difficulties in this area. Some may 'nod along' or appear to agree, without indicating that they have not understood. Some

people may not know when they have not understood. This can make it challenging to provide effective assistance and monitor an individual's understanding.

Expressive skills

Expressive language is the 'output' of language - a person's ability to share their views, thoughts, feelings, wants and needs through verbal or nonverbal communication.

It is the ability to put thoughts into words and sentences in a way that can be clearly understood by the listener.

An individual with expressive difficulties may find some or all of the following difficult:

- Speaking clearly and fluently or pronouncing words.
- Finding the words they wish to use.
- Providing a clear or detailed narrative.
- Telling their side of the story.

There are many different skills involved in expressing oneself in a way which is clearly understood by others, and many different reasons why someone may have expressive difficulties. The following is by no means a comprehensive list, but may provide some insight into the variety of expressive difficulties that can affect court users:

- A person with [Developmental Language Disorder](#) (DLD) may have difficulty using specific vocabulary and sequencing a narrative clearly.
- A person who has [experienced a stroke](#) may have aphasia which makes it difficult to find the words they wish to use.
- An [autistic person](#) may not follow neurotypical conversational conventions.
- A [person who stammers](#) may have difficulty expressing themselves to the best of their ability in front of a courtroom.

Impact in legal proceedings

Receptive and expressive communication difficulties often co-occur (for example, a person with DLD or a learning disability may have both receptive and expressive language difficulties).

However, this is not always the case. An individual's expressive communication is not always reflective of their receptive skills (and vice versa). This means it is very important that assumptions are not made about an individual's abilities in one area, based on their perceived strengths in another.

Whether an individual has receptive difficulties, expressive difficulties or a mixed profile of communication needs, there may be an adverse impact upon their participation in legal proceedings.

An individual with receptive difficulties may have difficulty:

- Understanding the vocabulary used in proceedings.
- Following legal arguments and the thrust of evidence.
- Understanding legal advice.
- Understanding case documents (particularly expert reports).
- Understanding questions put to them during their evidence.
- Understanding outcomes and rules (e.g., of a non-molestation order or bail conditions).

An individual with expressive difficulties may find it more difficult to:

- Provide a clear account of events.
- Provide clear instructions.
- Give clear evidence.
- Give their best evidence.

Further reading

- **The Advocate's Gateway Toolkits:**

[Toolkit 4: Planning to question someone with a learning disability](#)

[Toolkit 5: Planning to question someone with 'hidden' disabilities: specific language impairment, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and AD\(H\)D](#)

[Toolkit 15: Witnesses & Defendants with Autism](#)

- **Communicourt Blog** exploring [receptive and expressive difficulties in legal proceedings](#) (including tips and strategies to support participation).
- **Afasic:** [The Communication Chain](#)

From The Access Brief

- [Supporting expressive difficulties](#)
- [How to check understanding](#)
- [DLD in legal proceedings](#)
- [Learning disability in legal proceedings](#)
- [Stammering in legal proceedings](#)
- [Autism in legal proceedings](#)
- [Intermediary assessments](#)
- [How can an intermediary assist at trial?](#)



Intermediary services

If you are concerned about your client's ability to communicate effectively and participate in legal proceedings, Communicourt can help.

We will assess your client to understand their communication needs and how these might affect them in court. Your client does not need to have a diagnosis. Our reports will identify any particular communication issues and make bespoke recommendations to help you and your client throughout proceedings.

If intermediary assistance is recommended, one of our highly trained intermediaries can be there throughout proceedings to facilitate those recommendations.

Intermediaries are mostly funded by HMCTS, with no charges or payments required by legal representatives.

How to book an intermediary

- 1 Refer online.** Refer your client for an assessment through [our online portal](#) (5 minutes).
- 2 Funding.** We send a quote for you to send to Legal Aid / HMCTS to approve (24 hours).
- 3 Book assessment.** Once funding is approved, please let us know. We will schedule an assessment (2-6 weeks).
- 4 Assessment will** take up to 3 hours and can be conducted in person or remotely. You will then receive a report (7 days).
- 5 Book dates** for hearings or conferences. We will send you booking forms to be signed by the court. Once signed, we will book the intermediary.