



Information on Communication Aids

What is a communication aid?

A communication aid is anything that helps a person to communicate more effectively with people around them. Communication Aids can be anything from paper based systems, for example simple letter boards, through to sophisticated pieces of computer equipment.

Why do people need communication aids?

We all communicate in lots of ways, from chatting with friends, to hugging a child or letting someone know how you feel with a smile. Some people with disabilities e.g. cerebral palsy, stroke and/or head injury have difficulty with communication and they may need other ways to help them get their message across.

What types of communication aids are available?

There are lots of options available from an Irish sign system called Lámh, alphabet charts and picture symbol boards right through to adapted computers which speak when you select the message you want to say. When we think of communication devices, we might think of the famous physicist Stephen Hawking who uses a high tech communication aid with electronic voice output.



What developments are happening in the area of communication aids?

Rapid developments in technology have resulted in lots of innovative new ways of communicating using aids, for example new software applications which allow you to use a smart phone as a communication aid, and exciting new technology that uses a person's eye-gaze or brain activity to control a communication aid. There are many new communication applications being developed for the popular smart phones and other electronic goods. These applications include predictive text functions that can read out the words you write, and picture or word based communication systems. These electronic goods are light, portable and of interest to the person using the aid and the people with whom they communicate.

For people with conditions like **Cerebral Palsy** a range of aids are available, depending on the person's needs some of the following may help them with communication. A computerised device with a **touch screen** that speaks out the items selected, or a device activated by an **external switch** which a person may use their head, leg or hand to press may be beneficial. There are also **hand-held** portable devices available which speak out items selected on screen, and picture-symbol **communication boards**, and **alphabet boards** for spelling out words and sentences.

Children who have problems with speech development can be supported with a variety of hand-held devices, e.g. **palmtop** devices or **smart phones** which speak out messages written with symbols or letters, use of **gesture** or sign language, and through use of **alphabet** or **picture-symbol boards** to help them get their message across.

People with conditions like **Motor Neurone Disease** or **Friedreich's Ataxia** may benefit from use of **alphabet** or **topic boards** to help give cues to those around them about what they are saying.

Children and adolescents on the **Autism spectrum** have successfully enhanced their communication skills by using **picture exchange** methods and **portable touch screen** devices.

People with **Acquired Brain Injury** have found taking pictures of their therapy sessions via a **smart phone** a great way to remember what they did in a day and an easy way to share this information with their family & friends.

Modern **smart phones and apps** are being used by people with a variety of cognitive and communication problems to support them to recall what they did in a day, to share pictures of events with loved ones and to communicate via a device that the general public also uses.



How do you know which is the best communication aid for a person?

The *Speech and Language Therapist* can help with:

- Choosing the right system to suit individual strengths and needs
- Arranging trial periods with electronic aids
- Training on use of signs, symbols and writing to communicate
- Training on use of the communication aid
- Programming and updating of the communication aid
- Supporting use of the device at home and in the community

Who to contact

If you would like some more information or advice regarding communication aids, please contact your local primary care team/health centre/Speech & language Therapist. Alternatively ask your G.P or Public Health Nurse.

Useful websites: www.IASLT.ie (Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists)
www.IASLTTP.com (Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Private Practice)